

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### South China Morning Post

**Michael Craig-Martin is known as the Godfather of the Young British Artists**  
*Not every artist has obvious talent, says Michael Craig-Martin. They have to invent themselves as he did, the artist mentor tells Fionnuala McHugh*

Fionnuala McHugh



*Michael Craig-Martin's vibrant paintings of ordinary, everyday objects are on display in his first exhibition in Hong Kong at the Gagosian Gallery in Central. Photo: May Tse*

You may not know the name Michael Craig-Martin, but if you're British, you will almost certainly have seen his work: it's managed to escape the rarefied atmosphere of galleries to appear on Royal Mail postage stamps and Sainsbury's shopping bags. He also used to teach art at Goldsmiths' College in London. A few years ago, a gallery in Berlin held an exhibition entitled "Art - curated by Michael Craig-Martin" featuring works by 26 of his students. You've probably heard of some of them: Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Gary Hume, Michael Landy.

As a result, Craig-Martin has acquired a nickname as "the Godfather of Young British Artists". Every time there's a piece about the YBA art collective which sprang out of Goldsmiths' in the 1980s, his name is evoked. Given what's happened in the art universe since, given the - occasionally - monstrous influence of that tiny group, does he ever feel less like a godfather and more like Dr Frankenstein?

Craig-Martin, sitting in a backroom at the Gagosian Gallery in Central, laughs. At almost 73, he's as fresh-faced as a much younger man out for a stroll in Ireland, the country where he was born and whose passport he carries. (In this, as in his work, the apparent simplicity is complicated: he's one-eighth Chinese through a great-grandmother from Wuhan.)

"I gave permission to people," he says, of his human creations. "My function was to say: for God's sake, just do it. Don't wait. If there's something you want to do, that is the thing to do."

Old-fashioned question: where's the excellence in that? "You can't be excellent against a set of external values," he says. "You're not looking for a measure."

Are there no exams, then, at Goldsmiths? "Well, end-of-year shows," he says. "It's an unfair world. Some people have greater ... I'm resistant to the word talent but many artists have been people without obvious talent. Not having obvious talent forces you to be creative. You need to invent a way of working. I had to invent myself."

This is relevant because when critics discuss Craig-Martin's work, they usually describe it as a dialogue between representation and reality. He initially worked with physical objects (boxes, buckets, tables). Then he did drawings, but only in black and white. Now he paints everyday items - cups, headphones, chairs - in as realistic a fashion as possible, which he colours in vividly unlikely shades. "Early on, I realised I was never going to be a painterly painter, no matter how much I yearned for it. And I hated the idea that a clean, straight edge was less emotional than something ..." He stops and makes wild, sketching motions in the air. "Something scrubby. I hate that. It represents something romantic, which I'm opposed to."

He is a product, then, of his upbringing in the US - he left Dublin when he was only two weeks old - that shiny New World in which the streets were filled with two-toned, chrome-edged cars and shops crammed with hyper-bright goods. "A very golden childhood," he says.

When he was 14, his father, who worked for the World Bank, was transferred to Colombia and there Craig-Martin met Antonio Roda, "a real artist, a really wonderful person". Roda, born in Spain and one of Colombia's most famous painters, gave him drawing lessons. Later, Craig-Martin went to Yale. "I studied with Albers," he says, referring to Josef Albers, who had been a Bauhaus teacher in pre-war Germany and who, at Yale, hugely influenced a generation of American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Eva Hesse.

Except Albers had stopped teaching by the time Craig-Martin arrived in 1961. His teachers were people whom Albers had appointed - a distinct degree of separation. The two men never met. Is this an example of the gap between representation and reality? "He affected me so profoundly," Craig-Martin explains, after a moment. "Albers made it possible for me to be an artist."

If this sounds like a disciple referring to his (unreachable, invisible, deified) master, that would be Craig-Martin's Catholic side making itself manifest. He suddenly stopped going to Mass one Sunday in New York - he says he was about 19 so it would have been 1960 - but his most famous work, *An Oak Tree*, which he created in 1973, is the product of a Catholic sensibility. It consists of a glass of water on a shelf with a text next to it explaining why it's actually an oak tree.

It's a piece about faith and about transubstantiation: if you're Catholic, you must believe that bread and wine have become flesh and blood. Why can't water, therefore, be vegetation. (The quarantine-efficient - and possibly leg-pulling - Australian customs later played a secular version of the Inquisition by refusing to let *An Oak Tree* enter the country for an exhibition until its maker recanted and agreed that it was, indeed, water.)

This was also around the time that Craig-Martin, who'd married in 1963 and had a daughter (Jessica, now a photographer in New York), came out as a gay. Is that a personal version of the disconnect between representation and reality?

“It’s very dangerous to make too literal a connection.” He hesitates. Then he immediately says, as if one aspect of his life stood in for another: “I’m happy and proud of the work I did in the ‘70s, the drawings. But the earlier work . . . it was always about a thing. There was no progression or learning. So I think of the second half of my career as pleasing myself, pleasing my needs. Not being somebody I can’t be. Sometimes it takes longer to find that out.”

He still can’t work out the alchemy by which a group of Goldsmiths’ students, with whom he remains in close contact (“I love them, we see each other often”) suddenly revolutionised the art world. “It was innocent. One thing I hate is the idea that they were careerists, that they were only interested in the money. All they were interested in was survival.”

That was true of another of his students, Hong Kong’s Antonio Mak Hin-yeung (who died of cancer in 1994, aged 43). In 1976, Craig-Martin came to Hong Kong with Mak to assess the art scene here. “It was a nightmare, nobody wanted to know us,” he says.

Apart, that is, from one pioneer: Johnson Chang Tsong-zung, whose Hanart TZ gallery happens to be three floors beneath Gagosian’s. “Michael had baffled the art world three years earlier with *An Oak Tree*,” Chang says. “He’d opened up a contemporary way of engaging with everyday life, which artists like Antonio brought to Hong Kong. One might say that’s the meandering link down to the conceptualism of [artist] Lee Kit today.”

Michael Craig-Martin, *Gagosian Gallery, 7/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm. Until August 16*

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