

Roman Ondák

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Art lovers expecting the unexpected were amply rewarded by Roman Ondák's recent exhibition "Erased Wing Mirror." The Slovakian artist is a master illusionist; he famously made an entire Venice Biennale pavilion vanish into thin air, and once organized a fake queue to make it seem as if a vast public were waiting to view his work. This time he unsettled visitors with a nimble sideways move that took him beyond the bounds of such immaterial artistic gestures.

Mailbox, 2013, a large-format oil painting on the gallery's main wall, depicts a radiant, lushly green landscape: mountains, a river, and a dam



View of "Roman Ondák," 2014. From left: *Third Way*, 2013; *Mailbox*, 2013.

under construction. Set into the left half is a sort of wood inlay, to which a piece of triangular pipe painted a rusty red has been mounted. For another work, also called *Mailbox* but dated 2014, Ondák combined a length of white pipe with a round tabletop and a map of Central Europe. The pipes—and this explains the works' titles—are actually so-called delineators, plastic pylons used to mark roadways; it seems that in the 1980s, inventive Slovaks recycled the hollow triangular poles as mailboxes. The russet pipe, Ondák recalls, was cut to size by his father, an engineer, and used to grace the gate of his family's house in the

village of Stráňavy in northwestern Slovakia. A modest piece of home was thus promoted into the vaunted world of art through its selection as a found object.

With this show, Ondák took us back to his teenage years, when, after the collapse of the Prague Spring, what was then still Czechoslovakia underwent a pro-Soviet realignment process known as "normalization." That's when he first saw the landscape painting in his 2013 work—for it, too, is a found object—at Žilina's municipal museum, where he once worked. At some point after the so-called Velvet Revolution, the museum decided to deaccession the picture, a work of middle-of-the-road socialist realism, arguing that it was without artistic or historical value. But then Ondák's appropriation unexpectedly lent it new artistic merit. There's a biographical backdrop to the map in the 2014 work as well; it comes from the barracks in Čáslav, where Ondák did his two-year military service.

Such insights into the artist's personal background and individual experiences are crucial to an understanding of a complex oeuvre that encompasses not only sculptures and objects, pictures and drawings, but also performances, action pieces, and situational interventions. In *Erased Wing Mirror*, 2013, Ondák explores the relationship between reality and the mechanics of representation. The work combines two readymades: a raised-relief map of Slovakia and a template used to repair the side-view mirror on a Citroën, the car his father bought to

replace the family's old Škoda in the 1990s. The semiotics of Eastern and Western European economic systems, the semantics of historical processes, adolescence in a period of change: Ondák ties all of these together through the motifs of looking back and effacement, while the title invokes Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953—as if to say that the empty, nonreflective template had taken the place of the real mirror.

Ondák flirts with the substance, essence, and dimensions of things—he is concerned with the nexus between recollection and image. Arranged with sly irony, his works are hinges between reality and utopia. A flair for the comically absurd leaps at us from *Third Way*, 2013, an installation made of two ladders: An old wooden one that the artist picked up somewhere leans against the wall, while a scaled-down model of a stepladder also jockeys for our attention. What looks at first glance like a couple of props from a slapstick movie or a play on the reception of early Conceptual art is actually a muted and pensive plea for a third way: for novel perspectives, alternatives, and options.

—Brigitte Huck

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.