

## Bordeaux embraces avant-garde

Exhibition tells the tale of an unconventional partnership opening up a conservative art scene

by Gabriel Berner

Energetic and bold, *Red Sails* (c.1955) by Bordeaux-born Mildred Bendall and *Composition 64-1* (1964) by her pupil Georges Bernède use distinct colour blocks to build a striking composition of reds, pinks, blues, oranges, and yellows.

Similar in size at around 2ft 1in x 20in (65 x 50cm), the oils show not only Bendall's strong influence on Bernède but the central role of colour in both their artistic outputs.

For the first time, these works and others by the pair are currently hanging side by side at a selling exhibition in London at **Whitford Fine Art**.

*Bendall/Bernède: A Story of Painting in Bordeaux*, which runs at the gallery until May 9, explores their relationship through 26 paintings.

### Avant-garde embraced

Born into a wealthy family, Mildred Bendall (1891-1977) received her artistic training in the notoriously conservative art world of her native Bordeaux but later embraced the avant-garde on a year-long trip to Paris in the late 1920s.

Chief among the painters she met there was Henri Matisse, whose Fauvist ideas on colour, particularly to use as building blocks for form and space and to express emotion, were revolutionary to her.

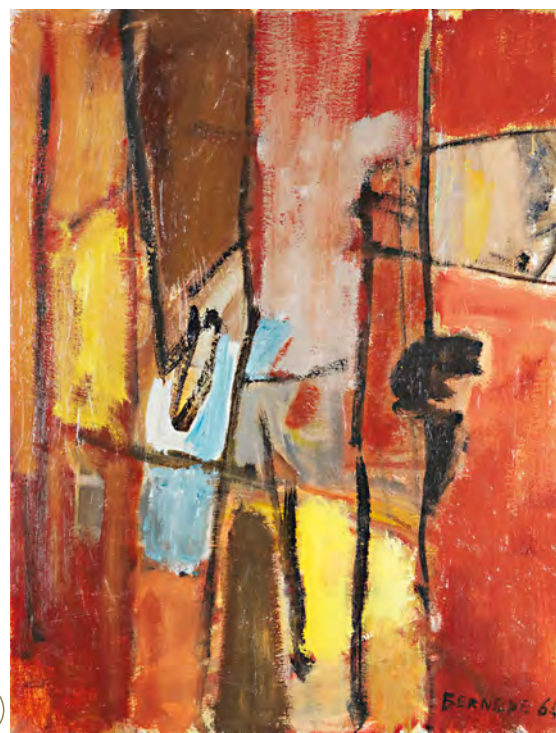
Returning to Bordeaux, Bendall became an active force of the avant-garde, helping to establish the Society of Artistes Indépendants Bordelais to challenge the prevailing Academism in the city (Bonnard, Braque, Picasso, and Matisse all submitted paintings to the society's annual exhibitions).

"Though a central figure of the avant-garde movement and tireless promoter of other Bordelais artists, Bendall never sought fame for herself, striving only to push the boundaries of artistic progress," says Whitford Fine Art's An Jo Fermon.

Georges Bernède (b.1926), the son of a poor local cabinet maker, was 14 years old when he first saw Bendall painting en plein-air on a small country road in nearby



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1. *Red Sails* (1955) by Mildred Bendall, 2ft 1in x 19in (64 x 48cm), oil on paper laid on panel – priced **£8000-10,000** at Whitford Fine Art.

2. *Composition 64-1* (1964) by Georges Bernède, 2ft 2in x 20in (66 x 51cm) oil on canvas – **£5000-7000**.

3. *Vue de Collioure* (c.1928) by Bendall, 19 x 2ft (49 x 61cm) oil on panel – **£18,000-20,000**.

Monségur at the outset of the Second World War.

Under Bendall's influence, Bernède embraced the Fauvist ideals on colour, beginning as a Figurative Expressionist before turning to lyrical Abstraction in the early 1960s.

"Their relationship was unusual and exceptional for the time: a female artist influencing a young male painter of a drastically different social and artistic background," says Fermon.

"Both would bring a love and exploration of colour and unremitting commitment to the advancement of the avant-garde to the art world of Bordeaux, an area of France notorious for its conservatism."

In the show, prices range from £15,000-20,000 for Bendall's best paintings and £8000-12,000 for Bernède's top works.

### 'Overlooked' works

The gallery's director, Adrian Mibus, feels that both artists have been undervalued, particularly in the case of Bernède who has been "somewhat overlooked" due to his reluctance to show abroad in the past.

"He never consciously sought to exhibit abroad until we held a comprehensive exhibition of his works in 2011, during which one of his works was

selected by the Modern Art Museum of Bordeaux," he says.

On Bendall's market, Mibus notes there had been a softening over the last decade or so – £7000 is her record at auction, set at Sotheby's in 2000 according to artprice.com – but prices appear to be "coming back strongly".

"I think partly because there is now a broader interest in her work along with interest from other galleries to exhibit her work. Also, the revival in popularity of female artists in recent years has stimulated interest in her work," he adds.

Paintings include Bendall's *Vue de Collioure* (c.1928), an oil from the artist's estate depicting the tiny Mediterranean fishing village made famous by the Fauves, and the already mentioned *Red Sails*, a much later work showcasing her experimentation with Abstraction following the Second World War.

Several of Bernède's still-lives such as *Composition 64-2*, show how readily he adopted Bendall's technique of building composition with colour, here in autumnal, reddish tones.

*Composition 88-16* (1988) belongs to his later body of work, which curiously departs from the full vivid colour palette favoured by Bendall and is almost entirely monochromatic, exploring instead the movement and energy to the act of painting itself. ■

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