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PRIVATE LIVES

WHERE MILLIONAIRES GO TO RECHARGE

Back to basics

■ JACK KEMP ON AMERICA
AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Biting the bullet

■ A DYNAMIC FORCE IN BUSINESS IS
TACKLING THE GLOBAL AIDS THREAT

Watch this space

■ FR. JOURNE TIME PIECES - THE BOLD,
THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE EXCLUSIVE

A brush with bulls

Paris-born Roger de Montebello began painting at the age of 17.

The increasingly successful artist will hold a solo exhibition at the Carlyle Gallery in London between the 25th and 30th of November.

At the heart of Montebello's work is his depiction of his very personal vision of Venice and Spain, trying to capture their essence under the ever-changing effects of light and shadow. He paints over and over the same buildings of Venice – the Zattere, the Arsenale, San Marco – and often the same general views of San Michele or Burano, usually seen from a distance. They are varied almost infinitely by how he captures the light through his use of subtle variations in the tonalities, brought about by the simplification of his palette. He is also fascinated by painting different compositions to combine a wide variety of elements. Water occupies a major importance in his work, as does the sky,

and he has greatly developed its observations and treatments.

Man and nature

There is a great love for nature in Montebello's work, and he manages, by, for example, painting the reflection of a building in the water, to make that which is manufactured enter the world of nature, to make it become part of nature. He has also explained that the technique of incorporating reflection in a painting allows him to achieve a more "finished" composition. The element represented appears on the canvas balancing the composition almost perfectly. Each individual work translates a mood captured





in an instant. He goes beyond the description of a building, capturing instead the essence of the scenes he represents, by reducing it to a few elements, an economy of means that confers to them their puissance and tranquility.

Fighting bulls

The artist loves to travel to Spain during the summer, when he can trail bullfights from one village to another. Montebello particularly likes to work on small formats (panels of usually, 16 x 22 cm), which allow him to execute his pieces directly on site. He uses a box on which two rails are fixed and between which the panel is held. This allows him to paint easily, in whatever circumstance, with great flexibility. His pictures are finished in one session, are never touched up in the studio afterwards, and are never recreated from photographs.

Montebello is fascinated by bullfighting, which is of course evocative of Spanish tradition. In those paintings, the artist manages to capture a feeling of immediacy, where the action is suspended. He prefers to depict the movement of the corrida, the relationship and harmony between man and bull, setting aside the brutality of the fight.

The great themes of valor, nobility, life, death, and challenge draw the painter to the ring. There, he connects with three thousand years of history and civilization, reaching back to early Greek mythology, redefining the elementary rapport between men

"THE GREAT THEMES OF VALOR, NOBILITY, LIFE, DEATH, AND CHALLENGE DRAW THE PAINTER TO THE BULLFIGHTING RING."

and animals. In the most remote regions of Spain, where few signs of modern life have made their way, these timeless rites continue, and are perceived by the painter as a true form of art, combining skill, elegance, strength, movement, vibrant colors and lyricism.

The challenge and tension in the arena is felt by the artist, and similar to the way the fight is waged in the ring, the artist enjoys the tension felt as people around him observe him in his fight to produce a masterpiece in less than two hours. The outcome of this struggle is never sure, leading at times to the rough, unfinished aspect of some works. And perhaps at other times, to the defeat of both the painter and his piece. ■

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Roger de Montebello, born 1964, took his first art class at the Facultad de Bella Artes of Seville (Spain), where he was awarded, in 1985, the matricula de honor in painting.

He then pursued both his artistic activity and his education, graduating from Harvard College in 1988 (Bachelor of Arts in Art history and Theory), and from the Paris Institut d' Etudes Politiques in 1992. The same year Montebello's friends organized his

first solo exhibition in Paris. He showed in New York in 1993, then at the French Cultural Services.

Later, he settled in Venice, where he rented a studio while pursuing his travels to Spain three to four months a year.

Works by Roger de Montebello can be viewed by appointment at Bernard Chauchet, 20 Brechin Place, London SW7.

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