



# DAMN°

Projects & Personalities

120

Words by Brecht Wright Gander

## Serban Ionescu



Serban Ionescu was, until the age of six, almost completely mute. This is in no way inferable from the velocity and volubility with which he now speaks. Indeed, fecundity pervades Ionescu's present: he has just opened his second solo show at R & Company in NYC, and is planning three international shows later in 2022. On Mother's Day back in May, he and his wife delivered their second child. English is, incidentally, Ionescu's second language; he was born in communist Romania. The Soviet poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who died of love, declaimed his own work as an "intimate yell", to borrow James Schuyler's phrase. [In despair, Mayakovsky committed suicide over an unrequited love]. That's also an apt description of Ionescu's sculptural register. Frequently he quotes domestic typologies – the chair, the table, the lamp – which can make his work feel familiar and graspable. Yet it blazes with wicked wit and radiates boisterous pleasure.

Castle Garden, the fanciful sounding title of Ionescu's current show, is more literal than one might at first suspect. There is indeed something in it that might be called a castle. And in the universe of that castle, there's statuary that might constitute a garden. To better define Ionescu's work, I find myself searching for a neologism, like Robert Morris's "object sculptures". Conveniently, the artist has, in fact, coined one: "roomscrapers", which captures at least three signature characteristics – scalelessness, hybridity, and humour. Just as Ionescu builds in the mud, where the holy water of art meets the pedestrian land of everything else, he also displays a fluency with scale which is so effortless it undoes any sense of meaningful difference. This is a phenomenon with which architects (which is what Ionescu was trained to be) may be more comfortable than the rest of us – they deal regularly with virtual models that shrink or expand at the

spin of a mouse wheel. Ionescu's elastic proportions evoke at once the seemingly contrary feelings of anti-monumentality and sprawling ambitiousness.

In his totemic *Roomscrapper 1*, it takes all of two inches for the plinth to get bored with its ordinary plinth-ness. That's when it gets sheared-through by a jagged, randomly perforated blue form. Multiple readings are available: this may be an idiosyncratic feature of the plinth itself, or it may be a downward assault on the plinth by the sculptural energy above. At the base of the sculpture are two dovetail-shaped mortises. A mortise without a mate suggests incompleteness, and yet these negatives are positioned at the totem's base, where nothing could logically be added. If the shape is incomplete, it is doomed to remain so. On another level, the feeling evoked by the resolved sweep of *Roomscrapper 1*'s frontal elevation is monumental, poised and contained. At the top, a neon tube bares its bright plasma spirit, but as a climax, this one is deflated: it has been formed to resemble the soggy outline of a hipster moustache.

Judging from his own home, Ionescu's work gathers strength from its adjacency to ordinary furniture, which supplies a flatfooted contrast to his tumultuous energy. This is hardly the case with most modern and contemporary art: no Pollock painting gets better by having a clutter of seating and lamps below it. But is this the fault of clutter? An above-the-sofa painting is now a pejorative synonym for 'decorative', meaning frivolous and trite. But what is it about proximity to daily life that diminishes art, exactly? Or what feeble art are we dealing with if it can only breathe within the cryogenic non-rooms of galleries and museums? And finally, is it really accurate to conflate banality with the domestic? The home is where the deepest dramas of our

lives play out. It is by the sofa that we make love, lose love, and gather our closest friends together in grief. It's below the sofa that the bottles are hidden. It's beside the sofa that confessions are made. How much more dangerous is the territory of the much-reviled sofa, then, than the money-hushed spaces which give art its artifying context? Which territory, truly, is laden with risk?

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Yet, as much as Ionescu's sculptures address the home, they still must pass through the intestine of the marketplace. There is, after all, a multistorey castle constructed inside the gallery space of R & Company. This will take some digesting. Call it 'above the roofline' art. To enter the castle you pass through a portal that resembles a cartoon cut-out of an electrical plug – like the profile Wile E. Coyote leaves after running straight through a wall. The portal gives one pause: what manner of 'thing' is it, precisely, that this structure is intended to accommodate? Large sections are missing from the freshly painted hull, as if it's in a state of ersatz romantic decay, like a 19th-century folly. At other moments, its bright colouration and guts-out form recall the radical architecture of Gaetano Pesce or the Centre Pompidou.

Ionescu stylises ducts and piping such that they clamour through ragged openings in the outer hull of his castle. These ducts carry no air – they are merely viscera and arteries, signs of a writhing mechanistic life. If Le Corbusier made "machines for living in", Ionescu is making machines that want to live – and, in manifesting desire, they do. There are organelles and intestines in his cabinets, there are flagella on his mirrors, and there are luminous eyes in his lamps. Granting 'things' the kinds of complicated identities we prefer to assign ourselves, encourages us to think about the things that we ourselves are. Which calls to mind a remark made by Paul Thek after visiting the Sicilian catacombs: "It delighted me that bodies could be used to decorate a room, like flowers. We accept our thingness intellectually but the emotional acceptance of it can be a joy."

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If frenzy and explosive impulse defined his previous show at R & Company, Ionescu's latest body of work has consolidated its energies into more resolved gestures and tensions. This is true in the smallest details too – for instance, tightly welded seams have taken the place of machine screws for most joints. *Roomscrapper 2*, which is approximately human size, resembles the profile of a tilted Greek amphora attached to an industrial Lego component. A mottled patina of blue and red has been applied to much of the surface. In the centre of the form, a grapefruit sized fan is visible through an irregular red cut-out that only partially provides the necessary space for the fan's

airflow. This wicked wink at functionality, in which the fan is far too small to provide meaningful wind and is further undermined by having its airflow blocked, is deliciously absurdist. John Keats enjoins us to encounter mysteries "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Ionescu incites us to reach for reasons and then makes us laugh at our failure. His are objects of obscure purpose marked by clear intention. You may think you know what fans do – but you will grope for an understanding of this one. <

Serban Ionescu: Castle Garden  
R & Company, New York  
until 12 August 2022  
r-and-company.com



Assembly of Fallen Values, Les Brasseurs, Liège, Belgium