



TIRANA, ALBANIA

Helidon Gjergji

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ARTS



e-mages, 2005, video projection on broken mirror, 4 minutes 15 seconds.
Installation view.

The titular centerpiece of Helidon Gjergji's show "e-mages," at the National Gallery of Arts, is a slide show in which fragmented photos of Joseph Stalin's family and friends are projected onto a shattered mirror lying on the floor in front of the projector and, in turn, reflected onto the wall. According to Gjergji's fictional narrative, Stalin's mother, Ketevan Geladze, has chosen the pictures for a Facebook album—a wink at social media as a form of personal propaganda. The intimate nature of the black—and—white snapshots only enhances the disconcerting effect of seeing a tyrant dandling children in his lap—a queasiness exacerbated by the accompaniment of Dmitri Shostakovich's jaunty, wildly popular, and insidiously catchy "Second Waltz," recently revived after a long disappearance owing to the fact that the composer fell from favor under the Soviet regime and lost many friends to the Great Terror.

The mirror in *e-mages*, 2009, was broken by the artist's jumping on it repeatedly—a task much harder and more brutal than you might think—making the images look like glittering ghosts on the wooden floor of the cavernous, half—empty gallery space. Gjergji's installation describes history in the age of mass media as a hall of mirrors and broken pieces where factual errors and untruths are concocted, too easily accepted as authentic, copied, and perpetuated ad infinitum by unreliable narrators. The museum's slightly worn modernist architecture provides a fitting geometrical frame: a wide set of shallow steps leads ceremoniously up to the spectral images on the wall, with symmetrical staircases rising up on either side like the wings of the Nazi eagle, evoking absolute power.

The warped simulacrum of reality represented via contemporary media was also invoked in a collaboration with David Lachman, *Pixture TV*, 2003, a video composed of shots of the screen of a malfunctioning television while flipping through channels. With color filters added, the vivid images resemble alluring abstract paintings. Gjergji often employs defunct television sets as sculptural elements, painting the screens and arranging the luminous relics in formations. The live TV transmissions here seemed to portray the distorted nature and alienation of contemporary society via the fractured compositions of pixels. The video *Blue Danube*, 2007, displayed on another vintage—TV monitor, traces an unsavory journey through Brooklyn's sewage pipes. Snaking down into the earth to the tune of a Viennese waltz by Strauss, the plumber's micro-camera eventually reveals a small crack that is sabotaging the system while allowing nature to reemerge. The nauseating movement, alternating between blurred close-up and sharper long shot, resembles a slow—motion roller-coaster ride through one's own body, the invasive eye of a colonoscope navigating fuzzy, rumbling innards—a strong metaphor for plumbing the depths of public consciousness.

Next to the National Gallery of Arts sits the decaying Hotel Dajti, once the most luxurious resort in the Balkans. Built in the 1930s by the Italian Fascists, it hosted the former Tirana International Contemporary Art Biennial in 2009. Just as the Communists razed the old buildings of nearby Skanderbeg Square, replacing the Old Bazaar and Orthodox Cathedral with the Palace of Culture and Tirana International Hotel, this rationalist ruin will soon enough be cleared out and replaced by the Bank of Albania. While uprooted statues of Stalin are still stored like sentimental artifacts behind the museum, Gjergji's dazzling ode to the roots of our future reminds us that history need be neither buried nor romanticized: If we can learn from it, there's cause for hope.

—Cathryn Drake