

The Museum of Everything's hunt for artists



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James Brett presses a button on an orange plastic loudhailer and a recording draws the Russian words "Sledyoosheee Whodozhnik" to summon the next artist for an audience. The founder of the Museum of Everything is in Moscow unearthing hidden treasures at the end of a tour of Russia that has taken him to the cities of St Petersburg, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg with a big red container truck. At each stop, his travelling museum invites people to bring along their artworks for possible inclusion in an exhibition at Moscow's Garage Centre for Contemporary Culture. His search for "untrained, undiscovered and unintentional artists" appears to strike a chord with Russians, where decades of Soviet control over culture instilled a habit of keeping creativity to yourself. Many of those who bring paintings, sculptures and other works to him have never shown them to anyone but family and friends.

"In each city, we definitely found artists that absolutely represent the area and themselves. That's been quite fascinating," said Brett. "We basically roll up in our two-container truck and tell everyone it's a museum. On the first day, there's not that much but by lunchtime we have a healthy body of work."

"We meet everybody and spend five or ten minutes talking with them, filming and taking photos, and that's a very enabling process for people. There's a lot of wives bringing their husbands' work."

One woman in Kazan brought a portrait by her husband that so impressed Brett that he drove for two hours into the countryside to meet the artist. "He's a very skilled painter but he has never believed in himself enough to take his work anywhere," he said. "Everybody is interesting and that's how you get to know the country. But then there are one or two very unusual artists, the ones where there's something very new."

It's the first time that Brett has taken the Museum of Everything, which he established in 2009, on an active search for artists outside Britain. Russia's sheer size, a history of crafts and a lively tradition of naive art among people who remain used to making things for themselves were among the attractions.

A man in Yekaterinburg had drawn his observations of changes caused by the weather in a section of woodland near his home every day for the past 14 years. Brett said: "It's incredibly complex work that he doesn't even think of as art. I'm trying to persuade him to show in Moscow because it's a lifetime project that, unless he exhibit it, nobody but us thinks is art. If he doesn't exhibit it, then it will disappear when he dies, which will be tragic."

The website for his "Exhibition No. 5", as the Russia project is called, declares that it is seeking "self-taught, visionary, folkloric, art brut, mediumistic, unintentional or alternative" artists. Brett admits that people are initially often nervous, even suspicious, but open up once they realise that "we're not pulling their leg".

"For many it is the first time that they have met somebody who believes in their work. We have had an incredible welcome everywhere we have gone, not only from artists but the local community thanking us for coming, because in the regions they feel ignored."

"The submissions have been in the thousands but I hope by the end to have discovered at least a dozen phenomenal artists. That would be an incredible achievement. I have learned a lot about how Russia works on my trip — one needs a lot of patience, optimism and persistence."

Brett's patience and curiosity appear boundless as he inquires into the artists and works that enter his trailer during one viewing session in Moscow's Gorky Park. They are of all ages, some eccentric, some shy, others simply drawn by curiosity. Some bring work that turns out to have been copied from a favourite photograph or picture, while others are wrapped up in an idea of their creations that escapes the casual observer.

He revels in the encounters, enjoying the interrogations through an interpreter of their work and impishly cracking jokes that get lost in translation. Despite the language barrier, a genuine connection seems to be established and even those not selected for consideration go away with a certificate and a feeling of being valued.

Dmitri Guryachkin, a photographer, assembles a clutch of iron rods and chunks of steel into a sculpture that keeps falling apart. He calls it "My Secret Archeology", explaining that it is important for him that he finds the pieces for his sculptures in rubbish dumps. He gets the nod, largely for his evident passion about his work.

Then Pyotr Polishyk, 73, steps inside wearing a rainbow-coloured cricket hat and begins to lay out painting after painting around the sides of the trailer, talking feverishly and often incomprehensibly as he does so. His wife Vera tells us that he had once been an art designer for advertisements, had been sent to a psychiatric hospital by officials for a time without explanation, and that their home had recently burned down. Polishyk is still talking chaotically, explaining details of his paintings, many of which, Brett notices, feature a storm tossed fishing vessel. When he asks why, Polishyk recounts how he had spent time as a 17-year-old working on a fishing vessel in the sea off the Arctic port of Murmansk. Amid the turmoil of his recent life, his paintings seem to search obsessively for a perfect rendition of this youthful memory.

Polishyk too makes the cut for possible inclusion in the final exhibition, which will be held at Garage's new pavilion in Gorky Park Owned and run by Chelsea billionaire Roman Abramovich's partner Daria Zhukova, the centre is Moscow's coolest contemporary art space. It is a Quixotic and compelling connection between two extremes of modern Russia that somehow seems fitting for a project called the Museum of Everything.

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The Museum of Everything tours Russia in a container truck Slav Syrkin/The Museum of Everything

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