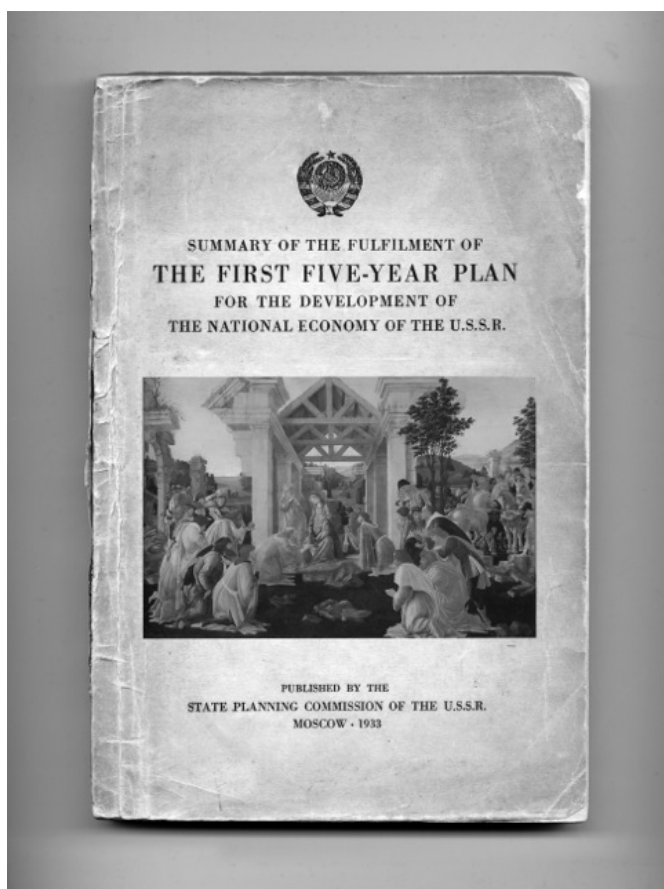


## Yevgeniy Fiks

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### Galerie Blue Square. Washington D.C.

Couched in fusty Georgetown, Galerie Blue Square's show of works by Yevgeniy Fiks offers a radical proposition: Did the U.S. industrialists pay for the Soviet Union's industrialization? Fiks considers the often overlooked facts in a painting and performance exhibit that centers on the United States' 1931 purchase of a cache of paintings from St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum. The backstory: In the late 1920s, the Stalinist regime embarked on an effort to liquidate significant portions of the Soviet Union's art collection (inherited from tsarist Russia) to defray the costs of its industrial ambitions. Andrew Mellon, then the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, seized the opportunity, purchasing 21 Western masterpieces — including paintings by Rembrandt, Titian, and Raphael — for an unheard of \$7 million, thus seeding what would become the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The Soviets used the funds to build Magnitogorsk, an industrial city on the Ural River that, in a twist, was modeled off such U.S. steel towns as Gary, Ind. and Pittsburgh, Penn.



*Magnitogorsk Guide to the National Gallery of Art: Botticelli. Adoration of the Magi, 2011, digital print on metal, 16" x 12"*

Fiks' show completes the circuit. In a series of small digital prints on metal, the artist replaces the cover of the Five-Year Plan program with images that make the connection explicit. It's jarring to say the least to see Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* appended to the cover of the "Summary of the Fulfillment of the First Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Economy of the U.S.S.R." Produced by Moscow's State Planning Commission of the U.S.S.R. in 1933, it's one of the documents that articulated the principles and foundation of the Communist regime. But Fiks has done more than doctor the document covers to reflect each work from Mellon's major purchase. In a performance that was part research, part documentation, Fiks led a "Magnitogorsk tour" of the National Gallery of Art — a walkthrough emphasizing the Soviet origins of one of the U.S.'s most beloved and inspiring collections of Western art.

The New York-based artist looks forward as well as back on the state of art, industry, and totalitarianism. The other component to his show at Galerie Blue Square is a series of still life paintings of Kimjongilias, a cultivar of begonia named after North Korea's recently departed Dear Leader, Kim Jong-Il. These paintings are altogether less pointed than his on-the-nose, metal-plate confluents of art, industry, and imperial politics. The still life paintings are instead quieter, fitting for the world's most secretive regime. The loose brushstroke and brilliant palette isn't a huge stretch for Fiks' painting style, but it's a sufficiently stand-alone style that it's obviously one he's adopted for the project at hand. And as such, it's a cerebral adaptation of North Korea's central totalitarian gift to global aesthetics: its loosely brushed, brilliantly colored propaganda posters, which stand today as the epitome, and maybe the sole nonironic example, of the Soviet Realist method. There is arguably no place in the world where art is more important than in North Korea, where it still serves in 2012 as a primary method of control. Fiks's weaving of the trajectories of totalitarian art from yesterday to today serves as a kind of thesis-level approach to an understanding of how politics shapes art and, perhaps more importantly, how art shapes politics.