

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

THE GODFATHER OF BRITISH CONCEPTUAL ART COMES TO DALLAS

“I’m going to madness,” said Michael Craig-Martin, when reached at his studio in London in late January. “Every day I’m on the verge of being overwhelmed.” At 73, Craig-Martin, a former teacher who several so-called Young British Artists (YBAs) have credited as an influence, is having the busiest year of his life. In March, a series of his large Pop-inflected sculptures (a stiletto, a pitchfork, scissors, etc.) was erected in the gardens of Chatsworth House, the home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, in England. He had just returned from Shanghai, where 50 of his paintings were about to go on view at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum (February 2 to March 21), and was preparing for an extravaganza in Dallas in April, when he will be the honoree artist for MTV RE:DEFINE—an AIDS benefit presented yearly by MTV, the Dallas Contemporary, and the Goss-Michael Foundation. As part of the ceremonies, Craig-Martin will show his work at ten art venues across Dallas. “You can spend a lot of time wishing more was happening and then suddenly things start to build up and to accumulate,” he said.

Several renowned artists have contributed work to MTV RE:DEFINE. Among the participants this year are Dan Colen, Julian Schnabel, Richard Phillips, and Nate Lowman. But this is the first time that an artist has been singled out as an honoree, an idea concocted by Kenny Goss, cofounder of the Goss-Michael Foundation (the other founder is none other than singer George Michael). “I wanted to honor somebody who deserves it,” Goss said. His foundation is a significant collector of contemporary British art, including Craig-Martin’s. “Whenever I talk to people in the art world the first thing they say is ‘I love Michael Craig-Martin. He is one of the greatest men,’” he said. After Craig-Martin accepted the invitation, Goss set out to convince the directors of the ten Dallas art venues to each simultaneously show one large painting by the artist. It turned out to be an easy task. “Everybody just said yes, because it’s him,” said Goss.

While in Dallas, Craig-Martin intends to visit Richard Patterson, one of the YBAs living in the city. Craig-Martin, who is Irish but grew up in the United States and studied at Fordham and Yale before moving to England to join a college faculty, met Patterson and his future YBA cohorts (Fiona Rae, Sarah Lucas, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, et al) while teaching art at Goldsmiths College in the 1990s.

“Everybody was raising everybody else’s game,” Craig-Martin said of that time. “There was a chemistry that was very unusual. I knew it was special. I can honestly say that I did let the thought pass through my head that this could be the next generation of British artists, but it never occurred to me that they would achieve the kind of success that they did.” Craig-Martin has kept in touch with nearly all of them. “The amazing thing is that there was a point a couple of years ago where they were all the age that I was when I taught them,” he said, laughing.

While Craig-Martin is proud of his association with the YBAs and is happy to discuss his relationship with them, then and now (“I think I was quite an effective teacher,” he said without reservation), he hasn’t rested on the laurels of this period of his life. Rather, since he made his iconic conceptual work *An Oak Tree* (1973)—a glass of water installed on a shelf and accompanied by text that makes a case that the glass is, in fact, an oak tree—he has been forging ahead in his own work. He has built an impressive art career for himself, and is now represented by Gagosian, one of the top galleries in the world. Unlike many of his students, his success has been rather slow coming, though he isn’t complaining. “One of the things I realize now is that the hardest thing about being an artist is being able to sustain a career over a lifetime, and not everybody is able to do that.” If anything, this year is proof that he is.

NANA ASFOUR

OPPOSITE Michael Craig-Martin, *Untitled (headphones)*, 2014, acrylic on aluminum.

