



Enchanting light and the inclusion of delightful details adds to the magical caught-in-the-moment quality of Spanish artist **Vicente Romero's** figural pastels.

stolen moments

BY NIALL O'NEILL

Untitled (19½x27½)

V. ROMERO



Untitled
(23½x28¾)

I LEFT THE PASTEL MUSEUM in the village of St. Aulaye only reluctantly. This small-town museum, located in the Dordogne region of France, opened its doors with an inaugural exhibition of work by five international pastel artists. Among the featured artists was Vicente Romero, a Spanish artist whose work I had, up until then, only seen in reproduction, but whose particular vision I had always found especially captivating. To get to see his work in person was truly special.

Romero's depictions of intimate moments are carefully arranged: a beautifully embroidered cloth held to the light, a sleeping form among crumpled sheets, a book cast aside. These details indicate a Romantic point of view, but—because I had the pleasure to meet and interview the artist—I learned that behind the Romanticism lies an analytical and rational mind.

Raised With Art

Born Vicente Romero Redondo in 1956, in Madrid, Romero was the eldest of four brothers in a family that encouraged activity in the arts. But whereas

two of his brothers became musicians, it was clear from an early age that Romero's artistic talents took a different form. Rarely without a pencil and sketchbook, he became notorious for his caricatures of school friends and teachers. At 15, he enrolled at the prestigious San Fernando Faculty of Fine Arts, the same school at which Salvador Dali had studied a generation earlier.

Although he graduated with a diploma in drawing and sculpture, Romero also studied philosophy, history and paleoanthropology at the University Complutense de Madrid, and claims to be as passionate about these subjects as he is about painting.

The next phase in Romero's artistic development took place on the village streets of coastal Spain and the islands of Tenerife, Majorca and Ibiza where he began painting portraits. This was where he honed his skills, using pencils, sanguine and sepia, and eventually pastels—first pencils, and then sticks. The artist suggests that he is, to some extent, self-taught as a painter, but his foundation in drawing he owes to his fine arts training.



Untitled
(25½x31¾)

Beauty All Around

When Romero married, he and his wife settled in the coastal region of Costa Brava. The inspiring setting—with the striking Mediterranean light and landscape, and the beautiful gardens of their villa—all contributed to what is now the *leit-motif*, or recurring theme, of his art. But central to Romero's compositions of quiet, intimate moments are the models. Sometimes he may use a professional model, but many times he looks to friends and frequently his wife.

The artist develops the pose collaboratively with a model, taking hundreds of photographs to capture the position, the surroundings and the perfect play of light. "Photography is a point of departure, not an end point," Romero says. "I don't trust the concrete expression of photography; that tends to stultify the creative process." To make sure he's leaving room for his own imagination, Romero will use camera settings that blur the details, lower the saturation or alter the contrast. "My compositions require that nothing should appear to be set up," he says. "A setup is, of course, inevitable, because that's

the artifice of art, but I want to give the illusion of surprise—a stolen moment of intimacy." The end result is a very personal painting that beckons with a fleeting gesture of a hand placed on the hair or a piece of beautiful fabric held up to the light.

Romero doesn't title his paintings, explaining that they aren't stories, but private moments as if observed through an open door; it's the artist as voyeur. Much like the intimate household settings of Vermeer or the bath scenes of Degas, these are works in which the artist, unobserved, captures a fleeting moment without shattering the intimacy. "But the story remains minimal," Romero says, "not even attaining the status of an anecdote."

Materials & Methods

Like most pastelists, Romero uses a variety of brands—Rembrandt, Daler-Rowney, Sennelier, Schmincke—and keeps a large quantity of colors available to better express the subtlety in tonal range that he requires. Pastel pencils are reserved for drawing and for details, and for imparting a glazing effect similar to that of oils.



Untitled (25½x19½)



Untitled (24x18)

As a surface, he especially likes Ingres pastel paper, likening the surface texture to the weave of canvas. He has the paper dry-mounted onto Fome-Cor, which gives him the freedom to lay down a watercolor underpainting. When he desires a sanded surface, the artist opts for Art Spectrum's Colourfix paper, which is also suitable for wet media applications. To ensure good adhesion, he prepares the surface by rubbing pastel into the support with his fingers, a paper towel or worn toothbrush.

Romero then begins with a fairly precise drawing which, though it soon disappears under the layers of color, constitutes the true armature of the piece. "I start with my darkest darks and lightest lights, so that my painting stays in place. Then my intuition takes over," he says. "The process is difficult to explain but, during the course of the painting, I squint frequently for fear of losing this fragile equilibrium of contrasts. I try not to get lost in the details and to always keep an eye on the whole."

Whereas some painters prefer to set down their values, and then proceed to color, Romero works out both at the same time. "I consider the two to be inseparable," he says. "I start straight away with saturated colors that, even if calmed down afterward, keep their intensity and freshness. Better to start off strong and add nuance afterward."

Working this way requires a high level of palette organization, so the artist tries to keep his in good order: "I need to know where to find a pastel in the right tint and texture. Everything should move along quickly, as the idea is ephemeral."

HOOKED ON CLASSICS

Vicente Romero draws inspiration from artists working as far back as the Greek sculptor Phidias (480 B.C.-430 B.C.), but he cites Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669) and Diego Velazquez (Spanish, 1599-1660) as primary influences, noting that the two could execute passionate work due to careful planning, so that technique could be subordinate to the spontaneity of the gesture during the creative process. He also admires the artistic output of the 19th century as expressed by Gustave Courbet (French, 1819-1831), Eugene Delacroix (French, 1798-1863), Edouard Manet (French, 1832-1883), Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864-1901), who share a mastery of draftsmanship.

Romero once had the unique opportunity to see two of his favorites, Joaquín Sorolla (Spanish, 1863-1923) and John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925) in parallel exhibitions in Madrid. He observed that, while he shares with Sorolla a taste for Mediterranean light and admires his passionate style and strong sense of color, he considers Sargent the more refined painter, noting his minimalism and extraordinary economy of brushwork. While the two have much in common, the exhibitions highlighted differences, perhaps reflecting their respective origins in Northern and Southern Europe, respectively.

As a trained sculptor, Romero also finds classical Greek sculpture an enduring source of inspiration. Whenever he's in London, the artist visits the British Museum, where the Elgin marbles—especially the Parthenon pediments—can move him to tears as the very epitome of Classicism.



Untitled (18x24)



Untitled (25½x19¾)

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Untitled (19¾x24)



Untitled (27½x39¼)

Multiple Viewpoints

Romero has painted a number of pastels with dancers as subjects, but it wasn't so much the dancers themselves that sparked his interest, but rather the potential to construct complex compositions, such as the inclusion of multiple reflected images in the dance studio mirrors. "I thought about double mirrors that would multiply the points of view," Romero explains. "I returned to a fundamental principal of sculpture: the subject viewed from all angles and not just from a single viewpoint as in painting. To distinguish between the primary image and the reflections required

great subtlety." A generous use of greens and violets in the shadows helped the artist "push back" the reflected imagery.

It's telling that ambitious compositions don't intimidate but rather inspire Romero. Whether the challenges are the folds of drapery, pieces of embroidery or mirrored reflections, it's these complexities that not only delight the eye but add conviction and intimacy to Romero's idyllic visions. ■

NIALL O'NEILL, of Cork County, Ireland, took up painting when he retired. His particular interest in pastel led him to start a blog, "Artists in Pastel" (www.artistsinpastel.com).



Artist **Vicente Romero** (<http://vicenteromero.wordpress.com>) currently lives in the Costa Brava region of Spain where he finds endless inspiration in the incredible Mediterranean light. The artist has enjoyed regular solo exhibitions of his work in Spain, France and Portugal since the 1990s. His work is represented in France by the Little Gallery in St. Emilion; in Britain by Petley's of London; and in Spain by Benedito in Malaga, Puerta de Alcalá in Madrid, and by Pizarro in Valencia.