

**GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA**

BRUSSELS

**EDI HILA**

***Open Museum***

**Thursday 6 September - Saturday 27 October**



Edi Hila, *Open Museum Series (#3)*, 2017.  
Oil on canvas, 103 × 149,7 cm (40 9/16 × 58 15/16 in.)

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is honored to present Albanian painter Edi Hila's first exhibition in Belgium. Long silenced by the secrecy imposed by his country's dictatorship, the artist, born in Shkodër in 1944, is now unanimously considered to be the most important Albanian painter of his generation, and, beyond that, as "one of the most interesting painters of the early 21st century," according to art critic and curator Ami Barak.

For his first solo exhibition in Brussels, Edi Hila presents *Open Museum*, his new series of paintings, which he began in 2018. It follows the series *La tente sur le toit d'une voiture*, which was presented in 2017, at documenta 14 (Athens, Greece – Kassel, Germany), under the artistic direction of Adam Szymczyk. In the spring of 2018, this series was also featured in Edi Hila's first retrospective, held at the Museum of Modern Art, in Warsaw (Poland), before traveling to the National Gallery of Art, in Tirana (Albania). The exhibition highlighted Edi Hila's current preoccupations and his latest pictorial experimentations, thus cementing his international recognition.

Alongside his new series, *Open Museum*, Galerie Nathalie Obadia also presents several paintings from previous emblematic series, including *Maison*, *Périphérie*, and *Penthouse*. The latter had been exhibited at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture (2014) and at the retrospective in Warsaw and Tirana (2018). Together, the works, selected by the artist, paint a unique pictorial trajectory, which composed, and still composes via the cultural, social and political reality in Albania, a country in "permanent germination," as Edi Hila underlines. A common thread amongst his paintings, whose origins are otherwise diverse, is the way they powerfully inscribe themselves in the everyday life and environment of the painter who lives and works in Tirana. Unlike many of his fellow artists and compatriots, Edi Hila never left his homeland to paint under less hostile skies.

When Edi Hila graduated from the National Academy of Arts, in Tirana, in 1967, his country had already been under the thumb of dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) for over twenty years. The latter led Albania with an iron fist, ever since establishing the People's Socialist Republic, on January 11, 1946. Hoxha and his grim successor, Ramiz Alia (1925-2011), were at the head of a regime considered to be one of the most authoritarian in the history of modern Europe.

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

In this context of repression, being an artist in Albania was no easy feat. For a long time, Edi Hila led this struggle alone, drawing only on his most intimate resources and benefitting from the lessons which he gleaned from his own work. Conquering his pictorial independence happened progressively and was fraught with obstacles since, like most artists of his generation, he had been trained according to the strict rules of socialist realism. This official style obeyed the artistic canons prescribed by the Soviet Union, where most of the professors at the National Academy of Arts were trained. All of Western art's avant-garde movements, such as Impressionism, Cubism, or Expressionism—considered to be degenerate art—were banished from the academic curriculum.

Edi Hila experienced a short-lived idyll with the regime when, in 1972, he was awarded the first prize for painting in the national Pranvera '72 competition. The following year, everything toppled over. His large-scale work, *La plantation des arbres* (today in the collection of the National Gallery of Albania, Tirana), which he presented at the national exhibition of Tirana, was censured. The painting—at first glance, a simple pastoral scene—was considered deviationist by the authorities, who faulted its flat planes of pure color, too similar to the chromatic audacity of decadent expressionist art. This accusation saw him dismissed from official artistic circles by forbidding him from exhibiting (until the 1990s), after which he was condemned, in 1974, to a penalty of reeducation, which forced him to work, for several years, in a poultry breeding operation and as a docker.

Despite enduring daily trials and tribulations, Edi Hila never ceased painting and drawing. Thanks to the few art books he'd obtained at great risk, his work was enriched by external input, such as Surrealism and, in particular, by the metaphysical Italian paintings of Giorgio De Chirico. Similarly to the latter's "antiquizing" compositions, Edi Hila's paintings gave a dominant place to urban architecture. This turning point occurred with *Shkodër*, the first series realized by Edi Hila during the democratic transition of 1990, which would lead to the end of the single party and to the fall of Ramiz Alia, in 1992.

Fortified by his newfound freedom and his intense desire to make up for "so many lost years in his creative life," Edi Hila stopped using the bright colors that had been his way of challenging the deleterious situation imposed by communism. He now opted for a limited range of colors, which he used in camaieu. This subtleness, according to Eric de Chasse, went hand in hand with his "meditation on identity (individual and collective), on history, and the painting's ability to weave them into a common melancholy."<sup>1</sup> A characteristic which he shares with Belgian painter, Luc Tuymans, who is the Western artist most similar to Edi Hila, according, once again, to the French art historian, who sees in the Albanian artist's paintings, this "same dry facture," this "same chromatic restriction that privileged the camaieu, to make works that are simultaneously ironic, melancholy, and meditative."<sup>2</sup> The white that Edi Hila adds to lighten his palette creates ethereal atmospheres that contrast with the gravity of the surrounding world. The bleaker the post-communist Albanian reality appeared—a far cry from what Edi Hila had hoped for when the country had still been suffocating under the stronghold of Hoxha's regime—the more diaphanous his paintings became. In opposition to the pangs of poverty and social and political violence to which Albania was subjected, the artist offered a painting filled with increasingly delicate nuances. The muted range of camaieu thus countered the more sharply contrasted one that the artist had used during the communist era. The subtle games of chromatic reversals reflected the wiser, yet still rebellious, temperament of a painter who, like so many other Albanians, suffered from the democratic transition initiated in the early 1990s. This transition did not meet the Albanian people's hopes, and proved to be, on the contrary, an extremely complex and bitter period, which is noticeable in the quiet melancholy of Edi Hila's works from that time. An impression that has lasted and is now fully identified as the artist's poetic signature. The elegiac contemplation that defines Edi Hila's work can be conceived of as consciousness distancing itself from "the world's disenchantment." This disillusionment is explained by philosopher Jean Starobinski in his text on Søren Kierkegaard<sup>3</sup>, in which the melancholy man is characterized by his "secession" from the world. Reality presents itself to him in the form of a spectacle to which he no longer subscribes, and which he contemplates from the outside. This position is also apparent in the metaphysical oeuvre of Giorgio De Chirico, as it is in Edi Hila's work, two artists who approach reality through absence, by often depriving their compositions of all human presence.

The series, *Penthouse* (2013), illustrates this sentiment of aborted hope, when Albania, in the midst of a democratic transition,

1. Eric de Chasse, « Saggio », in *Edi Hila. Painter of Transformation*, exhibition catalog (Warsaw, Museum of Modern Art, March 2 - May 6, 2018), Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2018, p.7.

2. Op.cit. p. 10.

3. Jean Starobinski, *L'encre de la mélancolie*, Paris : Le Seuil, Coll. La Librairie du XXIème siècle, 2012.

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

tried to go from communism to capitalism. This transfer in progress saw the emergence of a new middle class that aspired to live in detached houses, in order to break from the collective housing of the communist era. An abundance of new detached houses, as mediocre as they were unbelievable in terms of their architecture, materialized. Edi Hila uses this motif to mock the vulgarity of an elite who tries to isolate itself from the rest of the population. This voluntary exclusion takes the shape of tall houses, in which only the top floor (penthouse) is inhabited. From their eagle's nests, the nouveaux riches can thus hope to live far from the threat represented, in their eyes, by the rest of the Albanian population, which is still subjected to poverty. According to art historian Paul Ardenne, Edi Hila's metaphorical architecture symbolize the end of a collectivist utopia and of the joys of sharing that were falsely portrayed by Communism, in favor of "triumphant individualism, social arrogance, indifference to the common good, and the worship of privatization<sup>4</sup>," which are the common lot of our capitalist societies. In light of this allegorical interpretation, the "portraits of blind houses" in the *Penthouse* series strangely echo the thoughts of Sigmund Freud on the future of civilization. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud writes that "a big part of mankind's struggle focuses on a single task, that of striking the right balance—one that would bring happiness, that is—between individual demands and the cultural demands of the masses."

Edi Hila, though an eminently political painter, is above all an astute observer of his environment. To better describe it and derive



Edi Hila, *Penthouse*, 2013.  
Oil on canvas, 122 × 102 cm (48 1/32 × 40 5/32 in.)

inspiration from it, he gathers sizeable photographic documentation, before beginning a new series. In this, he works like Scottish painter Peter Doig, who also bestows a profoundly pictorial nature upon preexisting, photomechanical images. *Open Museum*, a series begun by Edi Hila in 2018 and exhibited at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, does not stray from this rule.

During a stay with his daughter in Berlin, in 2017, Edi Hila saw the birth of his next series' central theme. The unexpected discovery of an art historical book on German furniture<sup>5</sup> had left a deep impression. He was particularly fascinated by the chapter dedicated to armoires, from the Middle Ages to Art Nouveau, spellbound by all the creativity and aesthetic perfection distilled in some of these pieces of furniture. The theme of the armoire inspired him, since it was imbued with a symbolic and mysterious dimension that the painter related to the furniture's secular presence in domestic interiors the world over. He conceived of the armoires as museums or, according to him, as "time cabinets." They served a double function: historical and romantic. The armoires are at once vestiges of our collective past (they preserve archives, books, objects, etc.) and the relics of our individual lives (they contain family secrets, intrigues, or love mementos, etc.).

4. Paul Ardenne, Edi Hila, *Penthouse. My house is not your house*, text written on the occasion of the exhibition «Edi Hila. Penthouse », Galerie Miterrand, Paris, December 13th, 2013 - February 1st, 2014.

5. Heinrich Kreisel, *Die Kunst des deutschen Möbels : Möbel und Vertäfelungen des deutschen Sprachraums von den Anfängen bis zum Jugendstil*, München: Beck, 1968.

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS



Edi Hila, *Open Museum Series (#1)*, 2017.  
Oil on canvas, 102 × 98 cm (40 5/32 × 38 in.)

By extension, Edi Hila's armoires become obvious metaphors of history, politics, social or armed violence, as can be seen in one of the paintings exhibited at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, which represents an armoire filled with antique weapons. This representation evokes the etymological sense of the armoire, originally conceived of as a portable armory. Between armoire, arms, and armors, there is only one semantic and symbolic step, which Edi Hila negotiates elegantly.

However, this is not the true subject of the series. While Edi Hila has been deeply affected by the history of his country, he still remains a painter of his time, a vigilant witness of his epoch and of today's ills. The series, *Open Museum*, is thus directly linked with recent events, with the wave of terrorist attacks that struck Europe, and in particular France, Belgium, and Germany, between 2015 and 2017. Edi Hila remembers the dread that filled him at the time and that is still present when he visits Berlin. The emergence of the armoire thematic at that moment is no accident. The memories of these atrocities are contained in this armoire. Thus Edi Hila tackles the development of this very singular theme. On the one side, an armoire displaying medieval armor; on the other, an armoire transformed into a gleaming armor: the Tirana metro. Through all these allegories, Edi Hila calls out to us. He, who experienced the disenchantment of a country in the midst of complete reconstruction, now brings us face to face with our own contradictions and warns us against a history that repeats itself, this Pandora's box (armoire), whose doors can reopen at any given moment.

"Edi Hila wants to find the truth in the ordinary and reveal it in his painting," comments Eric de Chasse. This demand for truth is reinforced by his constant search for purity, which has its source, among other things, in his meditation on the works by Italian Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca. A certain solemnity that seems to subtract Edi Hila's paintings from the laws of time derives from this asceticism. His paintings are a concentrate of things seen and dreamt, of situations experienced and evoked, which he situates "between disappearance and appearance." Edi Hila breathes an air of reminiscence into his paintings, accentuated by his use of muted camaieu, which give a slightly vaporous aspect to the paintings' rendering. As if that milky haze attempted to contain, all by itself, an unspeakable and intense truth. His delicate and modest paintings are also, according to him, the result of "a precarious equilibrium," reflecting the fragile reality that surrounds him and now transcends the isolated case that is Albania. By mixing history and dream, politics and contemplation, explicit and tacit in his paintings, Edi Hila surreptitiously summons the most human part of us: hope. The hope of all the Albanian people who have not renounced their dream of prosperity and emancipation, of our civilization struggling against the barbarism of modern times, and also of liberation from obscurantism.

# GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

**Born in 1944, in Shkodër (Albania), Edi Hila lives and works in Tirana (Albania).**

*A central figure of the Balkan artistic scene for over twenty years, Edi Hila, born in Shkodër in 1944, has borne witness to the profound changes that rocked post-communist European societies. Having refused to emigrate to a financially thriving country, he lives and works in Tirana, where he meditates on the transitory nature of his country and on the status of Albanian painting in the history of Mediterranean art.*

*Since 1991, Edi Hila has been teaching at the National Academy of Arts in Tirana, where he educated important artists including Adrian Paci and Anri Sala.*

*Edi Hila has participated in numerous group exhibitions of international renown, including the 48th Biennale of Venice (Italy) in 1999, curated by Harald Szeemann; « After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe », organized by Serbian art historian and curator, Bojana Pejic, and presented in 1999, at the Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, then in 2000, at the Hamburger Bahnhof, in Berlin (Germany) and at the Ludwig Museum, in Budapest (Hungary). In 2003, Edi Hila participated, once again under the curatorship of Harald Szeemann, in the exhibition « Blood and Honey/The Future's in the Balkans », at the Essl Museum in Vienna (Austria). In 2004, the famous German gallerist, art critic and collector, René Block, included him in his exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans* at the Kunsthalle Fredericum, in Kassel (Germany). In 2010, Christine Macel, Chief Curator of the Musée d'art moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France), invited Edi Hila to take part in the exhibition, « Les promesses du passé (The Promises of the Past) », which presented works by fifty artists, most hailing from Eastern European countries. In 2014, his series "Penthouse" was exhibited at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture (Italy), then in 2015, at the AA School of Architecture, in London (UK). In 2018, Edi Hila was included in documenta 14 (Kassel, Germany – Athens, Greece), where he presented two series, "Boulevard" and "La tente sur le toit d'une voiture" that brought him international critical success.*

*In the spring of 2018, the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (Poland), organized Edi Hila's first retrospective, which was also presented at the National Gallery of Art, in Tirana (Albania).*

*Edi Hila's works are included in important institutional and private collections, such as, in France, the Colas Foundation for Contemporary Art, the Fonds Municipal de la Ville de Paris, and the Musée d'art moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Fonds Régional d'art contemporain of the Pays de la Loire (Carquefou), and the Fonds Régional d'art contemporain Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand); in Germany, the Neue Galerie in Kassel; in Switzerland, the collection of architect Roger Diener; in Albania, the National Gallery of Art, in Tirana; in Austria, the Kontakt Collection –Erste Group (Vienna), which, in 2017, acquired the seven paintings in the series "La tente sur le toit d'une voiture."*

---

**For any further information, please contact :**  
constance@nathalieobadia.com / + 32 (0)2 648 14 05

---

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
Brussels

**Edi Hila**  
Open Museum  
6 September - 27 October, 2018

**Valérie Belin**  
15 November, 2018 - 5 January, 2019

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
Paris  
Cloître Saint-Merri

**Rina Banerjee**  
Native Naked...  
8 September - 27 October, 2018

**Nú Barreto**  
8 November - 22 December, 2018

**Galerie Nathalie Obadia**  
Paris  
Bourg-Tibourg

**Meuser**  
Trocknen lassen  
8 September - 27 October, 2018

**Wang Keping**  
9 November - 22 December, 2018