

Can't be bothered to attend that Private View? A chance meeting at a Tate PV found painter PETER GRIFFIN in Latvia as a guest of the Rothko Centre. STATEMENT: PETER GRIFFIN

# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

IN SEPTEMBER of 2008 I was invited to the London opening of a Rothko exhibition at Tate Modern. At some point I was introduced to Farida Zaletilo and, as we were talking, her friend came up and joined in the conversation. I realised this other lady had an American accent so I asked if this was this her first visit to Britain. She replied that she did come, as a child with her father. But not to London, to Cornwall, where they used to visit Peter Lanyon and Terry Frost. I told her Terry Frost had been a great friend of mine and asked if her father collected Terry's paintings? She said no – that, in fact, her father was also an artist. Naturally, I asked his name because I might have known him.



▲ Peter Griffin in his Fulham studio, London 2011

That's possible, she replied, my father's name is – Mark Rothko...

At the time my own work was on show at Maddox Arts in central London. Kate Rothko and Farida asked about the gallery and politely said they would visit my exhibition. Amazingly, they did so – and as a result of this accidental meeting, I was asked to join an artist-in-residence programme the following September.

The Rothko Centre is in the city of his birth and early childhood, Daugavpils in Latvia (up to 1990 known as Dvinsk and a Russian satellite state). During regular contacts with Farida at Daugavpils, she asked me to propose two more UK artists to take part. I suggested Jenny Durrant, whose sublime use of colour has a natural connection to Rothko, and Anthony Frost (son of Terry Frost) which I thought would be a great reprise of the original Rothko/Frost relationship. Some months later Anthony had to withdraw, so I substituted the painter Paul Butler.

In September 2009, we travelled down from Riga with Eduardo, a young artist from Italy, and Malbrit, a Danish artist living in Paris. The following morning we were introduced to ten other artists from countries which had emerged as independent states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union including: Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland and various parts of Russia from St Petersburg to the Urals. And, of course, Latvia itself.

Under the Soviets, Rothko's fame as an artist was little understood and so his relationship to the city is a recent discovery. The house where Rothko spent his childhood no longer stood, but the street remained and still contained several of the vernacular wooden houses in which he was born. We visited the enormous complex that is to become The Rothko Centre. Initially built as a palace for one of the Russian Czars, it later became a military arsenal for the Soviet army and is on a massive scale. It is an inspiring concept that a city and country (which a decade or so earlier had not really known of Mark Rothko) were prepared to donate this impressive space to celebrate a painter's achievements. Though currently in need of repair and refurbishment, when completed this 19th century Palace will make a stunningly beautiful museum.

The artists' group was introduced to the locals of Daugavpils in an elaborate ceremony incorporating a large-scale light show based on Rothko and his work. Amongst the guests were diplomats from the embassies of Britain, France and the United States. The whole Rothko project was clearly being given serious attention.

The studios were housed in a wing of a nearby state school, each artist being given their own private space – usually a classroom which had been especially cleared. I was very encouraged to see those from the former Eastern Bloc countries were not jumping onto every fashionable bandwagon coming out of the west. The more that we were able to communicate the more I began to get an idea of their loves and interests: which covered everything from cinema to literature, religion to music, and from politics to nature. In this sense their aims and ambitions were directed exclusively to their work and not careers, something which I found very refreshing.

At the end of the residency each artist had several pieces of their work exhibited in the city museum, which now serves as a temporary space for the Rothko Centre. The permanent site is scheduled for completion in 2013. Once again, the respect given to the organisation was ably illustrated by the attendance of the American Ambassador, the British *Chargés d'affaires* and Rothko's son-in-law, Ilya Prizel.



None of this would have been possible without the initial dream (and the determination to make that dream come true) of the woman I met at the Rothko exhibition in Tate Modern the previous year. In 1999, Farida Zaletilo was working at the Daugavpils Museum when she received a Dutch government grant to allow her to research in the department of foreign art at the State Archive in The Hague. Here, Farida discovered an unfamiliar artist who came originally from Daugavpils/Dvinsk and as she read more about the story of Marcus Rothkowitz, she became determined to do something about it.



▲ David Enams Mark Rothko Art Centre Project Manager, Farida Zaletilo. Courtesy Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

'The life of an abstract painter is that of the loneliest artist – all alone in that studio, you and the picture...'

MARK ROTHKO



▲ Daugavpils staged an elaborate ceremony incorporating a large-scale light show based on Rothko and his work.

▲ The Rothko Centre was initially built as a 19th century Czarist palace, later becoming a military depot for the Soviet army. The Latvian State Real Estate Agency donated the historic Arsenal building, though currently in need of repair and refurbishment it is due to open as the Daugavpils Rothko Art Centre (DRAC) in 2013. The centre will also arrange exhibitions by Rothko contemporaries in addition to exhibitions by contemporary artists, and studios will be built for visitors.

Farida Zaletilo was now in regular contact with the Rothko family. The momentum continued and, in 2005, it was decided to set up the Rothko residency programme, now in its sixth year. Throughout 2006-07, Zaletilo, other supporters and the Rothko family, formulated plans for a Rothko Centre with the Latvian State Real Estate Agency donating the historic Arsenal building. At the same time, Sarmīte Teivāne was appointed to the team as administrator and fundraiser, successfully winning two substantial lots of funding from The European Cultural Council.

The Arsenal is due to open as the Daugavpils Rothko Art Centre (DRAC) in 2013. The family have agreed to a continual and interchangeable loan of their father's paintings. The centre will also arrange exhibitions by Rothko contemporaries in addition to exhibitions by contemporary artists, and studios will be built for visitors. It is rather ironic that the Arsenal complex – forbidden to Jewish families in Rothko's childhood – is now to be restored in honour of one of their illustrious sons. When the Centre opens in 2013, Europe will not only have a major museum born out of the vision and determination of one woman, but it will also have brought the Rothko story full circle.

An exhibition of Peter Griffin's work will show at the Rothko Centre in 2014. Peter Griffin solo exhibition at Maddox Arts: 8 July – 20 August 2011.

STATE Magazine is grateful to Nathalie Frankson at Lund Humphries for help in the preparation of this article.



▲ Paul Feiler: Lunch at Chapel, Kertis, August 1958 (clockwise starting bottom centre) June Feiler, Helen, Christine (hidden) and Anthony Feiler, Peter Lanyon, Marie Miles, Mell Rothko, Mark Rothko and Terry Frost. Kertis is Paul Feiler's house near Penzance.

Further information  
For English version Google:  
'Rothko Centre Latvia'

Contacts  
Maddox Arts, 52 Brook's Mews, London W1K 4ED  
[www.maddoxarts.com](http://www.maddoxarts.com)

Peter Griffin: [petergriffinart@hotmail.com](mailto:petergriffinart@hotmail.com)