

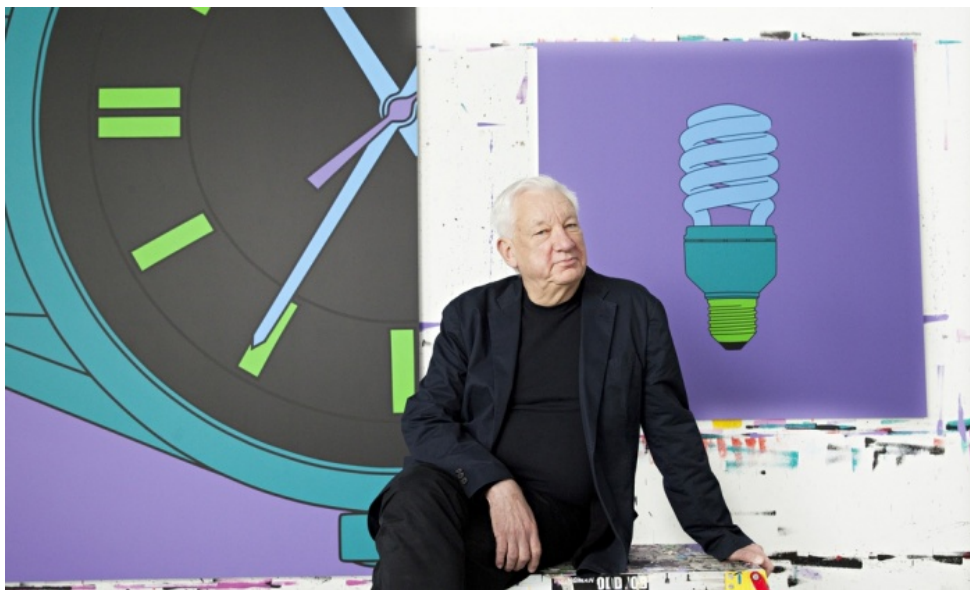
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

the guardian

Michael Craig-Martin: 'I have always thought everything important is right in front of you'

The painter and YBA guru on Damien Hirst and co, being savaged by Brian Sewell and his triumphant 'late period'

Tim Adams



'Inspiring': Michael Craig-Martin, photographed by Karen Robinson for the Observer New Review in his east London studio.

You first came to London in the 60s from America. Was it easy to become part of the British art world?

When I came in 1966 there were things happening – the Vietnam war – that I was very uncomfortable about in America. But when I got here the pop artists like Richard Hamilton, Patrick Caulfield, Peter Blake they idolised America, they were absolutely infatuated with an idea of it. That was very funny to me because all of what to them was a dream to me was quite ordinary.

Andy Warhol was already the dominant influence of those times...

Yes. The Factory was incredibly famous. In a way, I think the 1990s were very like the 1960s. Pop art in the early 60s spoke to a very large audience directly, it was accessible in the way that abstract expressionism had never been. That is exactly what happened with the Young British Artists [YBAs] here.

Did you see your students at Goldsmiths, in that sense, as kindred spirits?

The funny thing was, and Damien Hirst really typified it, they behaved like artists were meant to. The romantic idea, getting drunk, taking drugs, having sex with each other, they lived very much in the moment.

You say in your new book, *On Being an Artist*, that it is as important now for an artist to be an entrepreneur as a bohemian. Why?

I think it's much more like the kind of one-hit wonder culture that has always gone on in the music business. It's very hard to build a career. The previous generations always had something to fall back on for survival. My generation had teaching. The following generation had the dole. Then, by the end of the 80s, after Thatcher, there was no dole, or teaching, and the only hope now for young artists surviving is to try to make money from what they do.

Your first hit, or breakthrough, was *An Oak Tree* (1973), [a glass of water on a high shelf with accompanying notes explaining how the artist had, through art, transformed the object into an oak tree]. It took some nerve, presumably?

Well, as soon as I had the idea, as soon as I had written the text, I knew that I had hit on something special. It was a distillation of everything I had been thinking about for years. It was one of those rare occasions when it said everything I wanted to say.

One of the things it suggested was art as an act of faith, on the part of both artist and viewer. Do you think conceptual art occupies the same space as religion in some ways?

I don't think art is a replacement for religion but I also don't think people can live without faith. I don't mean by that some kind of ordered system of spirituality. I mean the way we are all looking for ways to make sense of things.

You said of your own work: 'I wanted the viewer to see the picture and not me.' Why was that?

In a way that was characteristic of my generation of artists, the hope was that the attention would be on the work. Over the years, though, partly through teaching, I have realised that the thing that is truly you, is the thing you cannot help but do. I am quite sure when people look at my work they can see me pretty clearly. So in the end art is always fully expressive of the individual.

There is a one-page chapter in your book in which you describe the breakdown of your 10-year marriage and your coming out as gay in 1976. Presumably that was a much longer chapter in your internal life?

It certainly was. It was a long, traumatic period.

Did the new honesty give you a different idea of yourself as an artist?

No, that is too romantic and too easy an idea. I needed to re-establish a sense of myself in a different way. That took a big chunk of my 30s. And at the end of that, my wife and I broke up, when I was 40.

Your art has always seemed likably purposeful – do you suffer doubt?

I like to see things set out clearly. When I am listening to music I'd much rather hear a string quartet than a full orchestra. I like that possibility of singling out individual instruments, to hear how the thing is put together. I'm less interested in magic tricks and more in showing how the trick is done.

I loved your idea that the main point of teaching was giving students permission to do the thing they love...

Yes students are often very resistant to doing that. The education system has taught them to think that if it is not hard and making you miserable there is no value in it. I always tried to suggest the opposite.

You have come in for some quite vicious criticism for your art, and your perceived influence. Brian Sewell once said, 'As an artist, Craig-Martin deserves only derision.' Are you having the last laugh?

It was kind of manic, that criticism, based on fear and ignorance. When a very well educated person comes across art that escapes them, they are so thrown by it that they have to dismiss it as fraudulent or fake. People in general might find they have less at stake, and are not so disturbed.

In your focus on familiar objects, what do you hope to convey?

I have always thought that access to everything important is right in front of your nose. We often look for the special in special objects or special events but actually, if we understood the quality of ordinary things, we are closer to the substance of life. I am speaking to you on my iPhone, a mass-produced object – everyone has one, but this one is mine. We imbue a sense of profound personal engagement to objects we see as ours.

They also, in their built-in obsolescence, remind us of our mortality...

They do. I think there is something valuable in looking at what we choose to make, and also what is discarded.

You have large shows currently in Dallas and China. Are we seeing late-period Craig-Martin?

I feel that right now I am doing work that has a certain simplicity and clarity that I could never have done without the previous 50 years. I'll be 75 next year. Hopefully it's a little bit like Frank Sinatra's last tour: I do see what I am doing now as late work. But that doesn't preclude much later work.

On Being an Artist is published by Art/Books at £22.50. [Click here to buy it for £18](#)