



Journey of no return

For Michele Del Campo, art surges from a need. Here is the story behind his latest body of work



Michele Del Campo

It is normal for me to take a rest from painting of around two or three months after a solo exhibition, but this time it took longer because I needed a more radical change in my approach to painting. The images had to go beyond the world of ordinary reality and had to show more intention. They had to use the language of realism but be born out of imagination, from the depth of a specific idea. In order to carry out this project, I had to change my working methods and I learned a lot from the experience.

I had felt the necessity to create a new series of work that would give voice to my

concerns about the current economic crises and political and social issues around the world. For six months I sketched, read, wrote, watched movies and documentaries, but did no painting, in order to conceive my last exhibition, 'Journey of No Return' at Enlace Arte Contemporáneo, Lima, Peru.

The concept

My paintings, which used to have bright, light and vibrant colours, now had to communicate ideas of abandonment, gloom, melancholy and torment. The setting had to be vast, desolated

TOP

One of Them, oil on linen, 55¼x78¼in (140x200cm).

This is a portrait of a girl in a group of vandals who are discharging their anger by throwing stones at an abandoned factory building. She is a bridge between us and the vandals – we recognise her as one of us. I found the factory in East Tilbury, Essex. It had all the characteristics I wanted – big windows and a repetitive design. The day that I took the photos of my friends, who posed for me in front of my house, strangely coincided with the first day of the 2011 riots in North London

READER HOLIDAY



suburban environments where young people could be portrayed in their emptiness, solitude, desperation, anger or sense of impotence. They are part of a disenfranchised generation that has lost faith in the institutions – they have realised that happiness cannot be bought in shops and that in justice someone is more equal than another. They have lost their values and see no bright perspectives in front of them, so they have let themselves go astray for a 'journey of no return'.

The process

Although the paintings have a certain appearance of reality, there is very little truth in them. The creative process began with sketches from my imagination, all with an underlying idea as the paintings had to have a narrative. For instance, a wall divides the wealthy city from the poor suburbs in *The Other Side* (above). Sometimes these location visits would prompt reassessment of the original idea, giving way to new sketches and ideas that enriched the image and took me to another, unexpected result.

I took photographs, too, as I researched the right tunnel, scrapyard or factory building with the characteristics that I was



looking for, often travelling to another city, or even another country. For example, the wall in *The Other Side* had to cover three metres of canvas, but it could not be any type of wall. In my imagination it was a huge dividing wall in a scruffy environment, made of stone or big white 'tufo' bricks, covered by lime. I knew I could find such a wall in Spain, and I found it in Valencia. There I also found the broken car, the models and the light I wanted – if you want strong contrasts, it is easier to travel to southern Europe than hope for the right type of light in England, even in summer. The skyline came from a picture I made the year before, on a trip to New York.

The direction of the light has to be consistent, even though the reference material is so varied, so it is important to plan it from the beginning. In the case of

The Other Side, oil on linen, 74¼x118in (190x300cm)



The Passage, oil on linen, 67x35¼in (170x90cm).

Here the allusion is to suicide as a woman decidedly enters the water of a river under a very long, monstrous bridge

JOURNEY OF NO RETURN



The Way to Darkness, oil on linen, 35¼x157in (170x400cm)

The Way to Darkness (above), I had visited the tunnel before so I knew that in there the strongest light comes from above, between the arches. Therefore I posed the model in my studio under one neon light, placed above her.

Technicalities

I always have an A4 sketchbook with me, so that I can sketch the ideas as soon as they come to my mind. However, during the six months of gestation of this exhibition I was so obsessed with the project that very often I would go to bed with my sketchbook beside me. In fact, some of the best ideas for my paintings occurred to me in the morning, while I

was still half asleep. Those ephemeral, fluctuating ideas could then be fixed on paper before the memory of the dream was swept away.

Usually I work only on one painting at a time, but with these new paintings, where I had to make up complex structured images, I sometimes felt the need to distance myself from one painting whilst working on the next one, to keep the work flowing. Half the time of the actual process of painting was taken up with the sketches, the research for scenarios, props and models, the visits and the digital collage of the various photographic references.

Having to deal with so many references at a time left me with two choices: increase the amount of time spent on assembling the reference images, to have a better starting point for the painting, or

try to break free from the tightness of photography and give intuition, experience and imagination more part in the play. I chose the latter, starting with a very roughly assembled collage as reference, drawing the image directly on the canvas with a brush. This had to be almost free hand, often just a cross drawn on the canvas to divide it into four areas. Working quickly in this way, painting *alla prima*, I enjoyed the freedom of interpretation and imagination to fill the gaps or give the image a certain charm.

I used Winsor & Newton Artists' oils and a special, very smooth linen canvas that I order from Spain. TA

Michele Del Campo's solo exhibition at Imago Gallery, via Nassa 62 – 6900 Lugano, Switzerland, continues until January 11 2013; www.imago-artgallery.com

Consuming Desire, oil on linen (quadriptych), 86¼x118in (220x300cm). This new painting, made of four canvases, is not part of Journey of No Return, but represents a development of that new way of working. The title is a metaphor for consumerism – the painting was made for an exhibition about globalisation to be held in Shanghai in 2013. Basically, the idea of the waste tip relates to consumerism and what we leave behind, our ecological footprint. Although the cycle of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal is having devastating impacts on our planet and our health, we are made to believe that a country's level of development and civilisation is measured by its ability to consume, and consumerism is encouraged. By painting enraptured, naked people intoxicated by sensual pleasure among the rubbish, I tried to create a visual metaphor of the excess of consumerism. In this painting the setting is mostly invented, while the models posed in my studio