

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

In My Studio: Michael Craig-Martin

The artist talks about the birth of conceptual art and how no style became his style

Paul Levy



Artist Michael Craig-Martin Jonathan Root for The Wall Street Journal

VISIT CHATSWORTH, the Duke of Devonshire's house in Derbyshire now, and in the Capability Brown landscape you'll see an 11ft 6in chrome yellow garden fork, and a bright blue giant pair of scissors, as well as a pink high-heeled shoe. All are instantly identifiable as the work of Michael Craig-Martin, the artist who taught Damien Hirst and the other Young British Artists at Goldsmiths College, considered then, he says, "the most radical art school in the world."

Mr. Craig-Martin, 72, born in Dublin, was brought up in America, and studied art at Yale, coming to England in the late 1960s, to teach at the Bath Academy of Art at Corsham.

He shot to fame with his 1973 conceptual piece, "An Oak Tree," which consisted of instructions for placing a glass of water on a shelf 253 cm from the floor, together with an imaginary conversation, drawing on his Roman Catholic background, about how it is transubstantiated into a tree.

His work has included drawings on gallery walls, public sculptures, ballet designs and even a London restaurant, St. Albans. He jokes about the huge 4-lightbox "electric fan" that was visible until recently from the Euston Road: "I do work that's temporary, and work that's permanent—and half the permanent work is gone." We visited him in his London studio.



Inside Michael Craig-Martin's studio. Jonathan Root for The Wall Street Journal

The paintings here are for the massive next project, at the beginning of 2015 in the private Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai, where I am showing 100 paintings, all of everyday objects.

At Chatsworth I was nervous because the scale of everything is so vast, I was afraid the sculptures might disappear completely. But they're painted in such artificial colors that the color stands out in the landscape very well, and they seem to hold their own. From the side they're an inch thick, so they're three-dimensional pieces using two-dimensional illusionism.

I've also done an installation in the house. Not wanting to interfere with the works, I've merely encased their plinths in magenta boxes. Most are elaborate, and the plinths distract from the sculptures. Something as simple as the magenta boxes means you see the sculptures more clearly, focusing attention on them by taking away other visual information.

"An Oak Tree" was the work that got me talked about. The National Gallery of Australia bought it in 1977, which deeply shocked me: I had no idea anybody would buy it. My idea was that anybody could go to a store and find the materials and they could have one too. The democratization of art has always been central to me, as is the idea of the viewer's participation in creating the work of art.

The generation of the '60s had been comparatively successful as artists; they had made things that could be sold and that made them very well known—particularly the pop artists. I came from the generation of the '70s, the conceptual artists, who were anti-market. I look back on it now and wonder that we were so happy to make things that no one could possibly buy. Of course it soon became clear that you could make almost anything and someone would buy it—but we hadn't known this at first.

Manufactured common objects were what interested me. I began to draw every object the same size, regardless of scale, using A4 paper. Whether it was a safety pin or a table, I made it fit the page, trying to find a way to be nonjudgmental. I used a fine line, and then I found a way of drawing with tape—to make everything look as neutral as the objects themselves. When you buy

a chair, you know there are thousands of them, all identical, though your own chair is individual.

The irony is that, over the years, my neutral kind of drawing, which was meant to have no style, has become recognizable as *my* style. I draw exactly the same way now, and what I've realized is that it is not only a visual language, but incredibly flexible, and can be used in many different ways.

A philosophical text by Robert Sokolowski pointed out that the image of a hammer doesn't look anything like a hammer. If I'm making a drawing, I'm not making a hammer; but if I show you my drawing, the first thing you'll say is, "That's a hammer," because you and I both have this unbelievable capacity to read an image and experience the presence of an object, which is actually not there. This is not very different from the glass of water and the oak tree.

The capacity to be able to see an image of a thing as the thing is one of the most profound of human abilities, and it predates language in human development. Think of the use of pictures in teaching a child to read.