

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

CHINADAILY

Color you can taste

London newspaper The Telegraph declared him “the high priest of ordinary things”, but the task facing world-renowned conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin at the Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai is anything but ordinary.

Timo Chui



British conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin, acclaimed as Godfather of Brit Art, will stage his solo show in Shanghai in January, following his current show in Hong Kong. Chris McAndrew / China Daily

Craig-Martin has taken up the challenge of mounting a solo exhibition filling six halls of the 28,000-square-meter museum — by January.

“The place is very big,” he says. “It’s a kind of exhibition space that one might think of for a retrospective. I’ve been given six large rooms, and you could put a lifetime of work there.” The exhibition will feature more than 80 paintings which he has been working on for more than two years.

He began in the 1970s, drawing ordinary objects, wheelbarrows, wooden gates, garden forks, paint rollers and other objects which became transformed into drawings, paintings and steel sculpture rendered as concisely as possible.

“It would have been inconceivable to me that they would remain at the center of my work to this day. I intended them to be ‘styleless’, but over the years the way they look has come to be recognizable as my style,” the artist says.

Craig-Martin’s Himalayas premiere will follow his current exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in the Pedder Building, Central, Hong Kong, which continues until Aug 16.

The exhibition of more than a dozen paintings continues a departure from his early works as a sculptor.

A standout digital portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Laura Burlington, near the gallery’s door employs constantly shifting hues so that the image’s mood is never the same twice. The highly colored depictions of modern, mass produced items that normally go unnoticed—the simple and clean lines of a violin, the threads in a winged corkscrew, the molded plastic of binoculars and the subtly undulating seams of a tennis ball.

The colors are meant to convey the non-visual sensations—the smell, taste, feel and sound—of the objects, he says. The meticulously painted pieces produce machine-perfect lines and shades, but done by hand.

The Gagosian show is his first since he came to Hong Kong in 1976 to visit one of his former pupils from Goldsmiths University of London, where he served as a tutor in the 1980s.

“(Hong Kong) was quite different then. The Pedder Building was here but nothing else around it was,” Craig-Martin says. He was visiting Hong Kong sculptor Antonio Mak and was introduced to Johnson Chang, who is now curator and guest professor of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou.

One of Craig-Martin’s most visible achievements, to his chagrin, was mentoring a ragtag group of UK contemporary artists who went on to become known as the Young British Artists.

Contemporary art icons Damien Hirst, Henry Bond, Sam Taylor-Wood and Tracey Emin were among the cabal’s membership. Craig-Martin’s tutelage of the YBA at Goldsmiths led the British press to dub him the Godfather of Brit Art.

“Today, there are far more young people from China at Goldsmiths. There were students from Japan and Korea in the ‘80s when there started to be more students from Asian countries. But I know the young Chinese artists are making up a larger share of the student body,” Craig-Martin says.

“I was a judge two years ago for the John Moores Prize Exhibition in Shanghai. It was a painting prize. We judged 3,000 submissions from all over China. I thought in general the quality was very high. A lot of the teaching (in China) is very traditional. Some of these people were very skilled, not just in the traditional sense, but the works showed had begun to build on those traditions,” he says. “China is a very big country, and I would like to make a very small impact.”

Craig-Martin's arrival in China is a sort of home coming for the Dublin-born artist, who claims Chinese lineage as well.

His great-grandmother was Chinese. His grandmother was born in China. His great-grandfather and his brother came to China in the 1860s, and worked as merchants in Wuhan in today's Hubei province.

Then his great-grandfather stayed in the business and his brother joined the Chinese army and became a general, Craig-Martin recalls, citing the story of his great-grand uncle, William Mesny, a mercenary serving the Chinese Imperial Forces rising to major general in 1873 and later given the title Brevet Lieutenant-General, Chinese Army after participating in the Taiping Blockade and having campaigned through northern Vietnam.

Craig-Martin's time in Shanghai will also see him deliver lectures to local art students.

"I was teaching for many years. I taught (the YBA) the exact same way. I believe that everybody has the essence of being an artist," he says. "My role as a teacher was to give permission to be themselves and believe in themselves."