

In their forefathers' footsteps

Descendants of the original Blue Rider group have formed a movement of their own in New York. Alison Gregor investigates

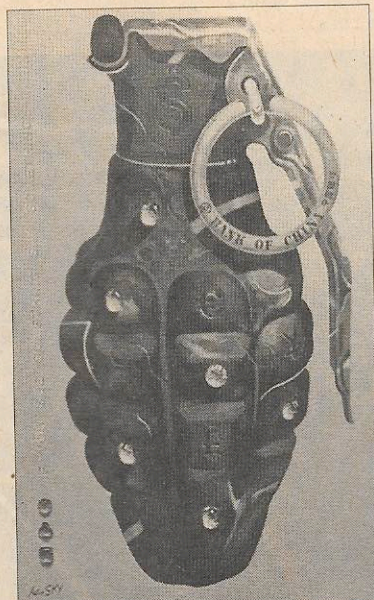
The original Blue Rider group, a loose association of Expressionist artists in Munich just before the first world war, was breaking away from the artistic establishment of that era. The rejection of a painting by Wassily Kandinsky by the city's dominant avant-garde artists spurred the creation of the group, which also included Paul Klee and Franz Marc.

But yesterday's rebels are today's establishment. A group in New York calling itself the New Blue Riders is so much a product of the mainstream that it is capitalising on having members who descend from the original group: Anton Kandinsky, Kandinsky's great-grandson, and David Noah Burliuk, great-grandson of David Davidovich Burliuk, a Blue Rider and pioneer of Russian Futurism. Joining them is Sophie Matisse, great-granddaughter of Henri, who was greatly influenced by the Expressionists.

The impetus behind the New Blue Riders is 43-year-old Laurance Rassin, who apparently has no illustrious forebears in the art world. Chiefly known for large-scale impasto paintings in a neo-Expressionist vein, Rassin has also attracted attention by transferring his paintings on to fabric and cladding fashion models in them to create "walking works of art".

That mingling of fashion and art may lead some to question the seriousness of the group. So too might such publicity stunts as last Friday's gathering of the four artists to ring the closing bell at Nasdaq.

But Jonathan Goodman, a New York-based critic, says he believes the group can both seek publicity and continue the tradition of the original group. "There is a certain kind of Expressionism going on now that can be linked to the Blue Rider group," he says. The work of the New Blue



Realist symbolism: 'Bank of China Grenade' by Anton Kandinsky

Riders "is biographically interesting if the work itself is interesting", and the pieces now on show at the Art Next Gallery in New York are "not bad".

Sophie Matisse has contributed one piece to the show. A large painting of oil, acrylic and gouache on linen called "Blue Note", it looks like a golden heaven over a wide blue landscape bounded by the partial silhouettes of instruments and the black-and-white ribbon-like flights of musical notes. As the title suggests, Matisse created it at a time when she was listening to a lot of jazz. "The deep blue is a spiritual symbolism," she says. "I used the yellow in a cheerful, hopeful, optimistic kind of symbolism. And the black and white ribbons that go through it remind me of jazz notes, and once in a while, hearing that note that goes straight to your soul."

Matisse says she was drawn to the New Blue Riders by the potential for further exploration of Expressionism; the serendipitous alliance of names

"was not one of the attractions". She has spent years forging a career based on her own merit, while trying not to devalue her ancestor's accomplishments – "a very tricky line to walk".

Anton Kandinsky, who emigrated to the US from Ukraine in 1998, has distanced himself from his forebear. "I'm interested in my art and in my vision," he says. His contributions to the show are all examples of Gemism, a movement he founded. Realistic images of gemstones are intermingled with flags, ideograms and political figures, with symbolism from China, the former Soviet Union and the US. But he concedes that the play of colour in the gems was inspired by his great-grandfather's bright tones and geometric shapes.

Burliuk and Rassin follow the Expressionist line more closely. Burliuk says that as a young artist, he has found himself painting in the Futurist style of his predecessor. "I've always grown up around the Burliuk art," he says. "It's influenced me probably in every way as an artist." Some of his paintings at Art Next are indeed Futurist, with urban skylines and floating globes; others play with Chinese themes; one, "Beijing Blue Riders", depicts a line of blue horses against a futuristic backdrop.

Rassin, the group's artistic director, has a more settled style, and about 15 of his works feature in the show. His paintings, including some transferred to hand-woven Persian tapestries, are splashes of brilliant colour painted in the lively Expressionist style of Fauvism. (A leader of the Fauvist movement was Henri Matisse.)

Rassin says his next goal for the group is to produce a conceptual show in 2011 called *The First Exhibition in Outer Space* to commemorate the centenary of the original Blue Rider show. Not only will the artists create pods of their art to be buried, but they would also like to "orbit some of the paintings around the earth", Rassin says, if they can find the wherewithal.

One may chuckle, but Rassin has a way of getting things done and has had some success on the secondary art market, with his work featuring regularly at Bonhams sales in New York. Frank Maraschiello, a vice-president at Bonhams & Butterfields, is advising the New Blue Riders and will introduce the group at an auction-house show in December. They will also have a second exhibition at Art Next that month.

"To my knowledge, there's never before been a reassembling of the descendants of the important and talented members of an earlier artistic group with the aim of carrying on the work of that original group," Maraschiello says. "It's an intriguing and unusual idea."

The New Blue Rider exhibition is at New York's Art Next Gallery until August 1, www.artnextgallery.com



From left: Laurance Rassin, David N. Burliuk, Sophie Matisse, Anton Kandinsky