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A Far Horizon, oil on linen, 49x49in (125x125cm)



Michele Del Campo

Beautiful people



Oliver Lange admires the work of Michele Del Campo, whose colourful paintings capture the vitality of youth

Michele Del Campo's paintings are inspired by the young urban middle class of attractive young people, particularly young women. His subjects are actual people in real-life situations.

'When I was young I used to copy images of models from fashion magazines,' he says. 'I have always been interested in portraits and figurative painting. There was a time when I only painted interiors – the environment without the figures. Now I am combining both. I especially like groups of people, showing how they interact. I am describing the environment of youth today.'

Backdoor, oil on linen, 69x75in (175.5x190.5cm)

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Girl with a Bottle, oil on linen, 45x77in (114.5x195.5cm)

Locations and reference information

Until recently Barcelona was Michele's favourite location for finding exciting ideas, and he still visits this city every year. However, he is now beginning to discover equally strong images in London, particularly in the East End. 'For me, the place is as important as the people,' he explains, 'it has to show a vibrant combination of youth and interesting environments. Barcelona is a sunny, Mediterranean city, of course, while London is quite different in its climate and character. Consequently, in Barcelona people dress in light, colourful clothes, which is not something that is so evident in London, especially in the winter!'

'I like the sense of life and colour that I see in Barcelona, which owes much to the street artists and the way that almost every door and wall is covered with lively marks and designs. And this is where the two cities, Barcelona and London, have something in common – again, it is the street artists and the environments they create that I particularly like about the East End of London. I also like these places because they show more life and character, in that you often see torn posters, flyers and stickers, scratched and stained walls or pavements, rusty surfaces, scuffed wooden doors, broken windows and so on – all signs of time and activity that shape the living city. In my work I tend to aestheticise all this and use it as a background that helps to define the image of the young people that I paint. Nevertheless my work is not simply about recording scenes. It is about

creating them, working from the reference information to serve a certain idea. Inevitably my response to the scenes that I find in London is different to those that I find in Barcelona, but I always shape the painting to suit my own view. So, I might decide to make the scene more sunny, for example, or combine people from several sources of reference material,

or place them in a different environment. 'Obviously, the colourful, sunny subjects I prefer are more readily found in Barcelona. But I seldom find a subject that does not need modifying in some way. Usually I start with the people, and then I think about what the setting should be like.'

For Michele, it is important that the people in his paintings look natural and



Girl with Sunglasses, oil on linen, 59x55in (150x140cm)

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The Letter, oil on linen, 67x79in (170x200.5cm)

create some kind of identity and relationship with their environment. His models are sometimes friends, sometimes people that he meets in the street. He works primarily from photographs. When he notices someone who, he feels, has a certain look, a certain way of dressing or some other interesting characteristic, he asks if they will pose for him while he takes the necessary photographs. 'Normally people are happy to pose because it is for a painting,' he says. 'I

show them a catalogue of my work!'

Exciting compositions

With reference to the photographs, Michele makes some quick sketches on paper to help decide on the composition that he would like to use for the painting. Once he has an idea, he takes the relevant photographs and scans them into a computer to create a more resolved and enlarged image to work from – a sort of photomontage design.

'But I never keep precisely to this in the actual painting,' he says. 'There are always modifications to make in order to create the best composition, and I usually have a struggle with the painting for some time to achieve this. The photographic reference is just the starting point. I may, for example, decide to change the way someone looks, their pose or their clothing – it's as much about imagination, experience and memory as it is about a specific image and its realisation.'

An interesting feature of Michele's work is the way that he composes each painting, creating an exciting visual effect, as well as a narrative element, and often involving figures that are cropped. Refreshingly, he doesn't feel bound by the accepted conventions for composition, and in doing so he gives us some delightfully original and intriguing images to enjoy. He manages to achieve a wonderful balance between what is stated in the painting and what is implied or left to the viewer's imagination.

While this approach is undoubtedly influenced by what Michele describes as the 'aesthetic of photography', he is equally quick to point out the value of drawing skills. 'The success of a painting always depends to some degree on the strength of the initial drawing,' he says. 'Drawing is the first tool that an artist has to help achieve a good result. I have studied anatomy and I regularly make life drawings. It is important that you can go beyond the mere reference of a photograph. I think that you have a knowledge of what is behind the shape of a head and so on.'

Painting alla prima

Michele paints in oils on fine linen canvas or, for the smaller works, carefully prepared MDF boards. He prefers a smooth surface because it allows long, flowing brushstrokes and a greater variety of marks, from the most trace to the thickest, leaving the purest trace of brushwork activity, uninfluenced by the actual texture of the canvas or board support. He likes the sensual quality of oil paint, its consistency, and the fact that it is slow drying enables him to rework and modify areas if necessary. It is a very responsive and expressive medium to use.

'This also means that when I mix a colour it will remain useable until the painting is finished,' he says. 'When I started painting professionally, about five years ago, I used to work with a very restricted palette, just six colours. But since then I have experimented and introduced many more colours. Now, I



Sitting in a Circle, oil on linen, 67x79in (170x200.5cm)

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might have over 30 colours available. I won't use all of these in one painting, of course, but it gives me greater scope to create variety and different colour interactions in my paintings. Similarly, I like to have a wide selection of brushes available, and these are now mostly hogs, rather than the synthetic brushes which I used to prefer.'

Michele starts by drawing a very rough grid on the canvas, perhaps just a cross, and then, with a brush and some diluted colour – often raw sienna – he places the main elements of the composition. Usually, he concentrates on the background first, which is painted with fairly diluted, flat colour. Then he works on the figures, adding to their interest with much more varied and often textural brushwork. His technique is essentially *alla prima*, painting wet-into-wet and in the main finishing each part as he works across the canvas.

He works quickly: most paintings take about a week to complete. 'It's about speed and the inspiration of the moment,' he says. 'I have to be quick, because I don't want the colours to dry before I have time to correct them, should that be necessary. Until I have finished, I cannot assess properly whether my vision for the painting has worked and everything fits together as it should. I may add some finishing touches, and then I hang the painting on my studio wall and start the next idea. I live with the painting in this way to see if any further adjustments need to be made. But I never make any radical changes, for it is vital the painting doesn't lose its vigour and impact.'



Gust of Wind, oil on prepared MDF board, 15x15in (40x40cm)

'I always shape the painting to suit my own view'



The Calm Sea Behind, oil on linen, 47x47in (119.5x119.5cm)

Michele Del Campo studied illustration at the University of Dundee, graduating with a Bachelor of Design (Hons) degree in 2001. He also graduated in fine arts from the Universidad Complutense, Madrid, in 2007.

Michele has regularly exhibited work over the past decade. Important solo shows include Mark Jason Gallery, London and Jorge Alcolea Gallery, Madrid. His paintings have also been exhibited in various art fairs and group exhibitions, such as the Threadneedle Art Prize, 2009. He has won a number of awards, including First Prize XXI Premio BMW de Pintura. You can see Michele's work at Mark Jason Gallery, London, tel: 0207 258 5800; www.markjasongallery.com, where he is having a solo exhibition in June, and The Artlounge, Birmingham, tel: 0121 685 2555; www.artlounge.co.uk. www.micheledelcampo.com

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