In early summer of 2007, the major arts organizations of southeastern Virginia embarked on a collaborative programming effort around the history and context of Russian art and culture. While researching artists, the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia (CAC) relied on the expertise of Anna Frants, director of the St. Petersburg Arts Project in New York City. Ms. Frants recommended artists who she felt had a contemporary approach to working and created a broad social dialog. Many exceptional artists were considered, but as we researched further it was Russian-American artist Mikhail Magaril’s work that continued to resonate.

CAC was particularly interested in Magaril’s visual reference to children’s illustration combined with silhouettes of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. Bright, comic strip-like imagery referencing Andy Warhol’s Pop Art aesthetics, juxtaposed with political figureheads and historic ideology, expose multiple connotations. Humble narrative scenes and landscapes suddenly transform upon recognition of looming dictators hidden in trees and puddles. The graphic nature and palette of Magaril's work feels fanciful, yet the larger discourse which comes upon deeper inquiry severs the initial read, creating a complex disconnect between visual cognition and psychological implication.

Born in 1950 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), Magaril witnessed the particulars of Stalin's rule. He saw the unjustified hopes for the bright future during the times of Kruschev's thaw and the stifling stability of Brezhnev's presidency. These curious times certainly inform Magaril's work where friendly, seemingly cheerful illustrations capture the viewer's eye, while dually depicting satirical commentary regarding his homeland's conflicted political history.

Magaril trained as a graphic artist. He graduated from Moscow Graphic Arts College (Polygraphic Institute), worked for two major publishing houses in Leningrad and later joined the Leningrad City Committee of Artists where he met representatives of Russian avant-garde. Before moving to the United States he exchanged artistic ideas and perspectives with E.M. Magaril, a relative on his father’s side, who trained under Russian Suprematist, Kazimir Malevich. Malevich, Russia's most recognizable artist, had a noticeable influence on Magaril's work, evidenced by his simplified use of shape, color and form.

Throughout the exhibition, while tongue-in-cheek, Magaril fashions work that pokes at the cultural and traditional aesthetics mandated under Stalin, including propaganda materials. The seriousness of political imposition is exacerbated through the artist's use of key figures of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Magaril's art fuses imagery from traditional Russian culture with satirical and often provocative political ideas. The juxtaposition of form and content allows for multiple interpretations and provides a glimpse of the psychology surrounding a specified cultural and multicultural identity. Often stifled by governmental stipulation, artists such as Magaril now emerge to speak openly about their experiences during tumultuous times in Russia. Through his work, viewers have the opportunity to examine some of the layers that make up Russia’s complex history.

-Ragan Cole-Cunningham
Director of Exhibitions and Education

1Mikhail Magaril’s artist statement, 2007

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A full-color catalogue with essays by Dr. Austin Jersild and Ragan Cole-Cunningham is available in CAC's Museum Shop.