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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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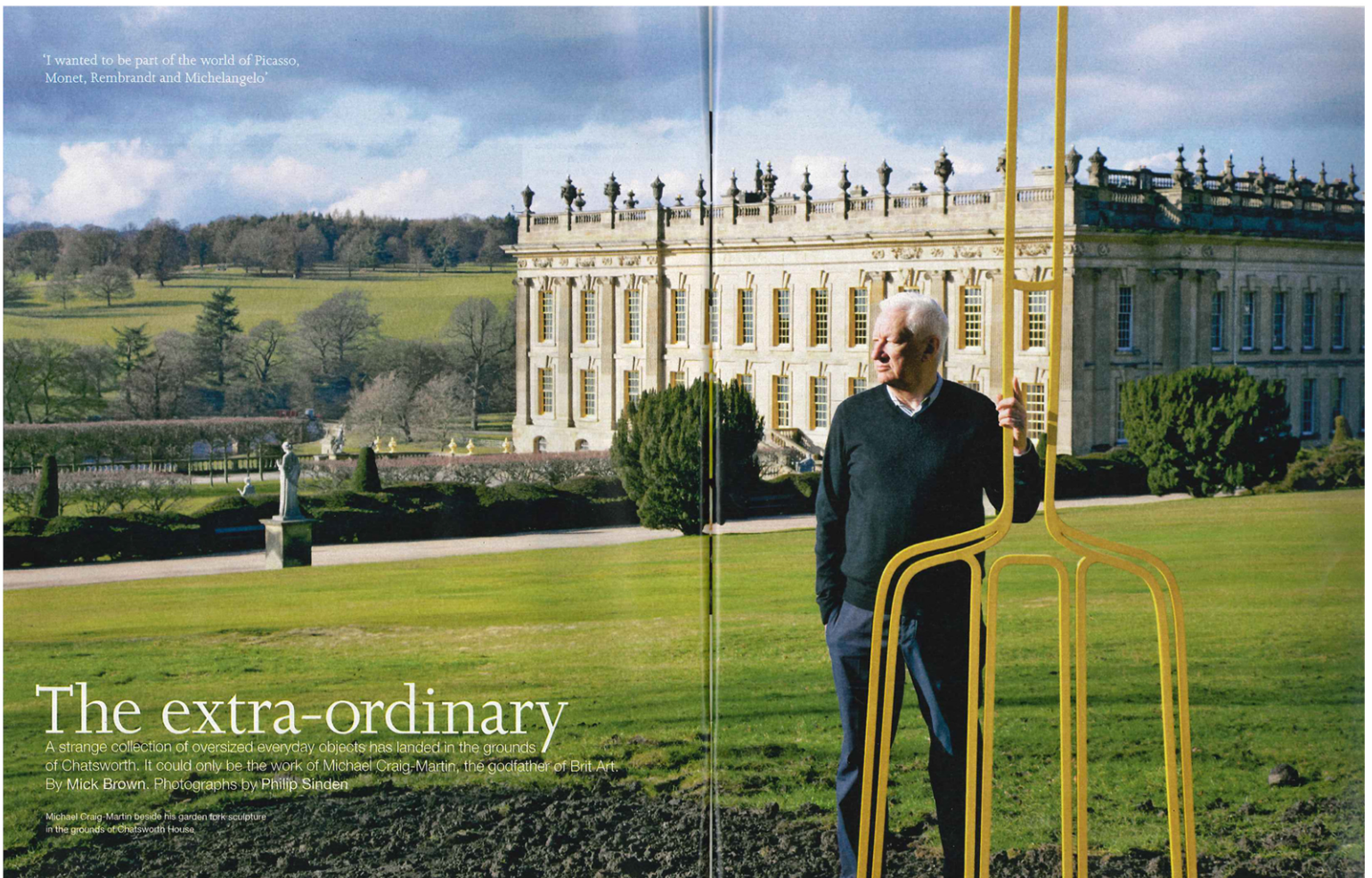
by Mick Brown

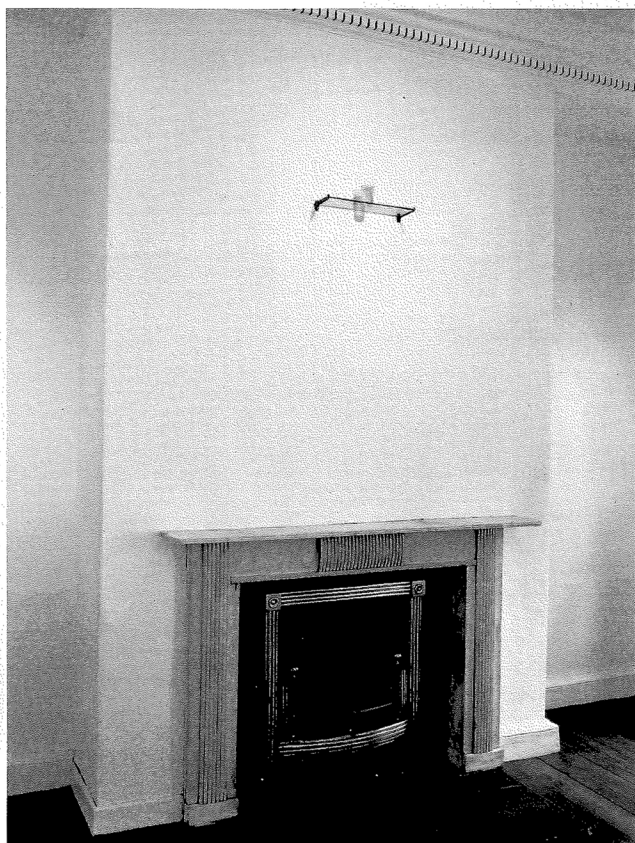
"I wanted to be part of the world of Picasso,
Monet, Rembrandt and Michelangelo"

The extra-ordinary

A strange collection of oversized everyday objects has landed in the grounds of Chatsworth. It could only be the work of Michael Craig-Martin, the godfather of Brit Art. By Mick Brown. Photographs by Philip Sinden

Michael Craig-Martin stands by his garden fork sculpture in the grounds of Chatsworth House.





On a blustery day recently, the artist Michael Craig-Martin stood on the Salisbury Lawn in the grounds of Chatsworth House looking admiringly over the rolling greensward, landscaped by Capability Brown, towards the great house, one of the finest examples of 17th-century English baroque architecture in the country. He was standing beside an 11ft 6in tall, bright yellow garden fork, one of the 12 sculptures of 'everyday objects' in his new exhibition at Chatsworth, the home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. On the lawn outside the Orangery stood a giant white picket gate. Nearby, a pair of oversized blue scissors were planted beside the Joseph Paxton greenhouse, as if waiting to be used to trim the vines growing inside. Across the lawn a huge blue umbrella lay on its side. Between the Canal Pond and the South Lawn was a pink stiletto-heeled shoe, as if abandoned by a tipsy Brobdingnagian partygoer.

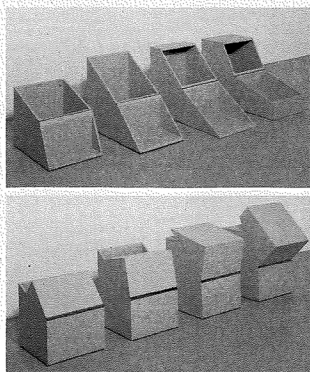
Craig-Martin, who is 72, was born in Dublin, raised in America, and for the past 47 years has lived

in England. His accent is a softly sibilant amalgam of all three places. He is a solidly built man with cropped white hair, dressed in a carefully calibrated melange of dark blues and greys, offset by a vivid cerise cashmere scarf – colour-coordinated, it seems, with the stiletto-heeled shoe.

Craig-Martin is art's high priest of ordinary things. He is probably most famous – or notorious – for his 1973 work *An Oak Tree*, an installation comprising a glass of water standing on a shelf, which he invited the viewer to consider as an act of transformation into 'a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water', and which established him in the vanguard of neo-conceptual art in Britain. He is also known for his years as a tutor at Goldsmiths College in London, where he nurtured the budding careers of Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and a number of the other so-called YBAs. But for the past 35 years, in his own work, Craig-Martin has been engaged in a methodical exploration of things we take so much for granted – filing cabinets, shoes, ladders, laptop computers – that we seldom stop and think of them as 'art', seldom stop and think of them at all.

The works on view at Chatsworth are sculptures, but not as we ordinarily know them. As Craig-Martin puts it, these are 'sculptures of drawings, rather than sculptures of objects' – drawings that seem to have been peeled off the page, and magically inflated to larger than life size. Made of high-tensile steel barely an inch thick, they are not free-standing, but supported by foundations dug into the earth. Because the grounds of Chatsworth, like the house itself, are Grade I listed, it has required special permission to install them. 'I like to make images of things that are as familiar to people as possible,' Craig-Martin says. 'These are the things that really make up our world; they're often so ubiquitous that we think of them as rather low on the horizon of importance. But I think these things are very rich and complex in their associations.'

'When I make a sculpture like the shoe or the spade, I'm only giving you the outline – I'm not giving you a lot. I'm not saying how big it is – the scale is wrong, the materials are wrong, it's not three-dimensional. The only reason you recognise them at all is because you know a lot about the object when



Above left a view of *An Oak Tree* (1973) at the Oliver Dowling Gallery, Dublin, in 1977.

Left Four Identical Boxes with Lids Reversed (open) and Four Identical Boxes with Lids Reversed (closed), 1969.

Right Craig-Martin hopes that his new presentation of Chatsworth's neoclassical sculptures will allow the works to 'reveal themselves more fully'

'I used a Duralux glass, because it was the most standard simple glass. I don't know about you but I'm unable to tell one Duralux glass from another'



you come to it. You may have good associations, or not; you may feel interest, or not. So it allows for exactly the same kind of slippage and interest and caring as I would expect people to have about the actual things themselves.'

A few days before his visit to Chatsworth, I met Craig-Martin in his home, an apartment high in the Barbican with commanding views over London. Outside, the wind howled menacingly, but inside everything was serenity and order.

Craig-Martin was raised as a Catholic; he was an altar boy as a child. One of the things Catholicism gives you, he says, is the sense of a consistent architecture of life – 'good and bad, here on earth, in heaven and hell – every single thing is accounted for.' He lost his religious faith in his teens, but the sense of a consistent architecture has remained. His philosophy of art, his aesthetic values – you might even add the cool, understated style of his clothes, his choice of white leather and tubular steel sofas, and the gleaming white surfaces of his kitchen – all seem completely of a piece.

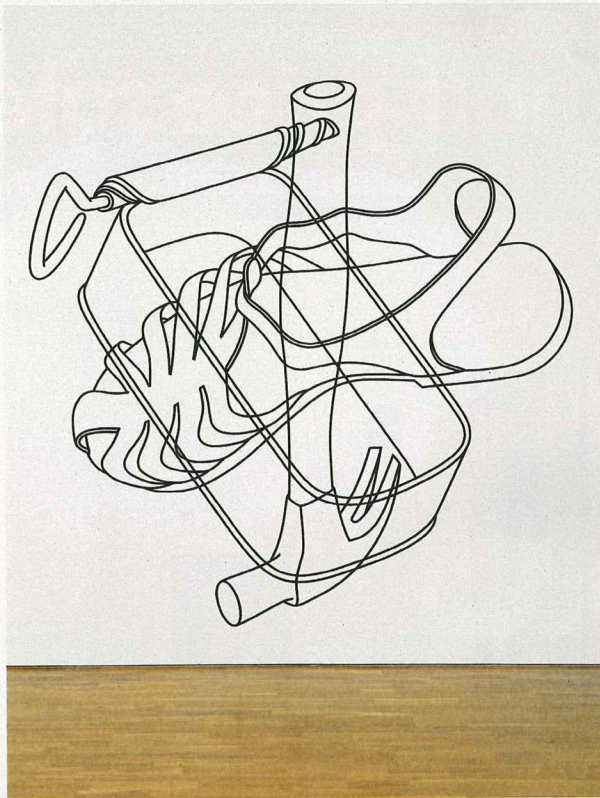
Craig-Martin's father, Paul, was an economist at the British Ministry of Food who, following the war, moved with his family to Washington, DC, to work for the United Nations and then the World Bank. Transplanted to America, the young Craig-Martin fell in love, as he puts it, 'with the look of the modern world'. 'I was a kid when American cars had fins – all those great Cadillacs and Chevrolets – and they were two-tone. I loved all of that. I then discovered modern architecture, modern graphic design, modern fashion. Anything to do with the look or the idea of 'what the modern world would look like interested me.'

But it was the discovery of Marcel Duchamp, whose Dadaist 'ready-mades' – found objects that he presented as art – revolutionised the art world in the early 20th century, that instilled in Craig-Martin the ambition to be an artist himself. 'Duchamp recognised something very, very important about the nature of art – the realisation that creative expression can take any form. I wanted to be part of the world of Picasso, Monet, Rembrandt and Michelangelo – but I knew that the only way you could do that was to do what was only available to us now. The greatest way of honouring the past is

Top right an early example of one of Craig-Martin's line drawings, *Hammer, Sandle, Sardine Tin* (1978).

Right Raffaella Monti's marble sculpture *Veiled Vestal* on its newly decorated magenta plinth

These are 'sculptures of drawings, rather than sculptures of objects' – drawings that seem to have been peeled off the page, and magically inflated to larger than life size



to make things that are appropriate to the present.'

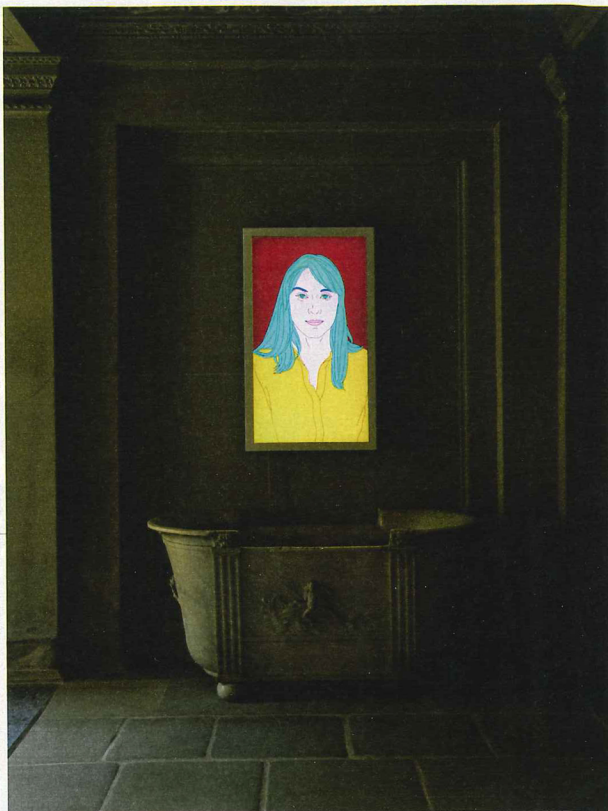
In 1966, after studying art at Yale for five years under the émigré Bauhaus teacher and artist Josef Albers – a minimalist who believed in the credo of exact observation, no spontaneity, expressiveness or emotional resonance – Craig-Martin moved to Britain, his head 'stuffed with theory', and took a job teaching art at Bath Academy of Arts. In that period, he says, between the rise of commercially successful 1960s artists such as Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake and Patrick Caulfield and the popular phenomenon of the YBAs, the only way an artist could survive was to teach. Craig-Martin would combine teaching and working on his own projects for the next 20 years.

His first exhibited work consisted of variously shaped boxes that the viewer was invited to open and close – confounding the usual 'look but don't touch' rule with art – and constructs of shelves, bottles and buckets. His fortunes changed when he exhibited *An Oak Tree*. Alongside the glass of water, perched

on a plain glass shelf 253cm high, he reproduced the text of a conversation between the artist and an imaginary critic challenging him about the meaning of the work. 'Q: Do you consider that changing the glass of water into an oak tree constitutes a work of art? A: Yes. Q: How long will it continue to be an oak tree? A: Until I change it.' Craig-Martin says he intended the piece as an exploration of the question of 'authenticity' in art, and his belief that art is as much an act of faith and imagination on the part of the viewer as the artist. 'I could say this...' he points to the glass-and-steel table between us, 'is a work of art, or my shoe, and for me it is. But if I don't somehow catch your imagination enough, if I don't make your belief system buy into what I'm saying, then you won't see it that way.'

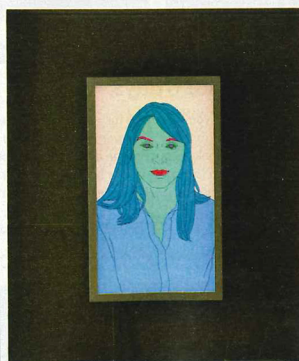
The kind of work that inspires baffled incomprehension among non-believers, and drives critics of conceptualism to despair ('Why is the glass of gin deliberately, and in homage, left in my garden 27 years ago not now a lofty juniper?' Brian Sewell wrote archly), *An Oak Tree* was purchased in 1978 by the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra (after a suitably surreal misunderstanding with customs over the matter of importing 'vegetation'). 'I didn't think I was going to sell it, and I didn't particularly want to sell it,' Craig-Martin says. He has no idea whether *An Oak Tree* in Canberra is actually the same work he originally exhibited in London. 'My intention was to make something using ordinary objects that anybody could have – very cheap. I used a Duralux glass, because it was the most standard simple glass,' he says, laughing. 'I don't know about you but I'm unable to tell one Duralux glass from another.'

In the late 1970s Craig-Martin moved on to making images drawn from what he called 'a visual vocabulary' of mass-produced everyday objects – a stepladder, a torch, a light bulb. These 'pictorial ready-mades', as he called them in tribute to Duchamp, were originally line drawings, made with black tape applied directly to white surfaces, grouping the objects together with no heed to relative scale, or any apparent unifying theme. What is the link between a hammer, a sandal and a sardine tin? In the early 1990s he expanded his vocabulary and began producing paintings of objects in vivid, glow-



Right The ever-changing colours of *Computer Portrait of Laura Burlington* (2010) have beguiled visitors to Chatsworth House

The Duke admits he was 'quite surprised' when he first saw the digital portrait of the Duchess. 'We didn't know such things existed. But it is absolutely brilliant'



ing colours. These paintings have the clean, graphic quality of images you might find in a handbook to familiarise a visitor from outer space with things to which we earthlings barely give a second thought: 'This is a safety-pin.' (Although the interplanetary visitor might believe from this that a safety-pin is the same size as a bucket.) To Craig-Martin his paintings not only invite the viewer to think about the objects – 'a true universal language in the modern world' – in an aesthetic sense. They are also a twist on the timeless conundrum of the relationship of an image of an object to the object itself, an idea that René Magritte posited in his painting of a pipe, with the words *CECI N'EST PAS UNE PIPE*. 'The real wonderment to me is that we are able to see one-dimensional images as the thing they represent,' Craig-Martin says. 'It's extraordinary if you think about how much of our lives depend on the ability to see something that isn't actually the thing itself.'

Craig-Martin is not much interested in art as a source of comfort, reassurance or spiritual uplift.

'Decorative' was a pejorative word for Marcel Duchamp, and one imagines it is for Craig-Martin too. Nor is he much interested in whether the objects he paints are beautiful in themselves. 'I draw everything exactly the same way, because I'm trying to avoid hierarchies; I'm trying to avoid value judgments about what's good and bad. I'm just saying, "This is what we do; we make these things." But I'm also aware that it is possible for me to make a very simple drawing of something that nobody necessarily thinks of as beautiful, but my drawing makes you think it is beautiful.'

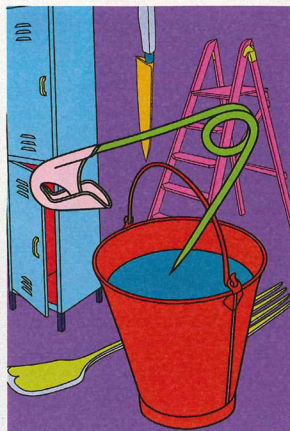
It is an irony that Craig-Martin's intention to make paintings 'devoid of style' and to efface any vestige of individual identity or self-expression – a phrase he dislikes – from his work should have produced work that is wholly unique and immediately identifiable. The flat, characterless representations of everyday objects could only be Craig-Martins. 'I know! I'm slightly amazed that I've ended up being the person that makes drawings of all these objects, and nobody else does that, only me, which is quite extraordinary, because they're everywhere. Everywhere I look, there's something else to draw.'

Michael Craig-Martin was a teacher at Goldsmiths for 27 years, and one imagines a very good one. His conversation ranges across ideas of art as 'a cultural format for a certain kind of understanding of things', and the need for the artist to 'find the core' of him- or herself. At Goldsmiths this manifested as Hirst's pickled shark and medicine cabinets, Lucas's fetishistic sculptures of vegetables as genitalia. But what if one of his students had come to him and said they wished for nothing more than to make cosy paintings of flowers in vases?

Craig-Martin winces. 'I'd have said go ahead. I would never tell a student not to do something. If it is true to them, that will be apparent. If it's not, that will also be apparent. If I asked eight students to bring their work in, if somebody had done something terrific, really special, everybody in the room knew it; whether they liked it, whether they liked the person or not, there was a sense of some completion in the thing. If somebody is trying to ape somebody they admire it will end up looking like they are aping them. And because they were being true to themselves, they will always be better at it than you are.'

He says he cannot take credit for the revolution that happened at Goldsmiths in the 1980s. 'There were 20-some artists teaching there every week, and all the students had access to all 20 people. And they were very lucky in their peers; unbelievably lucky to all be there at that time, to become friends, to become interested in each other. The level of discourse, of engagement and excitement in the school at that moment was just phenomenal. I tried for most of my early teaching career to have a moment like what happened with the YBAs; and once it had happened I tried to do it again. And I couldn't do it before, and I couldn't do it again.'

In those days he would teach for three days a week, and spend three days a week on his own work. When he stopped teaching, he continued working a six-day week in his studio. He is busier, and more successful, than ever. His images have appeared on everything from postage stamps to shopping bags. He exhibits all over the world, and



Left Craig-Martin draws on what he calls his 'visual vocabulary' to produce 'pictorial ready-mades' such as *Pricks* (2000)

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his work is on permanent display in places as diverse as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, in London, the Docklands Light Railway station at Woolwich, the chimney of Tate Modern (he co-designed the purple light at the top), and the Ivy restaurant – he designed the stained glass clock that stands on its tower, for which he was paid in kind. 'I've had a very luxurious life of eating way beyond my means.'

He lives alone. In 1963, while studying at Yale, he married the artist Jan Hashey. They had a daughter, Jessica, who now works as a photographer in New York. The marriage ended after 10 years when Craig-Martin came out as a gay man. 'It was a big trauma at the time,' he says. 'And it took a long time for everybody involved to recover from.' But in recent years, he has 'lost interest' in sex altogether. 'It's been very liberating. I have so much more time than I used to. Being gay is very time-consuming.' He laughs. 'It is extraordinary. When I was 18 and thinking about being an artist, the kind of life that I romantically envisaged for myself – the idea of living in a sophisticated place, having a wonderful studio, having people interested in my work, being able to travel – I have all those things more now than at any time in my life.'

The seeds of Craig-Martin's exhibition at Chatsworth were sown in 2005, when he participated in a group show at Lismore Castle in Co Waterford, Ireland, where William Burlington, the son of the Duke of Devonshire, has established a contemporary arts centre. That led to Craig-Martin being invited to make a portrait of the future duchess, Burlington's wife, Laura. Flying in the face of tradition Craig-Martin produced one of his computer-generated digital portraits in which the facial features – hair, eyes, brows and lips – continuously change colour. 'Laura wanted something of our time,' Craig-Martin says. 'I was quite taken aback. The family has a very distinguished history of portraiture – Reynolds,

Gainsborough, Singer Sargent, Lucian Freud... In those circumstances you can say that's daring.'

The portrait was originally hung in a gallery at Chatsworth full of 18th- and 19th-century paintings but had to be moved because visitors lingered in front of it, mesmerised by the changing colours and features. 'It was creating a bottleneck,' Craig-Martin says. It now occupies its own place under the main staircase. The Duke admits that he and the Duchess were 'quite surprised' when they first saw the portrait. 'We didn't know such things existed. But it is absolutely brilliant.'

As well as the portrait, the Duke has four of Craig-Martin's acrylic-on-aluminium paintings in his private collection. It is a measure of his admiration for Craig-Martin's work that in addition to planting his oversized sculptures in the garden, Craig-Martin has been given carte blanche to put his stamp on other elements of Chatsworth's formidable art works. He has curated a small exhibition of portraits selected from the house's extensive collection of old master drawings, and at the same time he has been set free on Chatsworth's peerless examples of neoclassical sculpture, encasing the plinths of every full-length figure, including a handful of Canovas, in simple magenta boxes. 'The plinths are all unbelievably beautiful and elaborately decorated,' Craig-Martin says. 'But they're also very distracting. What I'm trying to do is take away some of the visual distraction in the hope that the sculptures will reveal themselves more fully.'

The result, as you walk into the gallery, is a dazzling vista of shining white marble and vivid magenta – as striking a juxtaposition of classicism and modernity as the spectacle of an 11ft 6in yellow fork driven into the Grade I listed heritage soil. Craig-Martin laughs. 'What I really want is for people to recognise the potential for wonder in things that one sees all the time. Things don't need to be special to be wonderful.'

Michael Craig-Martin's sculptures are on view at Chatsworth until June 29