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## Works of painter who died young get new life

By Cate McQuaid

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The painter Charles H. Rathbone Jr. lived a short, starry life early in the 20th century. He showed his shimmery landscapes at venues such as the Brooklyn Museum and the National Academy of Design, and they were well received. He and his wife, sculptor Martha Moore, had an apartment on Central Park West. They'd have high society friends over and order takeout from the Rainbow Room. They spent their summers making art in a fishing village in Brittany. Then, in 1936, two months after their first child was born, Rathbone died in an auto accident. He was 33. Moore put his paintings in storage, and other than in a memorial exhibit in 1937, they haven't been shown since.

Until now. Rathbone's son, also Charles, who lives in Cambridge, is sharing the paintings with the public for the first time in more than 70 years in an exhibit copresented by Martha Richardson Fine Art and Colleene Fesko Works of Art, at Richardson's gallery.

The paintings are deft and luminous, the work of a young, thoughtful artist buffeted by trends, yet clearly talented. Most of these are harbor scenes, lit dramatically with honeyed sunlight (sometimes with a dash of lime) playing off cool shadows. "Penmarch Light," which depicts a ruffled harbor in Brittany, has a French Impressionist feel. Loose brushwork conveys glittering water. Sun rays break through gray clouds, illuminating the long vertical of a lighthouse. Forms such as dark sails are mottled and have soft edges, as if this romantic picture is a dream on the verge of dissolution.

All the works are undated, so it's impossible to trace a trajectory in the evolution of Rathbone's style. But the watercolor "A Quiet Afternoon" is more modernist than "Penmarch Light" by leaps and bounds. The sloping triangles and rectangles of sails cluster in the center of the painting, cut across by the horizontal thrusts of the hulls. The artist delicately frames this crisp assembly of shapes with mists of tone, painted wet on wet paper.

Rathbone's probing intelligence is evident in all the works. Had he lived longer, he might have discovered his own definitive style, perhaps in abstraction. As it is, these early pieces by the young, forgotten painter offer plenty to savor.

### The edge of implosion

Aaron Fink, who revels in the materiality of paint, has a new show at Alpha Gallery. It's classic Fink. His (hardly) still lifes present objects monumentally, whether he's depicting a piece of popcorn, a slice of apple pie, or a magnolia. He alters the paint in a variety of ways: He pushes and pulls with a squeegee, rakes, and rinses. Overcoats give way to undercoats. In the end, images painted to appear iconographic, and so somehow inviolable, seem at the edge of implosion. And it's all tonally and texturally delectable.

In "Apple Pie," filling, crust, and whipped cream are tinged with red, and the luscious wedge sits against a royal blue ground, all tacky, as if Fink roughed up the surface with a cloth before it dried. He has peeled off a narrow horizontal bar, exposing fire-engine red beneath. A portion of the pie seeps with red drips. At its tip, Fink has pulled a curtain of red over the image. This pie is not sweet; it's seething.

His single, voluptuous blossoms, like that in “Lotus,” verge on erotic. Here, pink petals cradle the orange pistil. Paint washes off the outer petals. One petal is smeared until it dissolves in runny pinks and teals. When Fink squeegees off a section to the left, he reveals a red undercoat speckled with black, recalling smoldering embers. These undercoats used to be simple, flat tones. Now the speckled texture makes what lies underneath seem less solid. That ramps up the calculus of illusion and reality that is already high in Fink’s work, as he builds up his monumental still lifes, then tears them down to reveal nothing but paint. And artistry.

#### Stylized folk tales

The subject matter of Cuban artist Orestes Gaulhiac’s playful paintings, on view at Galería Cubana, may seem at odds with his obsessive technique. Gaulhiac creates shading by scratching countless hash marks into his paint. He adds filigreed borders to many of his figures, delicate rows of triangles that he sometimes layers to resemble zippers. The results are like stylized folk tales.

In “Amor, paz y buen tabaco (Love, peace and good cigars),” he uses a bright rainbow palette and poppy pattern to portray a couple snuggling on a hill. Feathery ferns dance in the foreground. A dove rests on the woman’s back. The man puffs on a cigar.

Not every piece is as sweet. Gaulhiac often combines elements of Cubism and Surrealism that add a darker edge. “Bailarina (Ballerina)” features, in earth tones, a pirouetting dancer with two heads. A sickle moon with an eye smiles down at her, and a figure — part man, part dog, part bird — watches from the side. The artist’s hash marks suggest that the dancer’s spins have set ripples off around her. That texture, as in all these works, emphasizes the otherworldliness of Gaulhiac’s visions.

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