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Touring Museum Seeks Self-Taught Russian Artists

By Christopher Brennan

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A model of the museum's truck. The Museum of Everything is traveling to four cities in search of unknown artists.

Somewhere in the middle of Russia a man is driving westward in a big red truck. The truck has two large containers with the word "everything" emblazoned in white on the side, and is heading to Kazan, in search of unknown artists. Anyone can bring along their art and has the chance of getting an honored place in the Museum of Everything.

The Museum of Everything is a unique project founded by James Brett that has opened its doors previously to artists in Britain.

After Kazan, the truck will head to Nizhny Novgorod and St. Petersburg before displaying the best of the unknown art at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Gorky Park in September.

Brett spoke with The Moscow Times from the first stop on the tour, Yekaterinburg.

Q: What is the idea behind coming to Russia?

A: There's a history of what they call "naive art" in Russia, but these kinds of artists don't really appear and I bet they're there. So we came up with this plan of a show that would really be an experiment more than anything else. To see if we could connect to contemporary self-taught artists who are out there, in Russia, making work and not being given any visibility. We always knew it was going to be an experiment. When we open the show, the show is empty. The show doesn't begin until the artists come with the work.

Q: What do you look for when you solicit pieces of art?

A: What we're looking for predominantly are people who are making something as personal expression. Not thinking about the market, not thinking about a show. Just making because they have to or want to make. We are very open to who those people are. And sometimes the most unlikely people are the most exceptional artists.

For example, one of the artists we showed in London was Judith Scott, an artist who at the age of 50 started making art in a studio.

And she was a twin who had Down Syndrome and she didn't talk, she didn't hear. She wouldn't have even been able to tell you that what she was making was art, but actually they are these phenomenal objects.

In almost every society there was this schism that happened at some point where somebody creating a big museum said this is art and this is not art.

It's almost like the guy drinking too much beer in the corner of the pub carving a [wooden] stump into a face was not art.

He was just that guy that we don't talk to. Contemporary art has shifted it, I believe. We can look at those things and say they have beauty.

Q: Are you hoping for anything particular from Russian artists?

A: I think so. I think there's a tradition of making in this country and expressing yourself visually. There was an exhibition a few years ago of people making objects out of the wrong things. And this sort of thing of making is somehow is very inside Russian culture. There's also this folk tradition that is very strong from which some of the naive art sprang. So I'm hoping for the clash of that together with the current political mood, that there's voices being heard that haven't been heard in my lifetime coming to the fore. I'm hoping that the clash of those two forces will result in people who have something to say bringing it forward, people who five, 10 years ago would not have come along; that they'll bring works.

Q: What do you think of the relationship between the traditional art world and the Museum of Everything?

A: It's interesting. I think its mixed if I'm honest. I think that very specific artists and curators are very supportive. But at the same time very many are ... I used to live in Los Angeles, I

studied film in Los Angeles. And something happens in Los Angeles where people are incredibly enthusiastic about what you tell them and are being incredibly enthusiastic in order to negate you. There's a big proportion of the art world that does that. You have to have a good radar. Our biggest supporters are artists themselves because the people that we show are often the people that inspire them. Because they see that this stuff is absolutely truthful. And any good artist is trying to be truthful and communicate truthfully.

Q: What are your impressions of the work you have seen in Russia so far?

A: It's much more Russian. We see a more Russian imagery. There are older artists who are very gifted in terms of their ability to see something and represent it ... but they [often] copy a famous Russian artist ... For everyone who does they're own thing, there's five who copy.

There's a woman who made over 300 three-dimensional recreations of famous artworks. A three-dimensional "Guernica." The most exceptional thing about it is that it's only 50 centimeters wide.

See www.museumofeverything.com for more details about the museum.

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