

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



THE ART NEWSPAPER



# IN THE PINK

Michael Craig-Martin has reframed and replinthed historic works at Chatsworth in bright magenta for an exhibition opening this month. Can this type of contemporary approach bring older art back to life? By Jonathan Glancey

**N**on. Absolutement pas! The commanding marble eyes of the magnificent Neo-Classical bust of Napoleon Bonaparte carved by Antonio Canova appear to defy any conceptual artist daring to come too close. Michael Craig-Martin may be in the process of encasing the plinths of other subjects of Renaissance and Neo-Classical sculptors in the corridors, halls and Sculpture Court of Chatsworth House in eye-grabbing magenta paint – “so artificial, so contemporary”, says the Irish-born, Paris- and Yale-trained artist – yet it is easy to imagine the fiery French Emperor refusing to go pink. Imperial purple, perhaps.

*“We don’t find it easy to look at idealised 18th- and 19th-century sculpture. We have pretty much lost that taste”*

Not even the fact that strident magenta – a dye created by mixing aniline with carbon tetrachloride in 1859 – was named after his nephew’s victory over the Austrians at Magenta in northern Italy that year would, you imagine, be enough to sway Napoleon’s mind, let alone those cold imperial eyes. And, at first, it does seem rather an irreverent thing to do: to highlight selected and time-honoured sculptures at Chatsworth, home to the 12th Duke of Devonshire and one of England’s most justly celebrated country estates, in such an alarming colour.

Craig-Martin is happily unrepentant. “I chose magenta because it catches the eye and leads visitors through the vistas and enfilades at Chatsworth,” he says. “Some of the rooms can

seem quite dark, the sculptures hiding in shadows in a crowd of others. So your eyes focus on those I’ve chosen to highlight, and – hopefully – these sculptures appear to float in space. Normally, you see them rooted very firmly in their settings on stone and marble plinths that, while highly decorative, are often the same colour as other materials and surfaces around them. So you really get to focus on them, to see them anew when you might have walked past them before.”

### A fresh pair of eyes

Anyone who has spent too long in even longer galleries flanked by phalanxes of 19th-century academic sculptures will empathise to some degree. It can be hard for avid gallery-goers, let alone a much wider public and much younger audiences, to engage readily and attentively with gaunt statues of muscular gods, warriors, fawns and even emperors, seemingly frozen when so much contemporary art is restlessly alive.

Invited to organise a show at Chatsworth this spring, of both his own work and of spaces and works in the house that have moved or inspired him, Craig-Martin says: “We don’t find it easy to look at idealised 18th- and 19th-century sculpture. We have pretty much lost that taste. We admire without liking. Even Canova, a fabulous sculptor, can seem debased. But I think it’s great if we do get asked to stop and

look at them, and that’s what I’ve done to all the full-body sculptures.”

Starting in the West Entrance Hall, with a figure of a Roman man from Trajan’s era, Craig-Martin’s magenta trail invites us to reconsider a pair of Egyptian granite Sekhmet (the goddess of war and healing, depicted as a lioness); Raffaele Monti’s *A Veiled Vestal Virgin*, 1846-47, made for the sixth Duke of Devonshire; a naked discus thrower commissioned in Rome by the sixth Duke from the Dutch Neo-Classical Mathieu Kessels; Canova’s *The Sleeping Endymion* (and his attentive dog), 1819-22, another commission from the same avid aristocratic art collector; and, delightfully, a pair of reclining marble lions copied from Canova’s *Rezzonico*

**The 12th Duke of Devonshire (right) with some of the sculptures transformed by Michael Craig-Martin. Rinaldo Rinaldi’s crouching lion (below) is part of the artist’s eye-grabbing trail**

monument in St Peter’s, Rome, by Francesco Benaglia and Rinaldo Rinaldi – for, yes, William, the sixth Duke.

“The sixth Duke was a great collector,” says Peregrine “Stoker” Cavendish, the 12th Duke, who succeeded to the title 10 years ago. “He really liked new stuff and spent a lot of time away in Italy. He did an enormous amount of work at Chatsworth, too; when the estate was going through difficult times in the 1950s, what with death duties and other taxes, there was a thought that Chatsworth might go public and become a sort of Victoria and Albert Museum of the north. By the time the sixth Duke died in 1858, he had filled the place with new art. So there was a tradition here of mixing old and new, and of commissioning contemporary art.”

“Of course, we have visitors who tell us not to change anything. Some come to study door-knobs or clocks, or to ask how we clean the floors, but the majority come to walk in the grounds and otherwise to find solace. I can understand why some might find Damien Hirst’s *Exquisite Pain* [the artist’s 2006 sculpture of a flayed St Bartholomew, which is in Chatsworth’s chapel] unsettling, or a Robert Indiana piece by the fountain out-of-place, but most of these new works are here on a temporary basis. Today, we have a programme of exhibitions, so challenging pieces come and go.”

The Duke and Duchess have long collected contemporary art, furniture and craft,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 54





# In the pink

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53

and examples of these can be found throughout Chatsworth. Family portraits by Joshua Reynolds share rooms with works by Anthony Caro, Ai Weiwei and, of course, Craig-Martin, while outdoor sculptures by Allen Jones, Barry Flanagan, Elisabeth Frink and Richard Long are set against Baroque stonework and 18th-century statuary. One of the latest additions to this contrasting catalogue is a digital portrait of Lady Burlington, the Duke and Duchess's daughter-in-law, by Craig-Martin. A "live" computer portrait made in 2011, it changes colour, and character, continuously and randomly. Millions of combinations are possible, so even the most ardent Chatsworth devotee sees the piece afresh every time.

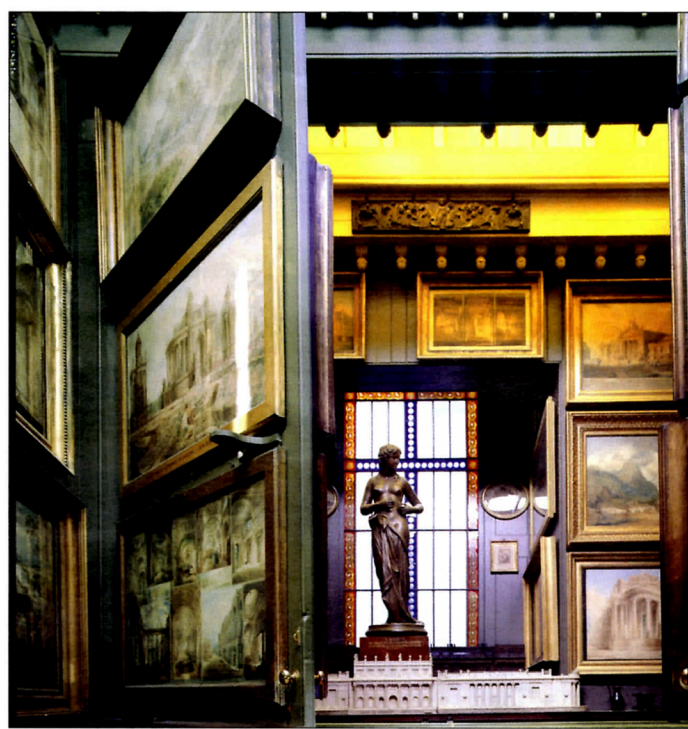
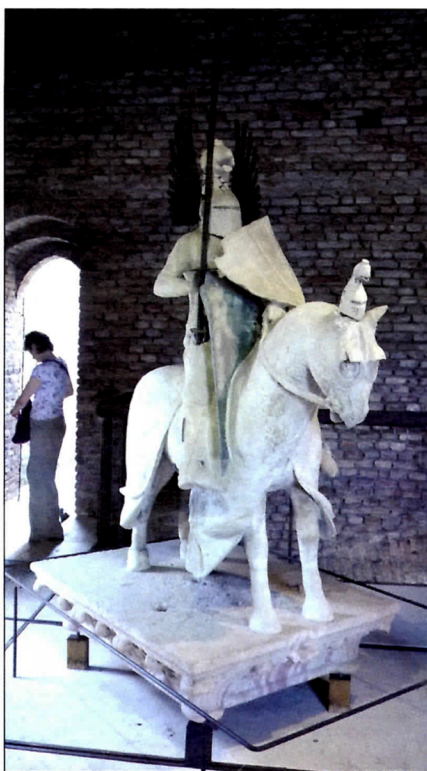
"My uncle [the 11th Duke] commissioned a portrait of my mother [Deborah, Dowager Duchess of Devonshire and the last of the famous Mitford sisters] from Lucian Freud in the late 1950s," Cavendish says. "Fine painting, even if it did make her look rather gaunt, and more like 60 than 35 and beautiful. I don't think we should ever freeze houses like this in time. Chatsworth is the product of continuous change and some radical innovations in architecture, landscape, horticulture and art. And what we do know is that visitor numbers – our lifeblood – increase when we put on new shows."

## Discreet treatment

Craig-Martin's approach at Chatsworth has been, if anything, remarkably discreet. Those magenta plinths are few and far between, except in the Sculpture Court, and he has chosen just 13 drawings from the house's rich collection, hung in simple frames, to accompany the highlighted sculptures. Gathered closely in one room, these are full-face drawings by Renaissance, Baroque and Mannerist artists of great power and concentration.

"They're not necessarily by the most famous artists, but they're all powerful and range from an infant to an old man," Craig-Martin says. It is a privilege to be shown these drawings by the show's curator, Hannah Obee, in the library at Chatsworth before they are framed. She asks me which two I'd like to take home with me (if only I could) without considering who the works are by. First, I choose a gloriously robust Baroque sketch of a man whom even Napoleon might have found a challenge. It proves to be a working drawing for a portrait of Pope Leo X by the Roman artist and architect Giulio Romano. Leo was a renowned patron of the arts, and Romano created the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, where ingenious design inside and out is matched by sensational murals.

My second choice is a striking red chalk sketch of a young man by Annibale Carracci. How he stares, unblinking, from the paper; he might have been drawn on the morning of my visit to Chatsworth. Obee prefers a drawing of a



A sculpture "floats" on its plinth in Carlo Scarpa's exquisite Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona (left). Above, the "unexpected depths and reaches" of Sir John Soane's Museum in London

young Florentine man, by an anonymous artist, who happens to look just like Elvis Presley. How I wish "Debo", the Dowager Duchess, were here to look with us. I remember an interview she gave in the *Daily Telegraph* a few years ago, when she recalled having tea with Adolf Hitler in Munich. For some reason, the interviewer asked her if, given the choice, she would prefer to take tea with Adolf Hitler or Elvis. "Well, Elvis, of course!" she exclaimed.

## Warhol's prints would be at home at Chatsworth; Elvis could certainly compete with Neo-Classical heroes in terms of pouts

One or more of Andy Warhol's 22 silkscreen prints of "the King" would probably look quite at home at Chatsworth; Elvis could certainly compete with Neo-Classical heroes in terms of looks and pouts. The point here is that the combination of generous and knowledgeable patronage and the discriminating eye of a visiting artist can lead to fascinating and enjoyable meetings of contemporary art and existing collections, not least because many of the "historical" works at Chatsworth were challenging in their day.

Of course, it could all go wrong if artists set out to provoke, with little respect for existing collections in venerable museums and galleries and long-standing houses. But even then, because exhibitions are by their nature temporary events, such houses, galleries and museums go back to being what they were before cultural iconoclasts swept through their inlaid doors.

So although shows such as Craig-Martin's Chatsworth exhibition, organised with the

brings us afresh to works of Romanesque sculpture. Some stand on low, wide plinths that make the stone statuary they support appear to float: exactly the same effect created by Craig-Martin at Chatsworth.

Because Scarpa ensured ever-changing plays of daylight, Castelvecchio's rooms and sculptures take on different aspects throughout the days and seasons. It is all but impossible to tire of this remarkable museum. It can be argued, of course, that Romanesque sculpture, with its clear, powerful lines and abstract qualities, has far more in common with 20th- and even 21st-century sensibilities than its 18th- and 19th-century Neo-Classical counterparts.

## Taking artistic risks

I can, though, think of one other museum that insists you come back again and again, even though it rarely seems to change. This is Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London – the extraordinary, multi-layered home of a Neo-Classical architect with the mind of a poet, painter and set designer. Soane mixed grand contemporary sculpture with antiques, curios and Modern art. He made his museum-home a labyrinth, a cabinet of curiosities, a house in which walls suddenly open up to reveal unexpected depths and reaches, or where mirrors suggest rooms that exist only in the imagination.

What both Soane and Scarpa did, architecture aside, was to *curate* the buildings we see as their masterworks; curate, that is, everything within them, so that architecture and art, form and light, decoration and voids, work both with and against one another. They curated spaces that we will never tire of. They also had buildings that they could work on with the equivalent of a new broom. This could never be true of Chatsworth, a house with a rich, given and complex history, of layer upon layer of works of art. But houses like Chatsworth surely gain from a degree of curatorship, from artists such as Michael Craig-Martin being encouraged to see what they want to see and to show what they want us to experience.

Others would gain from taking artistic risks, just as Chatsworth has done at various times in its long history. Houses like this – as with many museums and galleries – are strong enough to engage with even the wildest and most wilful exhibitions. They have, after all, survived the wars, recessions, hostile political regimes and even jealous taxation that have done their best to destroy them. And at Chatsworth, Canova's Napoleon is there to keep order, and too much magenta firmly at bay.

• "Michael Craig-Martin at Chatsworth", 16 March–29 June; for details, visit [www.chatsworth.org](http://www.chatsworth.org)