



ARTIST WITH A MISSION:
George Rothacker at home
in Villanova.

island fever

Villanova artist George Rothacker paints a nostalgic picture of Cuba, with an eye toward change. *By J.F. Pirro*

When *Havana '59, Paintings of Cuba* by George H. Rothacker debuted last fall at Radnor's Bolingbroke Mansion, the artist wore a white three-piece suit he'd bought online for \$150, a Panama hat and a

vintage 1940s silk necktie with a label that read "Havana." At the entrance to Bolingbroke, American cars from the 1950s were decked out as taxis. Guests posed for black-and-white snapshots with

stand-up figures of Ernest Hemingway, Josephine Baker, Meyer Lansky, Carmen Miranda, Fulgencio Batista and Frank Sinatra. They enjoyed Cuban fare, and a female cigar roller

provided the necessities for smoking on the porch.

When *Havana '59* reappears in full this month at the Wallingford Community Arts Center, Rothacker's wishes won't have changed for the Cuban people. Mostly they involve freedom, of the kind he enjoys in his work. For the Villanova artist, books like *Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba and Then Lost It to the Revolution* rekindled the vivid tales of his father's trips to Cuba in the 1930s. Rothacker finds the island "so corrupt, it's delicious." And his own five-day research trip there in November 2009 with his wife, Barbara, and two friends coincided with the 50th anniversary year of the Fidel Castro-led Communist revolution.

If yesterday's artists were remote, hermetic and reclusive, Rothacker reflects today's ultra-fast, ultra-political, ultra-immediate global marketplace. In an ever-competitive art world, art needs a cause and a mission for it to resonate. Today, art for art's sake is passé.

Throughout his career, Rothacker has tied his artwork to social causes that dovetail with philanthropy. *Havana '59*'s ambitious underlying pitch is to end the Cuban embargo and the misery it creates. He's always asked himself what benefit his work might have, incorporating what he calls "a social schematic."

That ambitious perspective lends itself to more than just another art show. At the very least, Rothacker hopes his series of 37 acrylics on canvas will shift some of the American public's attention back to Cuba. "Havana is crumbling, and it's time to both profit from and assist the Cuban people," says the artist, who also owns and operates Rothacker Advertising & Design in Media.

For *Havana '59*, all money made from the sale of books and T-shirts, and 40 percent of the gross from paintings and prints, benefits Eastern University and its David R. Black Academic Enrichment Fund. Rothacker's generosity will help brand and pilot a program that was established to provide a college education to those with Asperger's Syndrome and other complex learning disorders.

The Bolingbroke opening raised more than \$27,000 for the fund. Rothacker's "Caught Dancing," a bustling Havana street scene, was the first of five paintings sold that night. "It was wet while we were



there, and cloudy, so I really painted just a few outside," says Rothacker. "The rest are from reference and imagination."

Thanks, in part, to the universal appeal of his thematic-nostalgic style, Rothacker has consistently partnered with kindred community organizations and charities, including the Media Theatre, Radnor Memorial Library and the Jimmy Stewart Museum. Three shows last decade helped bolster Radnor High School's scholarship fund by almost \$50,000. In 2007, his paintings of Eastern University raised \$25,000. A year later, images of the fabled Ardrossan estate generated \$3,500 for the Radnor Conservancy. "I'm better doing it this way—away from a board, rather than on it," Rothacker admits. "It's philanthropy without any money. It's finding ways that my work can benefit somebody. And if there's a social cause, it gives my work even more legitimacy."

On the surface, Eastern University's Christian mission would seem at odds with *Havana '59*, a show that celebrates Cuba's wilder side. Eastern is a dry campus, after all—which is why the opening was held at Bolingbroke before the work was moved to the school that same night. Among the more logical ties is Esperanza College, Eastern's branch campus in Philadelphia, which serves a Spanish-speaking, Christian-based population.

"All people don't learn in the same way," says Rich Merriman, chairman, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Trust in Radnor, the show's lead sponsor. "Let's not forget the marginalized. Let's reach out to the underserved populations."

Merriman's 30-year-old son, Ted, has Asperger's. He works at the circulation desk in Eastern's Warner Memorial Library. "He's part of my motivation," says Merriman, who's an Eastern board member and chair of the university's development committee. "But I'd like to think I would be a compassionate person otherwise."

As a pilot program last year, the David R. Black fund served four students. More are expected in 2012. "Right now, one of every 10 Asperger's spectrum college students graduates," says the fund's namesake, David Black. "We want that to be at least six out of 10."

Havana '59 also focuses on the underserved. Rothacker's "Washday Madonna" is shown hanging clothes on a line—a standing scene around Havana.

"The stories of the people are so rich and captivating," says the artist. "Without the stories, I'd be just another painter. This is a story in art—Havana 50 years after its revolution."

The way Rothacker sees it, working alongside philanthropists gives those who love and respond to art—and those who want to be part of such a project—ownership in it. "That's exactly what an organization like the Pennsylvania Trust wants to be known for," he says. "It generates good press for its good will."

Rothacker would love to return to Cuba. At the very least, he wonders if his series will wield influence, though he understands that our government leaders have other parts of the world on their minds lately.

"One day, he feels, the embargo will come down, and what we know will be gone—the cars, the crumbling buildings and the poverty that's shocking down there," Merriman says.

Good thing, then, that it's preserved for posterity in Rothacker's paintings.

To learn more, visit havana-59.blogspot.com and communityartscenter.org. 