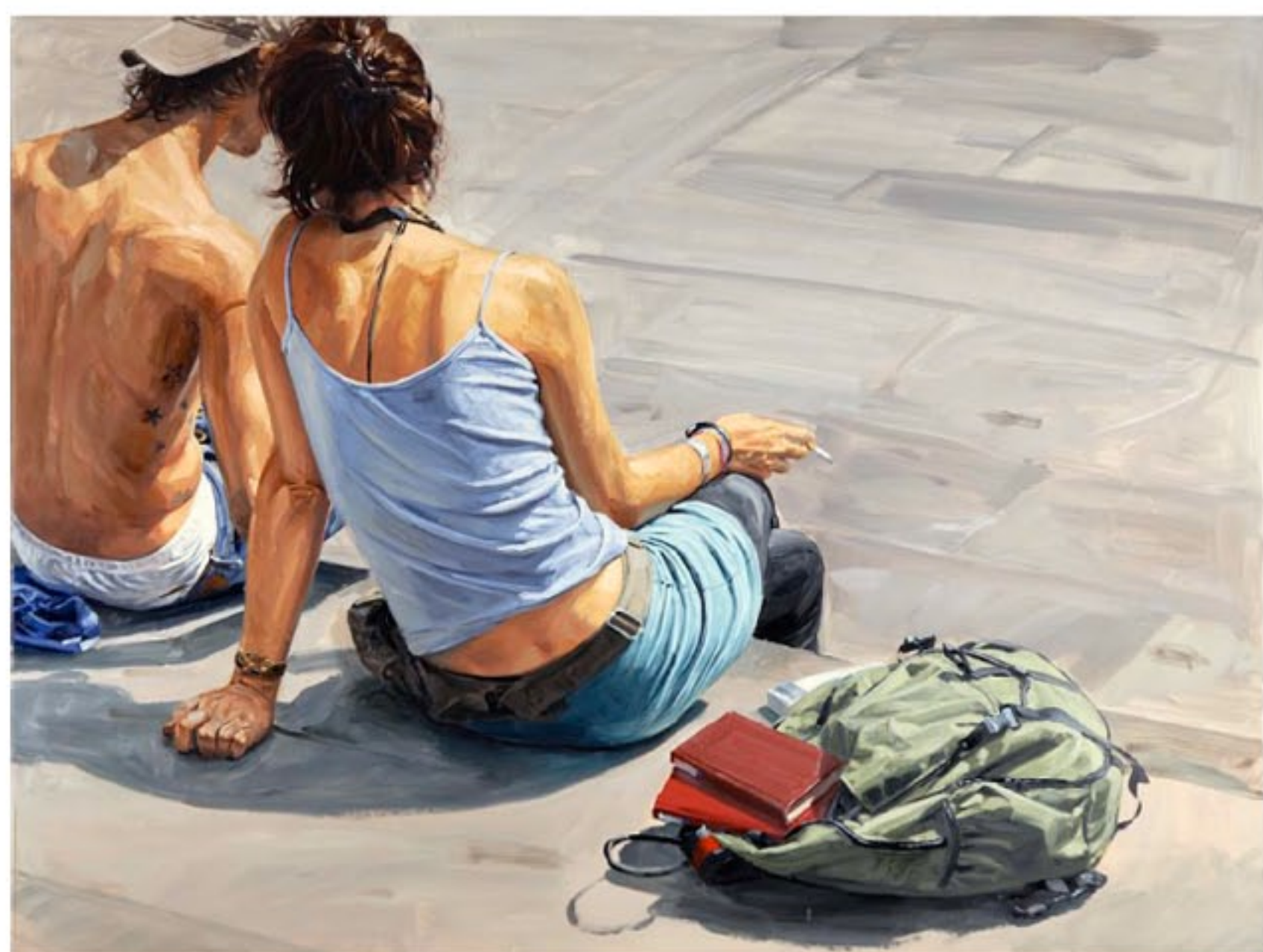


## MICHELE DEL CAMPO

"And so, walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, for ever in search. In search of what? We may rest assured that this man, such as I have described him, this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity', for want of a better term to express the idea in question. The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory."

Charles Baudelaire – 'The Painter of Modern Life', 1863



Pareja de espaldas, óleo sobre lino, 150x200cm

It is impossible to look at Michele Del Campo's recent paintings without being reminded of one of the seminal texts that defined our idea of the Modern – Charles Baudelaire's extended essay 'The Painter of Modern Life'. For Baudelaire, Modernity resided as much in observation as it did in actual creation – something that the passage quoted above makes clear. He saw the truly modern artist as someone submerged in the *zeitgeist*, entirely responsive not simply to changes of artistic temperature, but to everything that happened in society – to the ways in which people stood, sat, walked, dressed. Above all, to the ways in which they managed their everyday social relationships. Baudelaire understood very clearly that these things changed subtly over time, and that each particular moment of social interaction was unique, and could never be repeated.

Michele Del Campo's work shows very clearly how fascinated he is by Baudelaire's doctrine. The influence of photography is obvious, because of the often radical cropping, but the paintings are not photographic. Here one thinks of an influential contemporary of Baudelaire's – Edgar Degas. Degas's *Vicomte Lepic and His Daughters* [1873] – a street scene like many of Del Campo's paintings – is composed in an identical way. However, the clothes are very different, and so too are the actual physical movements the artist has recorded, which immediately reveal a very different kind of social consciousness. A comparison between this painting and those that Del Campo is making now tells us how much European urban society has changed in the course of one hundred and thirty-four years. What is the same is the kind of vision applied to it.

What Del Campo shows us is a new urban middle class of attractive young people. He shows them in city settings, and also occasionally at the beach. Their clothes are much lighter and simpler than those that would have been worn in the past. They show more bare flesh, even when they are not at the beach. Their physical attitudes are suppler and freer, and indicate the confidence they have in their own bodies. There are occasional references to characteristically modern amusements, such as skateboarding, and to contemporary technological gadgets, such as mobile phones.

It is clear that the painter is particularly attracted to young women, but he treats them in a very different way from the way in which Degas treats his ballet dancers, or his young women washing themselves. With Degas one is always aware of both the intellectual and social gulf between the painter and his subjects. He once referred to the models who posed for his studies of women bathing as being like 'cats, licking themselves' – a remark that implies that they belonged to a different species from that of the artist himself.



Huevera, oil on linen, 89x81cm

With Del Campo there are no such barriers – the women he portrays are shown as his equals, or, as one might say in contemporary shorthand, as being 'part of the same scene'. One telling detail, in some of the paintings, is the presence of books. In *Pareja de espaldas*, two books spill out of the rucksack in the foreground. In *Chicas sentadas con un libro*, a book is the object of a discussion between two girls. The implication, in many of the paintings – however it is one that is never fully spelled out – is that these young women are university students, preparing to make their way in what will soon be a much wider world. The only subject who seems to be working-class is the *Huevera* [Egg-seller], and she is in fact the closest Del Campo comes to the sort of painting produced by Degas.

When one looks at the paintings from a more purely technical point of view, one

sees that they fit into a tradition inherited from Velazquez, and passed on to artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries who were not all of them Spanish – among the names that come to mind are those of Edouard Manet, Sorolla y Bastida and John Singer Sargent. Essentially this technique is illusionist in a rather special way. It is in no sense photorealist, but aims to create the appearance of reality through the use of quite loose and fluid markings on a surface. It never attempts to conceal that fact that paint is paint – a substance that exists in its own right.

One of the pleasures of looking at Del Campo's work is the play between one's perception of the painting as an object, created in a certain way, with fluid strokes of the brush, and one's perception of it as a representation of something. Often the markings force one to extrapolate, to construct elements of form that are implied, but not in fact fully present. Effectively, the radical cropping of some of the compositions forces one to undertake a version of the same thing – to imagine things outside the actual boundaries of the canvas.

Art nowadays often has aspirations towards the transcendental. It struggles towards a vague spirituality, and usually fails to achieve its goal. These are not artworks of that sort. They are about the things of this world, and one man's pleasure in observing them. Michele Del Campo offers us no particular moral lesson – if we choose to draw conclusions of that sort from what he shows us, then we do so on our own. What he does tell us about is the pleasure of seeing, of experiencing the world in all its complex quotidian reality. You can look at these paintings for a long time, and always get something new from them.

Edward Lucie-Smith



Edward Lucie-Smith, "Michele Del Campo", diciembre 2007, catálogo exposición, Galería Jorge Alcolea, Madrid.