



## Close Strangers - Michele Del Campo

by Ben Austin

'Youth has no age' - Pablo Picasso

Michele Del Campo, as his name suggests, is an Italian artist and is at heart a very Mediterranean painter. Here we have beautiful young people bathed in glorious sunlight, sitting against a backdrop of the sea or in urban settings that resonate with local flavour rather than with inner city degradation. But, as we examine some of the conceits behind the work, we discover there is an inherent complexity in these seemingly innocent set ups.

After spending some time with him in the company of his work, I began to understand more about his practice and the ideas behind his painting. The first thing that struck me above anything else was this sense of underlying drama in the construction of his scenes. This effect I found out was very deliberate on his part and, in fact, there is throughout his work constant intention and a well thought out process. These figures are frozen in a theatrical tableau whereby composition is everything.

Indeed, Michele clearly enjoys playing with construction and in earlier works we see cropped figures, torsos captured in a cinematic way. When heads are left off and the picture plane cuts through bodies, we are reminded of the ballerinas by Degas,

where some of the action takes place off stage. It is this shifting viewpoint that interests the artist, making for a more suggestive scene. In the absence of expressions it is left to the viewer to fill in the gaps. This imposed visual framework adds tension to the dramatic milieu, alluding to someone or something else taking place just outside our field of vision. For Michele the source material is critical, as the subjects must be as seductive as the artistic arrangement.

Michele will go out with his sketchpad and camera and seek attractive, young people to pose in a setting of his choice. Back in the studio he will select the right combination of figures to build up the mise-en-scene. One figure may reappear in certain paintings or a figure taken in isolation may suddenly form part of a group. It is not just the figures themselves that are re-arranged to suit the overall effect, but expressions and gazes are altered in order to obtain the desired narrative or suggestion. It is this unspoken story that makes the work so intriguing, inviting us the viewer to ask questions. Who are these people? What are their backgrounds and, more importantly, what is their relationship to each other?

And hence the title of the show - *Close Strangers*. What interests Michele is the group dynamic and

how, even amongst friends, there is a sense of personal isolation. This becomes even more apparent when the central figure is a beautiful girl, the object of desire. She is aware of her power and the sexual frisson that surrounds her. Michele will portray her as somewhat aloof and self-absorbed, often looking out into the middle distance.

If we take, for instance, the large diptych, *The Fair Girl* - the group is focused around the Venus-like beauty in the middle and whilst the alpha male tries to make a physical possession of her, she remains detached. The same can be said for the girl leaning against the scooter in *The Proposal*. We can only guess at what the guy has offered her and his expectant smile speaks volumes, but again her gaze is not directed towards him, rather she looks out halfway to the viewer as if to say, 'Can you do better?'. The girls here exhibit a certain amount of ennui; they have an expression of someone who has heard it all before and hence are beautifully bored. In *The Other Girl* the seated blonde girl is feigning interest in the conversation. Is the brunette with her back to us some kind of threat? Once again, Michele consciously creates ambiguity, leaving the viewer free to interpret meaning and to guess at intention. There is though one consistent quality to these paintings which is the fact that all the subjects are so young and attractive.

When pressed on his subject matter, Michele is quite open about his obsession with youth and beauty. For him, like other artists, the representation of the idealised female is a means of release. This is a cathartic process whereby lust and longing is expelled through artistic creation. This male gaze can be found in Gauguin's Tahitian dusky beauties or through a fashion photographer's lens.

Michele is clearly concerned with aesthetics, but there is a dichotomy at play here. The nubile girls and young men who populate his painting are often set against a grittier environment. There is an effective visual contrast between the beauty of the figures and their urban background. In terms of technique, Michele works wet on wet, with broad and confident brushstrokes. This is free and loose painting, not photo-realism. The large scale of some of the work also relates to Michele's dramatic concerns. He wants to create a sense of intimacy of impact by allowing the viewer to fully enter the scene portrayed. The colour palette is rich and saturated, lending the sun soaked scenes an incredible vibrancy through hue and tone.

Michele Del Campo's ability as a painter is beyond question and by careful orchestration of composition he

is able to give each constructed scene a powerful yet subtle narrative. We have implied interaction through suggestion, with the main protagonist often being remote and even coolly removed from the others.

*Close Strangers* hints at personal intimacy yet points to the essential separateness which is part of our very nature. The subtle emotional impact of these paintings derives from the interplay between tight social groups set in urbanity combined with a considered configuration. This is all heightened by the application of fresh vivid colour cast in a dazzling sunlight. Here the beautiful are captured in an idealised manner, in a moment in time, where thoughts and desires stand still. They will be forever, young.

*Close Strangers* runs 28 June - 10 July at the Mark Jason Gallery, 1 Bell Street, London, NW1 5BY. Telephone: +44 (0) 207 258 5800. [www.markjasongallery.com](http://www.markjasongallery.com)

opposite: *The Fair Girl*, 190 x 300 cm

below: *The Gift*, oil on linen, 95 x 170 cm

bottom: *The Proposal*, oil on linen, 100 x 110 cm

