

Splendour

Pio Abad



Tell her, a woman who describes her subject better than her own home, a woman with such attention to detail for her subjects, such an eye for detail, this is a woman after my own heart...

Tell her what does she have left if she doesn't have history? Tell her I'm a piece of history right under her nose.

Tell her I want her to shoot my right side, even after...
My right side is the side I want the world to see...

Tell her outside of history she is nothing... A parasite...
I am history... I know what I leave behind...

Tell her I want to be seated in front of the painting...
Tell her I take back nothing...

Splendour, Abi Morgan, 2000

Splendour

Archival digital prints on Phototex

Installation dimensions variable

2019

The main hall features a marble staircase with a Murano mosaic artesian fountain. On the opposite wall is an enormous Flemish tapestry that represents a green landscape. Next to it is a sculpted furniture set composed of a table and four stools. The doors that lead to the vestibule have solid wood framing and panelled windows.

The Renaissance style walnut furniture in Nicolae's office was produced at the Heliade, where more than 800 of the best Romanian sculptors worked. The carpet is a gift from Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the former leader of Iran. The porcelain from Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. In the showcase you will see objects of African ivory, gifts from Mobutu Sese Seko, leader of Zaire. On the wall is a 16th century tapestry given by Charles de Gaulle. Prominently displayed on the bookshelves are leather bound editions of Lenin's works. The chess table is original and the pieces reference Romanian medieval history. The pawns are villagers, the king is Mircea the Elder, and the queen is made in the image of Queen Maria.

Nicolae's favourite room was the cinema, where he spent much time watching American Westerns and the television series 'Kojak'. The whole room is illuminated by six crystal chandeliers. The walls are covered in gold and velvet quilted wallpaper.

The Louis XIV Day Lounge is a very large space for rest and conversation between family members. The fireplace is Ruschita marble with grey incisions. There are two porcelain cups resting on it and a Venetian mirror. The double doors are covered buffalo leather, painted in white with a golden pattern.

The dining room has a table with 12 chairs. On the table is a Rosenthal service, Baccara crystal glasses from Italy and gold cutlery. In this room, lunch was rarely served. The only guest received in this room was President Richard Nixon.

Elena's day apartment has an opulent bathroom with gilt swan-shaped taps. The rooms itself is decorated with Louis XV furniture and has two fountains decorated with Venetian mosaic. It was only used by Elena at noon for her daily siesta.

In such a large house, the family only had five employees: two chefs, two housekeepers and a maintenance man.

The Ceausescus shared a large Baroque bedroom. On the bed are two blankets, a blue one for Nicolae and golden beige one for Elena. The floral wallpaper is made of silk with diamond detailing. There is a large chandelier, eight crystal sconces and a mirror decorated with Murano glass.

'La Cuci', named after the birds that adorn the wallpaper, is the salon and dressing room. Elena was crazy about Chanel suits, which she had copied and produced in pastel colours by dressmakers in Apaca. She also had an enviable collection of shoes produced by factories in Mondial, Antilopa Bucharest and Clujeana, and by Christian Dior. Nicolae took inspiration from Neckermann magazines. His clothes were made in Romania, at the factories in Braila, Tulcea, Barlad and Sighisoara. The wardrobes are filled with clothes in unopened boxes.

The 'Golden Bath' was built when the palace was extended between 1970 and 1971. Above the lavatory is a mirror with a golden frame made up of three figures. There is also a sofa, a table with two chairs, a six-drawer sideboard and a weighing scale. The faucets, sinks, pipes and ceiling mosaics are all gold plated.

(An abridged transcript of a guided tour of Palatul Primaverii, the former residence of the Ceausescus in Bucharest, 8 November 2016)

Untitled (1986)

Enlarged reproduction of a photo my father took on the 25th of February 1986
Archival inkjet print on semi-gloss paper
55 x 71 cm
2016

The opulent rooms are filled with abandoned chaos, the debris of a hasty and panicked retreat.

There are empty and torn boxes, papers, half-eaten food, stuffed animals, empty jewellery cases, unmade beds, clothes strewn over embroidered couches and chairs, mattresses flung into corners, drawers half open, some empty, some full.

His unfinished last meal is on a ledge near a microwave oven: alphabet soup and pork rolls. At the top of a stack of video tapes is one marked 'Hitler, A Career.'

There are two giant-screen projection television sets. The most expensive, a Mitsubishi, has a gold plaque that says 'Happy Birthday.' On the presidential double bed with rumpled sheets thrown back is a green military helmet.

A few feet away is a hospital bed used recently. Intravenous tubes and an oxygen tank are nearby. A full operating theatre is on the floor below.

There are a half-dozen small mattresses thrown around the room. One has a child-size red Mercedes Benz parked right next to it.

The refrigerator doors in the kitchen are open, revealing fresh vegetable and cheese. An eight-foot freezer is filled with meat.

Candles burn in two private chapels under ornate statues of the Virgin Mary.

A carved wooden bed is unmade. In one corner is a strange, pulsating electronic tube machine, made in Canada and designed to encompass different parts of the body to battle 'degenerative and/or chronic diseases' with its ion pump.

A book, 'President Roosevelt, the Coming of the War, 1941' is on a side table. 'The Great Book of Jewels' covers another table top and on another desk, 'Self-learning Course in Goat Raising' and 'No Bed of Roses' by Joan Fontaine.

Left in the bathroom is a bottle of Listerine, talcum powder and a toothbrush.

A buffet set up in an adjacent dining room displays chicken and fish in sterling silver serving dishes. Napkins and papers are all over the floor.

In the dressing room, the smell of perfume is overwhelming, though she has been gone for over two hours. It is no wonder. There is an armoire filled with gallon bottles of imported fragrances, Caleche seems to be her favourite.

Long racks of dresses hang in a walk-in closet the size of a large bedroom. There are 120 pairs of shoes.

Valentine's Day cards from her children are on the floor. Giant pillows and sachets are cast around, apparently thrown out of drawers in the search for more important things. Her bed, unmade like the rest, is draped in sheer bunting and equipped with two phones.

A pink teddy bear is face down on the floor. There are stacks of bananas and empty beer bottles on the tables.

In the toilet, a medical scale is set at 139 pounds and decorated with a ruling party red, white and blue ribbon. There is a bedpan on the floor and contraceptive jelly on the sink.

(Phil Bronstein, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 February 1986)

The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders

Postcard reproductions of Old Master paintings sequestered from Imelda & Ferdinand Marcos and sold by Christie's on behalf of the Philippine Commission on Good Government.

58 sets, unlimited copies

2014 – 2019

When Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos sent the message 'Happy Birthday' to Markus Geel in Zurich, it didn't mean Monsieur Geel was a year older. That greeting meant the Marcoses wanted money from their secret trust, the 'Sandy Foundation,' set up for them and their children in Vaduz, Liechtenstein.

Whenever Geel got the birthday greeting, he was to contact Ralph Klein, his representative in Hong Kong, the documents indicate. Then Klein was to travel to Manila to meet with the Marcoses and handle the matter.

Through such clandestine devices, codes and false names, the Marcoses funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into and out of foreign bank accounts, according to the documents served on the ousted leader by the Philippine Commission on Good Government, which is investigating Marcos' wealth.

The documents indicate that if the Marcoses wanted money out of secret accounts opened with the Swiss Credit Bank beginning in 1968, they would use the pseudonyms William Saunders and Jane Ryan.

The documents include a copy of a note on presidential stationery at Malacanang Palace in Manila on which someone repeatedly practiced the signature of 'William Saunders.'

There was a more elaborate code to assure that Marcos' communications with the Swiss bank were authentic, the documents indicate. The first cable was to be numbered 'one' followed by the word 'sugar.' Successive cables, numbered in order, were to begin with the words 'copra,' 'plywood,' 'copper,' 'chromite' and 'nickel,' in rotation.

In addition, the name of the sender of the cable would have to change every two months. If it was July or August, for example, the sender's name would be 'Andrew Warner.'

The papers included contracts, trust agreements, analyses, receipts, instructions and other financial records involving institutions in the United States, Hong Kong, the Caribbean and Europe.

(Walter Wright, *Washington Post*, 22 August 1986)

It Seems We have Developed a Taste for Each Other's Weaknesses

76 counterfeit replicas of Margaret Thatcher's black leather Aspree handbag and framed page from 'The Jeffrey Archer Charity Sale' auction catalogue.

Imitation leather, metal fixings, gloss paper in wood frame

Dimensions variable

2019

A handbag belonging to Margaret Thatcher fetched £25,000 when it went under the hammer on the 27th of June 2011, auctioned by the disgraced Tory Peer Jeffrey Archer.

The black patent leather handbag, produced by Aspree, features prominently in a photograph of Thatcher with US president Ronald Reagan and his dog Lucky, as they walked through the White House Rose Garden during her visit to the United States in 1985.

This image would later be echoed in a January 2017 photograph of Prime Minister Theresa May holding hands with Donald Trump in the same White House garden, where she became the first world leader to visit the newly elected US president.

The lot donated by Lady Thatcher was among a number of highly prized items sold by amateur auctioneer and author Lord Archer for charitable causes. It was bought by an unnamed Cypriot who is understood to have been a student in Britain during Lady Thatcher's tenure as prime minister.

Lady Thatcher's daughter Carol joined bidders in the packed sale room. 'I hope that the highest bidder knows that if he's into handbagging, he's got a weapon with quite a track record. After all, my mother invented the verb 'to handbag', she said.

The auction preceded a sale of Lord Archer's art collection, which included an 1878 painting by Claude Monet and a Grey Marilyn painting by Andy Warhol. A few years earlier, Lord Archer was released on parole halfway through his four-year prison sentence for perjury and perverting the course of justice.

Notes on Decomposition No. 13

A collection of 24 Chinese porcelain from the Lehmann Brother collection, arranged in descending order according to auction value.

Ultramarine blue India ink on Heritage woodfree paper, dry transfer text

40 x 50 cm each framed drawing, installation dimensions variable

2019

In the corner of an auction room, fourteen 2ft-high steel letters skulked as if embarrassed by the fate of the institution whose name they spelled out. Around them buzzed city types in pinstripes, aspiring city types in slightly cheaper pinstripes, ladies of the south-west London lunching class and the odd curious foreigner. It is, after all, not every day that one can snap up a fragment of the once-mighty Lehman Brothers empire.

Among the paintings, sculptures and books that graced the British and European offices of the investment bank before its collapse two years ago were two Lucian Freud etchings, a Gary Hume and some rather nice Ming dynasty porcelain. But a fair few of those who turned up appeared to be obeying the summons of schadenfreude rather than aesthetics.

Lot 1001, the very first item, was the prize that had lured many bidders online and through the doors of Christie's. The simple metal plaque, commemorating the opening of the Lehman Brothers' Canary Wharf HQ by one Gordon Brown MP six years ago, had an estimate of £1,000-1,500. The bidding opened at £4,000, quickly soared and finally peaked at £23,000. Its buyer seemed to agree with the auctioneer that snatching the plaque was "the chance of a lifetime". The total cost, including the buyer's premium and VAT, was £28,750.

Lot 1002 may have been a far more minimalist example of the signwriter's art, but the 2ft x 10ft Lehman Brothers corporate plaque still fetched £42,050. The five other Lehman signs in the sale also performed well, bringing in very nearly £40,000 between them.

A few objects offered their own discreet commentaries on the fate of the Wall Street legend. The works of Byron, which fetched £3,500, might have afforded a warning about the dangers of profligacy, while the handsomely bound edition of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, sold for £2,375, could have spoken silent volumes on the transience of even the mightiest man-made institutions. Numerous paintings of ships struggling to stay afloat amid black storm clouds offered up convenient metaphors.

By late afternoon, the sale had raised very nearly £1m. But that, alas, will not go very far in covering the £384bn that Lehman held in debts when it collapsed.

(Sam Jones, *The Guardian*, 29 September 2010)

Târgoviște (9 November 2016)

Archival digital print on Phototex

133 x 100 cm

2019

The end of history was not supposed to take place in Târgoviște.

Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu's brief and vain attempt to evade capture began on an overloaded helicopter that barely managed to take off from the rooftop of the Communist Party headquarters in Bucharest.

Their first destination was the town of Snagov where the Ceauseascus had a summer palace. While en route they were spotted by radar and the pilot claimed they were in danger of anti-aircraft fire, forcing them to land on the side of a nearby road.

They were able to requisition a passing Dacia, the only Romanian-built car available to local Romanians, by pulling a gun on an unsuspecting factory worker. They drove to the nearest local party headquarters in Târgoviște, a town 51 miles northwest of Bucharest, which the Ceausescus still believed to be loyal to the Conducator. They were tragically mistaken.

Upon arrival, they were immediately arrested and brought to the local military barracks. An army office was hastily transformed into two cubicles, with army beds and blankets. There was a large porcelain stove in one corner and a cold-water tap wash-basin in another. On their first night, Nicolae and Elena slept in the same bed, huddled together.

From their room, the Ceausescus could hear the formerly loyal town of Târgoviște baying for their blood. Ceausescu unsuccessfully ordered his jailers to open the lace curtained windows separating him from his people, believing that he still had sufficient authority to win over the crowd.

The Ceausescus remained in this room for three days. After a hastily conducted trial, they were killed by firing squad on the 25th of December 1989.

The execution of the Ceausescus on the final days of 1989 marked the beginning of an end that would culminate in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Nearly three decades later, I found myself in that same room in Târgoviște on the 9th of November 2016 just as Hilary Clinton was delivering her concession speech. I took a photo of the Ceausescus' prison window to mark the beginning of another collapse. One that we are still in the midst of.



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Weaknesses*

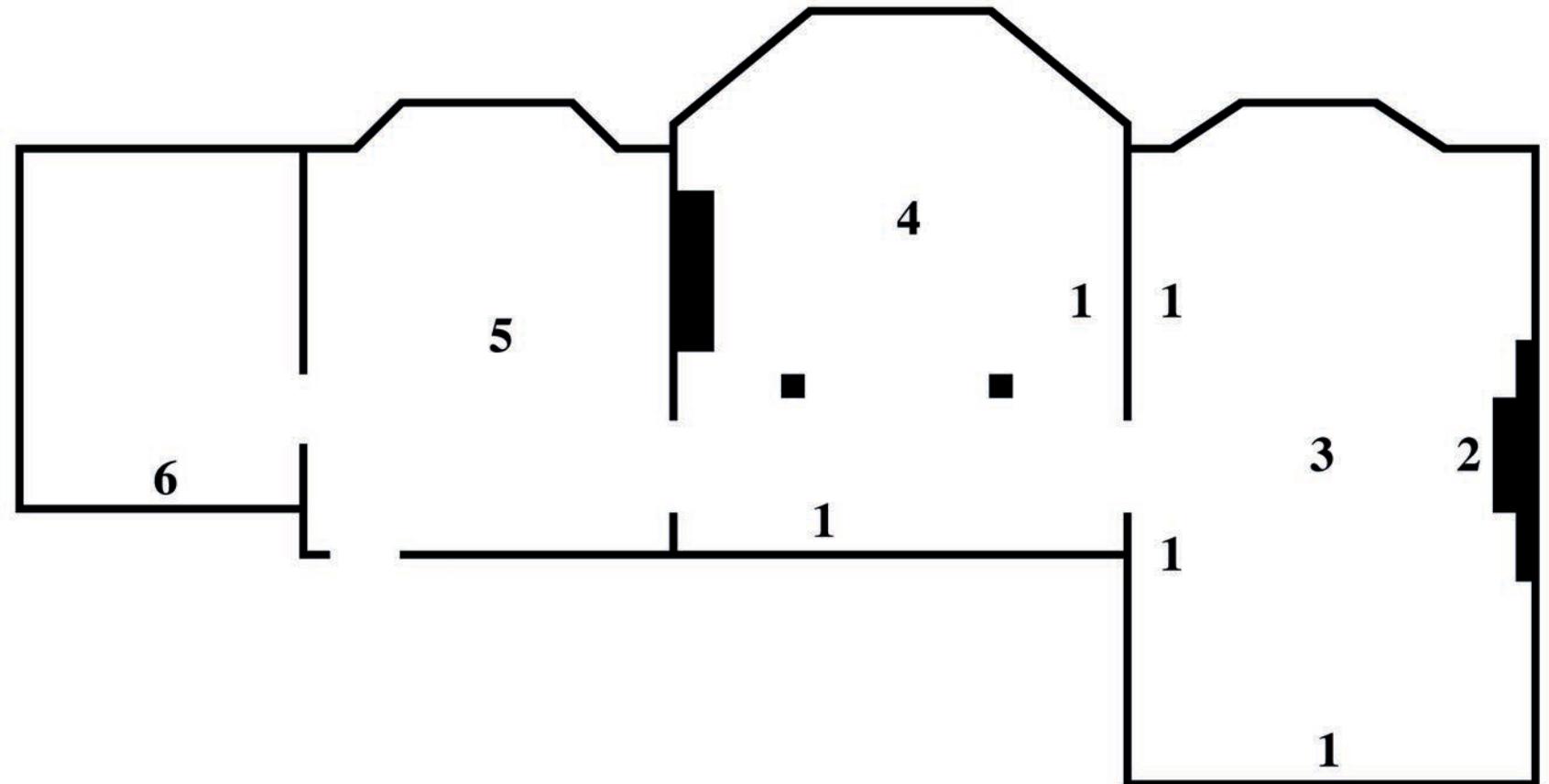
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Oakville galleries

