

A Critical Juncture

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I am a contemporary artist working with painting, video, installation, and other media. My work explores themes of urban space, the environment, Soviet history, and historical memory. I create intricate and multifaceted images that encourage reflection on Soviet collective history and its impact on contemporary society.¹ The history of the USSR and contemporary Russia have long been interwoven into my artistic practice. My interest in Soviet history stems from my interest in my family history. I realized that my grandmothers could share some unique stories about their lives. However, I did not have much time: they were in their eighties and nineties. When I interviewed them, I realized that this was my door into the controversial history of the twentieth century. From this vantage point, I found other sources of information, local historians' books, official newspapers, and memoirs, and I discovered that their descriptions of the same events sometimes don't tally.

"Promzona," my long-term artistic project, was based on a variety of sources. I used a multifaceted approach and found a mixture of painting, photography, and installation combined to illuminate different layers of Soviet history. I opened my exhibition "Promzona" with the most predictable evidence, archival photographs, and newspapers. I turned then to a more personal dimension, and I showed a collection of portraits of unknown people and paintings along with my own impressions of this area and some of the private memoirs of different workers. Then I showed a bird's eye view of the toxic wastelands that were a result of Dzerzhinsk's industries.

Another big project, "Ringing Trace," was created in a closed scientists' village concerned with nuclear production in the Urals. It brings to light the history of the Soviet atomic project and its tragic repercussions. "Ringing Trace" also distils different historical perspectives. The beginning of the show is about the start of the Soviet nuclear project. The next part is about the restricted area. Then I turn to real-life catastrophes and their consequences. After the chemical explosion of

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¹ *Editor's recommendation:* <https://otdelnov.com/en>.



Figure 10.1: Pavel Otdelnov, *Techa*, 2021, installation.

September 29, 1957, the land and people's lives were decimated. The last halls are about human stories and real tragedies. A local inhabitant, Iran K. Khaerzamanov, describes the consequences: *When the cloud came, my daughter of ten months was on the vegetable patch with her grandmother who was harvesting potatoes. The little one got red diarrhea and died in a few days. My little darling is still buried at the cemetery of Berdyanish Village. I am quite composed telling you all this now, but back then, the grief—it's better not to speak of it. There were great many such cases with kids. Grown-up bodies happened to be more resilient.*

The show's composition encouraged local people to tell their stories of that time and the show stands as a permanent testimony to them.

Acting Out

Everything I created in 2022 was based on my personal understanding of the present ongoing catastrophe. As an artist from Russia, I can hardly reflect on this war from the perspective of the Ukrainian people and Ukraine. However, I can explore the set of problems that lay behind the Russian aggression and led us to the current tragic juncture. My concerns are about Russia's mutations over the last two decades. Amongst them are the country's inexorable slide into authoritarianism, large-scale political repressions, the wholesale destruction of the institutions of



Figure 10.2: Pavel Otdelnov, *Swan Lake*, 2022.

civil society and independent media, increased militarism, and the enactment of legislation aimed at enshrining the existing power.

My observations on this matter resulted in my project “Acting Out,” which I showed at Pushkin House in London from October 2022 until January 2023. I turned back to the events of the 1991 coup and analyzed the resentment caused by Russia’s defeat in the Cold War. I looked at Russia’s messianic ideas and the notion of a special Russian path. Part of the exhibition was dedicated to the theme of nostalgia for the Soviet past, an emotion which has been actively exploited by the Russian state media. “Acting Out” allowed me to see current events from a historical perspective, and to place the ongoing military aggression into a larger context of the twentieth century. I feel it’s tied both to the Nietzschean concept of Ressentiment, which determines the sense of injustice and offence—the outcome of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union are felt to be above all injustices—and also to the language of psychotherapy, in which ‘acting out’ means playing back, a hysterical transition into a state of aggression.

The exhibition begins with an officious red carpet, going nowhere (fig. 10.3), and then there’s a symbolic descent down into the bunker. It consisted of three



Figure 10.3: Pavel Otdelnov, *The Path*, 2022.

sections flowing into one another: “Resentment,” “Generation,” and “Beautiful Far Away.” And from the first to the last, you have to go up the stairs. There are two works on the “putsch,” the attempted conservative counter-revolution of 1991. A counter-revolution that happened in the recent present, after all. I dedicated an entire section to my compatriots who have left the country and those who will return as “Cargo 200.”² I designed the exhibition as a compositional rondo: the nuclear suitcase at the beginning of the exhibition turns into the time machine from the Soviet TV series “The Guest from the Future” (1985) at the end. It was important for me to show how the future turns out to be the past, and how nostalgia for the “beautiful past” turns out to be a poisoned well and very dangerous to drink from. In my country’s leadership I see a hysterical impulse to stop—at any cost—a future that is incomprehensible to them, in which, of course, they have no place.

² Editor’s note: “Cargo 200” is a code word referring to the transportation of military casualties.



Figure 10.4: Pavel Otdelnov, *Grandmother*, 2023.

Hometown

In 2022, like many of my contemporaries, I left Russia, firstly for Sweden and then for the United Kingdom. Immigration deepened my personal crisis. Every time, when I am asked about where I come from, I cannot just name my country. My reply seems to prompt further expectations and a commentary on Russian politics. When I answer, *I am from Russia*, I always simultaneously ask myself: *What does it mean to be Russian?* With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the internal political changes in Russia, the question of identity has become painful for me. I cannot accept that my country is killing people, that bombs are being dropped on the cities and people—in my name, right now, every day.

To answer the question of identity I realized that it was crucial for me once again to turn my attention to the history of my hometown of Dzerzhinsk.

Gangs One of the strands of my project “Hometown” is dedicated to the criminal youth gangs of Dzerzhinsk. Like many other industrial cities in the USSR, Dzerzhinsk had a significant criminal youth element which burgeoned in the 1980s and declined in the 2000s. The gangs were a real challenge to the police, and, at the



Figure 10.5: Pavel Otdelnov, *Gang 3*, 2023.

same time, their structure and ethics mirrored those of the official security forces. The main principles of the gangs include a rigid societal division into “us” and “them,” a constant readiness to fight over the slightest provocation, and the notion of vendetta. The gang system had a strict hierarchy, in which the word of the leader was a diktat. Gangs encouraged hatred of any otherness, especially of different sexual orientations. Members of the gangs, as people with combat experience from group fights, were recruited by the authorities to participate in military actions in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Worryingly, the basic principles established by the subculture of youth gangs have outlived the gangs. Many gang members have become influential individuals, and today their principles are echoed by the President of Russia and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov. I believe that these same principles guide Russia’s aggressive conduct in domestic and foreign policies.

Honest workers Another important theme in my Hometown series is dedicated to the workers employed in Dzerzhinsk’s military industries, diligently performing their duties without considering the monstrous consequences of their actions.



Figure 10.6: Installation photograph of *Hometown* at Peckham Rye Station, London, 2024.

Since its foundation, the city has produced weapons and explosives. The first factory was built during the First World War, and chemical weapons production began shortly before the Second World War. Dzerzhinsk suffered greatly during the economic crises of the 1990s and 2000s, with many enterprises shutting down, leading some factories to fall into disrepair. However, with the onset of full-scale military action in Ukraine, the city experienced a revitalization, a “beneficial” period due to increased orders of munitions. Now, Dzerzhinsk is home to several major producers of explosives and shells, and these factories are ramping up production. The city is restoring and improving its infrastructure thanks to new Army contracts, creating jobs and improving the citizens’ welfare.

Dzerzhinsk was established as a munitions city in 1930. It expanded in the Second World War, declined in the 1990s, and now it rises again. There’s a symbiosis between Dzerzhinsk’s prosperity and that of the military regime.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine made me look at my beloved city’s complicity. I needed to find a visual metaphor for the ongoing catastrophe. I created a sign reminiscent of a black hole image, a black vortex or an abyss which rotates and absorbs everything around it. When I showed my “Hometown” project at the Old Waiting Room at Peckham Rye Station, London, I painted a large “abyss” and hung it at the center of the exhibition above the paintings of my hometown.

Conclusions

I believe that the roots of Russia's current catastrophe lie in the Soviet past. The Soviet Janus face, in which *one set of words is for the kitchen, another for the streets*, a world where the senior is always right and beyond criticism, where there are the righteous "us" and the treacherous "them." In Russia, Soviet history has not been properly studied and understood. I believe it is essential to explore the history of one's country and family honestly, carefully, and in a clear-eyed way, especially now, when I am standing at this critical juncture. The under-explored, unspoken, hidden, and seemingly contentious past calls for attention. It awaits our understanding and critical examination. I believe it is time to revisit the history of the twentieth century and particularly the Soviet project. Now we can see that the reluctance to delve into a difficult and often unpleasant past has resulted in truly catastrophic events. It is at this critical juncture that the importance of studying history, including its dark corners, becomes clear. Then we can break the endless cyclical pattern of historical mistakes, and one day we might be able to draw the right conclusions and offer hope.

From this point onward, we can see something hitherto unseen. For instance, we can now observe the effects of cognitive biases more clearly, and investigate the nature of conformity, and the psychological defense mechanisms that can be activated against unwelcome information.

This vantage point can motivate us and allow us to see the constructed nature of historical narratives and the lacunae in our artistic and scientific studies. Thus, we can detect echoes of the colonial past in our research and ourselves. It should and must inspire us to continue our explorations.