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From Wales to Dzerzhinsk 'In the Footsteps of Ghosts'

Geraint Rhys' award-winning film about the artist Pavel Otdelnov

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Artist Pavel Otdelnov **Courtesy of Elena Michailichenko**

Geraint Rhys, a musician and videographer from Wales, made a short film called "In the Footsteps of Ghosts" with the artist Pavel Otdelnov, whose show last year at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art was covered here. The Moscow Times talked with the filmmaker about how he discovered this Russian painter from Dzerzhinsk and why his canvases of abandoned industrial plants, a way of life ended, and the ecological legacy of the past resonated with him. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: You're not a specialist in Russian studies. How did you hear about this artist and make a film about him?

A: I have a Russian friend I studied with in Edinburgh, and I'd visited him in Russia in 2012. I

came over to Moscow again in August. I stayed with my friend, who had showed me some of Pavel's works. South Wales is very post-industrial. Russia is such a big country in comparison to Wales, which only has a population of three million people. But still, it seems very familiar. A lot of the coal which fueled the British Empire and the industrial revolution in the U.K. came from South Wales. Although it was different, there was still a familiarity with it with that kind of decline of industry. If you drive around South Wales valleys, there are still plenty of monuments, abandoned industrial sites that are still part of the landscape.

It's very much a part of our identity in Wales, this link to mining. It's why Pavel's work resonated with me — the duality of a sense of loss of community and wealth, but also the massive cost to the environment.

That's something that Pavel negotiates with his works. He talks a lot about his family and that kind of sense of purpose and ancestry and a link to the area, the industry. But yet there is a realization of how it created scars on the landscape.

Q: How did you meet Pavel?

A: [A while back] I had found a book by Viktoria Lomasko called "Other Russias," which I read and loved. I messaged her to see if she would do some artwork for one of my upcoming singles... It was through Vika that I met him.

Q: Did you meet him and set up another time to film?

A: No, I went [to his Moscow studio], and he was very generous. As soon as I arrived, I got out the camera and once we'd said hello and felt comfortable with each other, I asked, "Do you mind?" He knew of me already because I'd worked with Vika a few times in the past. A lot of these things are just a matter of trust, aren't they?

Q: Yes, but to just walk in and start filming...

A: I had a rough idea of what I wanted to ask him, but you just strike up a conversation. I showed him some of my work as well so he could see that I do something similar but in a different medium. And then we just started talking. The approach I like to take whenever I'm doing something like this is to have a rough idea, but give it room to breathe. The most exciting place is if you allow it just to develop. And then you go through editing processes, spending hours in front of the monitor, unpicking it, making a narrative of that discussion.

Q: Pavel had all those paintings he showed you on hand?

A: Yes, it was in his studio. And as most studios are, it was a fantastic mess. He pulled out some of his bigger paintings. We had to unfurl them and look at them. Pavel talks about moving to Moscow, but he says that going back to his family and his roots was important to him. A sense of place is something that's really important to me in my work. So that and the link to an industrial past, an industrial family history, resonated with me. But I've worked with other people in the past who are nowhere near as generous or are quite guarded. It was a very relaxed atmosphere. We hit it off straight away.

Q: Where have you shown the film?

A: We entered it in the Moscow Shorts International Film Festival and it won best documentary for January. I've entered it into other film festivals now, but it was good to get that kind of first initial recognition from the Moscow Shorts International Film Festival.

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In the Footsteps of Ghosts / По следам призраков from Geraint Rhys on Vimeo.

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