

ADRIAN GHENIE

ALBERTINA

Exhibition Facts

Duration	11 October 2024 – 2 March 2025
Opening	10 October 2024 6.30 p.m.
Venue	Column Hall The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Klaus Albrecht Schröder, Ciprian Adrian Barsan (C.A.B.)
Works	28
Catalogue	Available for EUR 58 (English or German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/
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Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Adrian Ghenie

Shadow Paintings

11 October 2024 – 2 March 2025

Adrian Ghenie is honoring Egon Schiele, one of expressionism's most important visual artists, with a revolutionary exhibition. Based on a concept originated by Ciprian Adrian Barsan, it envisions a return of Schiele's lost works—known only from black-and-white photographs—courtesy of Adrian Ghenie's hauntingly emphatic artistic abilities.

Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie takes Schiele's lost works as an opportunity to embark on an impressive and unique search for traces with works created especially for this exhibition:

“Schiele was of course part of my intellectual archive, not in terms of style, but in terms of attitude. Together with Schiele, I share an interest in the deformation and stretching of the human form and playful experimentation with it. Deformation was a solution for representation, but also an expression of the freedom that came with modernism. Once you leave the traditional constraints of anatomy behind, the way you deform can become a portrait of character or the inner psyche on a deeper level. This play with the human form marked the beginning of something new.”

Adrian Ghenie

Immortal energy from lost works

Around one quarter of Schiele's paintings remain missing to this day or are known to have been lost or destroyed, for the most part prior to the Second World War. The exact circumstances surrounding their disappearance are still a mystery. These lost images, which revolved around weighty themes such as death, sexuality, self-reflection, the search for identity, distortion, melancholy, and faith, now exist only as shadowy photographs.

Ghenie assumes the challenging task of not only resurrecting these works from the shadow world but also of physically re-embodiment and reviving them. The point here is to refrain from physically replicating Schiele's own shadows and instead provide their deeper essence with a new, impossible embodiment.

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The project “Shadow Paintings” takes viewers along on a metaphysical journey through dissolution and eventual reincarnation. The works referred to here as “Shadow Paintings” symbolize the dark night of the soul in which individuals find themselves confronted with their inner shadows—a process associated with concepts such as nigredo, tenebrosity, and melancholy.

Via his own deconstructive method, Adrian Ghenie lends these “Shadow Paintings” a new dimension that reaches far beyond mere form, transforming them into lively manifestations of the chromatic spectrum while also blurring the boundaries between reality and abstraction. In doing so, he strives not to follow a spiritual calling but rather to achieve a state of energetic euphoria. Ghenie creates “the impossible body” without anatomy—a reinvention of nothingness.

The human body as a medium

The emphasis in this new series of works is on the human body and on existence as such. It offers space for interpretations that range far beyond the physical, indeed diving into the transcendental. This process gives rise to deeper reflection upon the nature of perception itself and upon just how we construct and deconstruct reality. Schiele himself employed the human body as a medium via which to convey deep-reaching emotional and psychological states and pose questions as to human existence, sexuality, death, and spirituality.

Also the self-portrait is an essential component of Adrian Ghenie's entire oeuvre. It was his thematisation of himself as van Gogh or Darwin that prompted Adrian Barsan and me to ask the artist whether he would like to paint a cycle of Egon Schiele's lost paintings at the end of my 25 years as director of the Albertina. Adrian Ghenie accepted immediately.

This unique cycle of 14 paintings is now available: an echo of those paintings by Egon Schiele that have only survived as pale shadows, as colourless, black-grey silhouettes, which nevertheless contain Schiele's time: Vienna at the turn of the century, its culture, his penchant for psychology, for the aestheticisation of life in the Gesamtkunstwerk, his obsession with the unconscious, which pushes outwards in gestures, facial expressions and body language.

Obsessions with sexuality and its abysses. The discovery of early childhood sexuality. All this sounds like the echo of a bygone era in Adrian Ghenie's picture cycle: an echo thrown back from the walls of the culture of our own time. Schiele's lost pictures cast their shadow into our present. Adrian Ghenie materialises this shadow again, giving it back the colour, plasticity and fleshiness that the long-lost, destroyed, burnt, destroyed or stored in an unknown place paintings have lost in the course of time. However, this cycle of Ghenie's works, which emerged from this echo and shadow image, is not an image of the lost originals, not a copy, not a reconstruction. The echo does not sound exactly like the original sound of Schiele and his era.

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Search of traces

The work of few artists is as complex as that of Adrian Ghenie. It refers both to his own biography and to the history of art. Ambiguity, including the oscillation between figuration and abstraction, is the central feature of Ghenie's art. Personal, mysterious, even occult experiences, which are reflected in the artist's visual world, are based as much on Ghenie's life as on the set of art-historical references.

Ghenie's imagination, which is fuelled by his own and collective memories, gives birth to monsters. His figures suffer from loss of face and physical deformities. The disfigured heads can only be inadequately explained psychologically by the influence of film stills showing the comic victims of pie fights in old slapstick comedies, however illuminating the reference to Ghenie's preference for this film genre of the silent film era may be.

The artist has always been attracted to horror and suspense. He loves Alfred Hitchcock's aesthetic of the uncanny. The atmosphere that characterises Ghenie's images is saturated with film noir. In recent years, Ghenie has only changed the method of painting: instead of collage and the use of photographs, he works solely with a brush and palette knife; a master of pure peinture.

Ciprian Adrian Barsan previously joined forces with the ALBERTINA Museum to realize the successful exhibition of works by Niko Pirosmeni. This exhibition is likewise supported by Barsan's Informat Foundation.

Curators: Klaus Albrecht Schröder, Ciprian Adrian Barsan (C.A.B.)

Exhibition Texts

Adrian Ghenie

*1977, Baia Mare, Romania

lives and works in Berlin

No artist other has ever slipped into such diverse roles for his self-portraits as Egon Schiele did more than a hundred years ago, thereby anticipating the millions of self-presentations on Instagram and other social media platforms. Despite all this role playing, Schiele never violated the principle of recognizability that the portrait demands.

Adrian Ghenie's Schattenbilder after lost works by Schiele are also meant to be understood as self-portraits. However, his self-thematizations no longer reveal his physiognomy. Ghenie's self has dissolved into alien beings: a disturbing experience that some people have when they get lost in the many roles they play to please others. Sometimes our self-image is shattered when we encounter our own mirror image unexpectedly, and it reveals us as someone other than the person we believed we were.

Shocked, we search our face for psycho-physical stability. The bourgeois idea of the strong personality has been borne to the grave in wars, colonial horrors, and extermination camps: in all the hells that expose the destructive quality of human beings.

Adrian Ghenie paints this naked personality scarred by its abysses. He depicts the psychosomatic disorder of society, its neuroses and anxieties, the loss of the self. Growing up in Romania, he experienced the aftermath of the Stalinist terror and the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Every one of Ghenie's paintings is an imprint of the rotten atmosphere of that subjugated country.

Schattenbilder

In his powerful cycle of Schattenbilder, Ghenie has recourse to lost and destroyed paintings by Egon Schiele. The reproductions of lost works by Schiele, most of them small, offer only their typical gestures and exalted body language.

Adrian Ghenie rematerializes these shadows of Schiele's paintings. He gives them new color, plasticity, and fleshiness. Ghenie's cycle does not, however, offer a reconstruction of the lost originals. The echo of the twenty-first century does not sound like the original sound of Egon Schiele and his epoch. The walls of our time distort the original sound. They have seen the division of the world, the Vietnam War, the noise of weapons and the noise of Hollywood, the mass consumption and the entertainment industry that swallows everything, digitization and its acceleration of the world to the speed of light. The earth has once again become a battlefield in which the chaos will not end and the noise of the weapons will not fall silent.

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Adrian Ghenie paints this chaos and this noise. In his work, the figures borrowed from Egon Schiele become the monsters that our world has untied again.

The shadows of Schiele's lost paintings that have become Ghenie's self-portraits resemble the frightening aliens that populate our cinematic nightmares. Tentacles and strange excrescences deform the head and face. Abrupt turnings threaten to tear these bodies apart. Rather than driving themselves, they are controlled by external, catastrophic forces that are alien to their fragile bodies.

Ghenie's incomparable visual idiom is saturated with the destructive energy of our time. The theatrical gestures and exalted poses of Schiele's shadow pictures suit it. Their contorted bodies are the counterimage of the self-composed personality. Ghenie's self-portraits represent the latter's opposite side, the dystopia of this ideal, and the fear of one's own uncontrollability and the changes that can befall us, such as parasitism and other grotesque mutations: Ghenie's paintings show the self-portrait after the shattering of the illusion that the technical progress of humankind is one to greater humanity. It is not. In front of the rubble of that illusion, we are like Ghenie's figures. Ghenie is a witness of our time not because mobile phones, tablets, disposable razors, bathroom tiles, and the like populate his pictures but because he sees the people of the twenty-first century in their still violent, poor, and cruel form, as perpetrators and bloody victims at once.

As in body horror films, the transformation of the body is an existential symbol of the loss of identity, a symbol of the extermination of the self, of the transformation of one person into another who has violated the familiar moral laws and norms of behavior.

The transformation of the human body was already inherent in Schiele's figures with their insect-like extremities of long bones and atrophied muscles: a gallery of the horror of evolution. For Ghenie, the laboratory of human evolution is expanding in the twenty-first century to include technology. It is becoming a factor in evolution for the first time and shifting the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest to anthropogenic, technological environmental conditions such as the smartphone as an extension of our body and our senses. If one day in the distant future someone wants to understand our time, the paintings of Adrian Ghenie's Schattenbilder cycle will provide information about our state of evolution. Don't say that no one saw the misfortune coming.

Press Images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.

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Egon Schiele
The Self-Seers
From: Albert Paris Gütersloh, Egon Schiele. Attempt at a Preface, Vienna 1911



Egon Schiele
The melancholy of the World
From: Albert Paris Gütersloh, Egon Schiele. Attempt at a Preface, Vienna 1911



Adrian Ghenie
Study after The Self-Seers I, 2024
Charcoal on paper
140 x 120 cm
Foto © Infnitart Foundation



Adrian Ghenie
The melancholy of the World 1, 2024
Oil on canvas
210 x 150 cm
Foto © Infnitart Foundation

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Egon Schiele
Kneeling male nude with raised hands (self-portrait)
From: Albert Paris Gütersloh, Egon Schiele. Attempt at a Preface, Vienna 1911



Adrian Ghenie
Kneeling male nude with raised hands 1, 2024
210 x 150 cm
Oil on canvas
Photo © Infinitart Foundation

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Egon Schiele

Resurrection

From: Albert Paris Gütersloh, Egon Schiele. Attempt at a Preface, Vienna 1911

Photo © Kallir Research Institute

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Adrian Ghenie
Resurrection 1, 2024
190 x 200 cm
Oil on canvas
Photo © Infnitart Foundation