

Roll Up for a Radical History Tour

Painter Yevgeniy Fiks examines historical ironies and absurdities that shed new light on the Inconstancy of the Cold War.

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RUSSIA NOW

In his current show in Washington, D.C., painter Yevgeniy Fiks reproduces digital prints of 18 masterpieces, from Raphael to Velazquez, that Andrew Mellon bought from the State Hermitage Museum. By 1932, these stop-you-in-your-tracks paintings were the core collection of the National Gallery of Art (NGA).

As a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the unprecedented purchase that helped to fund Soviet industrialization, Fiks placed the prints of these masterpieces on silver metal plates with the title "Summary of the Fulfillment of the First Five-year Plan for the Development of the National Economy of the U.S.S.R."

Yet in the same show, he also presents lush oil paintings of begonias that seem to clash, albeit exquisitely, with the conceptualized prints. Titled "Kimjongillias, a.k.a. Flower Paintings," the large-scale, lyrical works refer to the flower festivals in North Korea in honor of the late leader, Kim Jong-il.

The exhibit runs through mid-April at Galerie Blue Square, an inviting, new Georgetown gallery focused exclusively on Russian contemporary art.

"What I really like about this exhibit is that someone could walk into the gallery and see two different artists. It's the historical theme that connects them," said Dianne Beal, a curator and dealer of Russian art who recently opened Blue Square. "This new series of prints on metal are entertaining, intellectual and aesthetically pleasing, which sums up the work I like to show."

Adjustment to a new life

Fiks immigrated to New York with his parents when he was 21 years old. He recalls this time in the mid-1990s as a period of significant changes for him, when everything was not only new, but also not entirely un-

derstandable because of a lack of context.

"There was a long, long adjustment period," he said. Before coming to the United States, Fiks trained as a painter at one of Russia's finest art schools, which has the formidable title of The College in Memory of the 1905 Revolution. Afterward, he studied at the V.I. Sunkov Institute in Moscow.

"When I came here, American contemporary art was not tangible for me. I couldn't understand what gave birth to abstract expressionism and pop art. Everything seemed flat. ... But over the years I began to understand what was going on," he said. These ambiguities

Fiks likes to invade what people know and are comfortable with, when it comes to art and history.

about history and perspective later fueled his work; Fiks continued his studies, receiving a BFA at Brooklyn College and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York.

The Magnitogorsk Tour at the NGA

Fiks is taking on a new role as a radical tour guide. On Saturday, March 24th, the artist conducted his performance/tour of the NGA.

The Alba Madonna is among the most significant Raphael paintings in the United States. The round painting, with its classical and Florentine influences, was created in 1510. But when Fiks, wearing his art historian/tour guide caps, walked up to the Alba Madonna during the NGA tour, he wanted visitors to think about something else. Fiks walks you through an irony of history when industrialist Mellon bought the Alba Madonna for more than \$1 million — a lot of money in the 1930s — from the Hermitage. Mellon also bought 20 other seminal works for a total of more than \$7 million.

The money Mellon paid the



Yevgeniy Fiks uses his art to recall forgotten bits of history.

Soviet government went directly to Soviet leader Josef Stalin's first five-year plan, according to Fiks's research. And it helped to build the city of Magnitogorsk, which was a major priority of the first five-year plan. Thus his tour is called the "Magnitogorsk Tour of the NGA."

"I was really interested in documenting this symbiotic, pre-Cold War relationship," Fiks said. "This idea of being chained to one another. How Mellon helped the Soviets to industrialize themselves while at the same time they bought American equipment and hired American engineers."

His exhibit from 2009, "Songs

of Russia," involved a series of oil paintings that utilized images from Hollywood films about Russia made during World War II. The films were made to change the attitude of Americans toward the Soviet Union. The show reflected on a time, between Stalin's Terror and 1950s McCarthyism, when the United States wanted Russia to look good.

The NGA tour examines another forgotten chapter in the Russian and American relationship. "I want to make an intervention with the museum," he said. "It's about me trying to perform this radical, inconvenient history."



Metal plates reproducing Mellon's purchases, left; a painting from "Songs of Russia," right.

In Georgetown, A Haven for Russian Art on Book Hill

Longtime curator Dianne Beal has opened a gallery to show contemporary Russian artists influenced by the Russian avant garde.

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When President Bill Clinton needed a present for visiting President Boris Yeltsin, curator Dianne Beal was ready with a drawing by esteemed artist Oleg Vassiliev.

Not every day is this heady in the compact scene of Russian contemporary art, as America's utter fascination with the country's underground culture and communist kitsch has ebbed.

But Beal has been a steady presence for committed Russia-watchers and collectors — so much so that shortly after her return to Washington, D.C., from Paris in 2011, she opened a tony Georgetown gallery devoted to contemporary Russian art, Galerie Blue Square.

She represents some of Russia's most iconic artists who are still little known outside a tight sphere of collectors. This year, she will show the work of Yuri Avvakumov, who finds completely new ways to explore Russia's search for utopia. The artist was the founder of the famous Paper Architect movement of the 1980s, a group of architects known for their award-winning visions of wondrous buildings they suspected would never be built. Avvakumov has been commissioned to design the Russian Lounge at the Kennedy Center this year.

Beal also represents Ira Waldron, a painter and silkscreen artist. Waldron's work reveals a mix of humor and simmering menace as in "Woman with an Axe."

Beal had a calling for Russia, despite the fact that she grew up in Pittsburgh and had no Russian heritage. She studied art in high school and Russian

Studies at the University of Michigan. "I remember my Republican father looking at me like I had three eyes," she said.

The beginning of her career coincided with glasnost and perestroika, and Beal became involved with the Washington Moscow Arts Exchange, which developed connections between American and Russian artists. She met the late, eminent collector Norton Dodge when she happened upon some art that had been stolen from one of his exhibits. "We ended up being very close, and he became my mentor," Beal said. Dodge recovered the art.

In the early 1990s, Beal started making studio visits to artists in Russia. Beal moved to Paris in 2003, and it was there that Galerie Blue Square first made its mark. In 2011, she returned to D.C. The gallery joins eight other galleries on Book Hill.