

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



‘Art is poetry, not prose’

By Jackie Wullschlager | September 16, 2011 10:04 pm

Michael Craig-Martin, a key influence on the Young British Artists in the 1990s, talks about his instinct for the modern



Michael Craig-Martin in his London studio

‘I don’t like the term ‘self-expression,’ ” declares Michael Craig-Martin. “It implies self-consciousness, the sense that you can control it. What interests me is the part of you that you are stuck with, that you can’t control, and it comes out whatever. That’s infinitely more profound: you are who you are, even when you don’t wish to be – you can’t not do it. As a teacher, you help people locate that, have confidence in that self – not as an invention, and maybe including aspects you don’t like. That’s the you which you are using when you make art.”

The “you” that Craig-Martin is stuck with is a metaphysician who found his own vocabulary – everyday objects such as a spade or light bulb mechanically drawn on flat bright monochrome grounds – in an

unlikely balance of pop, minimalism and conceptualism. As a teacher at Goldsmith's College, he passed the mix on to the generation of students constituting the Young British Artists, including, most famously, Damien Hirst. It is hard to overestimate Craig-Martin's significance in the revolution in British art and in Britain's relationship with art, which followed in the 1990s. Yet this distruster of self-expression is as modest, elusive and studiously neutral as his works.

Craig-Martin has just turned 70: the Art Fund, of which he is a trustee, is holding a birthday party at the Whitechapel Gallery next week, and we meet nearby at his Hoxton studio, a former warehouse tucked at the end of a parking lot strewn with debris. Slim, white-haired, dressed all in black, eyes a transparent shining blue, he greets me at the iron gate and welcomes me into a large light space. The walls are lined with his new rhyming paintings: the word "Love" over the outline of a glove on garish sugar-pink, "Flirt" set against a shirt on purple, "Liar" on a pair of pliers, "Soul" on a bowl.

The pop colours sing, the straightforward aesthetic, free of personal inflection, is accessible, democratic, but the words – each in a different way about truth – suggest the thinker. This is representation so clean and simplified that it becomes conceptual: questioning the nature of representation. "I'm into the basicness of ordinary things," he explains. "I'm not interested in design, not in kitsch, not in consumer aspects of everyday things. It's the idea of colour, form. I'm trying to get at something so simple and transparent that it's got to a position when you can't subdivide it again."

The soft mid-Atlantic tone – Craig-Martin was born in Ireland and grew up in Washington, DC – is precise, polite. "I've always felt that art is really a metaphor – poetry, not prose. It's about finding a larger truth in some kind of artifice. The disaster of the modern age is fundamentalism – the failure to appreciate poetry. The Bible and the Koran are poems, not documents – if you don't understand truth in a poetic sense, you turn to literalism and it becomes ghastly. The stories in the Bible work as poetic metaphor. That God made the world in seven days tells of the fabulous power of invention, in terms we can understand."

Like Hirst, Craig-Martin is not only a philosopher but a Catholic-educated one. He made his name in 1973 with the ready-made "An Oak Tree" – a glass of water placed on a plain shelf, accompanied by a text explaining that it was an oak tree because he said so. "I could never have done 'Oak Tree' without [knowing] Catholicism – the doctrine of transubstantiation," he says. Art's demand for faith, the suspension of disbelief, is the work's subject – one not always understood. "An Oak Tree" was once refused entry at Australian customs because officials thought it was actual vegetation.

"I stumbled on 'Oak Tree,'" Craig-Martin recalls. "It was a great experience. I'd been hitting around at something for a long time and suddenly I saw where it was leading – it summed up the whole idea of art and the world. To be honest, I can read the text accompanying it and I don't think I'm different now. The form has changed but I'm doing the same thing."

When making the piece, Craig-Martin ended his marriage and came out as gay. "A lot of things came together in a kind of crisis, about being true to things: how can you be true to things if you're not true to yourself? During all those liberation movements, so much that had never been said before was being said. I was caught up in the best and worst of that period. People of my generation were at the cusp of everything."

The optimism of that epoch, combined with an instinct for the modern, has always characterised Craig-Martin's art and his teaching. "I really liked everything modern from when I was very little – magazines like Popular Mechanics, modern design, furniture, architecture – that feeling of contemporary life. Duchamp I thought was just unbelievable, and John Cage, Buckminster Fuller – people who think into the future. Marshall McLuhan's prediction – the power will be with information – came completely true. In 1960, he could see the world of fabrication ending, the world of information beginning.

"I always thought abstract expressionism was the last vestige of European modernism. The modern world started with Johns and Rauschenberg, pop, minimalism, Warhol – that was the real break. I was in luck, I was 20 in 1960. This was my moment – a time of innocent optimism."



With former YBA Gavin Turk

With his wife and small daughter (Jessica Craig-Martin, now a New York photographer), Craig-Martin moved to England in 1966, “just as the Vietnam war escalated dramatically, a nightmare, it transformed the American psyche. I carried a vestige of pre-Vietnam America, and the Swinging Sixties suited my interests and sensibility. But the money wasn’t there to sustain that in 1970s England, it didn’t affect enough people’s lives. That was the difference in the 1990s – the country was materially better off, so even when the moment of the art was past, something was kept up. You need these optimistic periods to open doors – the YBAs did that for many, many people.”

Although placing himself alongside Gilbert and George, Richard Long and Barry Flanagan in a British context, Craig-Martin feels “culturally American”, a sensibility that in key ways – a particular admiration for conceptualist Bruce Nauman; the instruction “don’t be intimidated by art history, you’ve got to get over that” – liberated the YBAs. He believes his own contribution came from “the wonderful advantage of being a kind of observer of America as well as an outsider embedded in England, so I was able to bring something different to the table – a feeling that, you know, just do it, let’s worry about it later, then we’ll see what we’ve got.

“There was a sense for a British student to think, ‘Well, I could do it, but it’s hardly worth it’ – that’s very English. The American way, ‘Just go for it’, might be a fantasy but it’s a useful fantasy – it gives people optimism and courage.”

These days the YBAs are still his friends – “the only difference between a teacher and a student is age”. He was “astonished” by their success. “Not that I didn’t think the work was good but I never thought that would happen. In the art world, what’s good for one is good for all. Art is expensive to produce – if there isn’t money running through the system, it won’t work.

“With the degree of opportunities now, I just can’t believe how lucky I am. But I used to say – the secret of success is longevity. When you’re 20, there are 50,000 other artists, by the time you’re 30, its down to 5,000, by 40, it’s 2,000. If you make it to 70 there are only 12 of you left and you’re all famous.”

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