

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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# Review

## Abstracting our past in a graveyard of technology

**Art**  
Michael Craig-Martin  
*Serpentine Gallery, London*  
★★★★★

### Adrian Searle

Takeaway cups with plastic lids, iPhones and headphones and memory sticks; a lightbulb and an Adidas shoe and a serving of fries: they all cascade around the walls in a nonchalant dance of ordinary things.

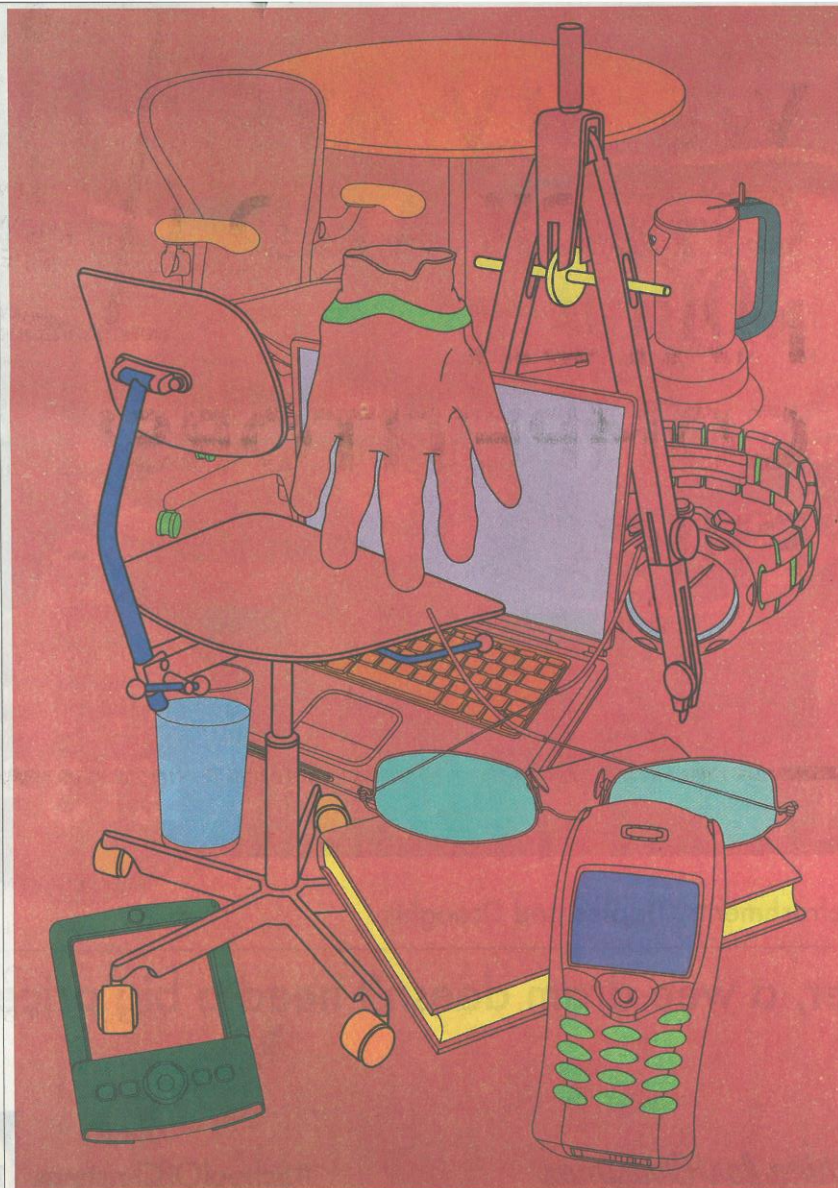
This repeated lexicon of objects - black outlines over a white ground - provides the wallpaper backdrop for the first gallery of Michael Craig-Martin's *Transience* at the Serpentine Gallery. The same objects reappear later in painting after painting, where they take on vivid colour.

Here's those fries again, painted a virulent green like some dumb potted plant, in a cheery little McDonald's pouch that's been rendered in shrieking magenta, the image floating on a dull turquoise square and hung on a queasy pink wall. However plain these objects, colour re-complicates them, turning them into abstractions, without you ever being able to entirely forget the things they represent. An iPhone is like a take on Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square*, while a rear view of a credit card waiting to be signed, with its horizontal black strip and the elongated white rectangle below, has the feel of certain Ad Reinhardt paintings or a Rothko.

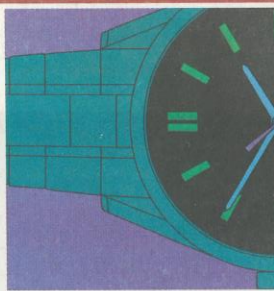
If you look at these painted renditions long enough - a lightbulb or an AA battery, a pair of three-pin electric sockets or an open laptop - they begin to drift from what they signify and take on an almost baleful strangeness. Craig-Martin bathes them in unearthly light. You can almost hear the dissonant colours throb, and smell its electricity like the tang of ozone in the air.

The colour in Craig-Martin's paintings, and the walls on which many of them hang, invites a kind of synaesthesia - a bodily, almost emotional tone that heightens the pitch and tenor of these mute, commonplace objects. A painting of a hotel door handle, with its room-card slot and little red light, glowers back at me just as the real thing does when the lock refuses my card for the third time and leaves me in the corridor. Another image, of a hotel room-safe, looks back with the same indifference as the one I've forgotten the code for, no matter how many times I punch the numbers in.

Craig-Martin heightens the



**A malevolent strangeness:** above, *Biding Time* (magenta) from 2004 by Michael Craig-Martin, left, *Untitled* (watch fragment) and *Untitled* (headphones medium) Photograph: Mike Bruce/Gagosian



normality of things, their indifferent affectlessness slipping into a kind of perceivable malevolence. I am sure this is unintended, and it would be foolish to regard his work as a denunciation of consumerism. He's just observing the things around us, the appurtenances of the modern world. For all his knowing sophistication, he is a realist in a mannerist world.

The works also chart how the world has changed over the past 30 years, since he made the earliest wall-drawing on show here. In *Stack*, 1981, drawn with black tape directly on to a white wall, five objects float above one another in isometric projection - a clipboard, a leather briefcase, a cassette tape, a hardback book, a portable television. Who uses a clipboard now, or cassettes, or has a TV like that nowadays? For a while, it seemed even the book might be on the way out, and the briefcase has now assumed a retro stylishness.

What once felt new has become quaint. A painting of a hand torch from 2002 describes an object redolent of its moment. I have no clue what the once up-to-the-minute Palm "Tungsten" T-Handheld, from the following year, even did. It's now in a technological graveyard, along with the fax machine and the clunky portable TV.

When Craig-Martin first started these works, there was no internet and

“The works chart how the world has changed ... What once felt new has become quaint”

no one had a home computer. Now he uses one to draw his images. With time, everything, including the familiar, has changed - the things in our pockets, in our homes, in offices and studios and hotels. Things that look new now will soon be superseded, though a lot of the old stuff hangs around - that old torch, the hammer in the drawer, stepladders and safety pins.

His work has remained remarkably consistent. The way he describes things, in a kind of flat descriptive tone, as if he were naming things, reducing them to the status of simple nouns without accent or adjectives, stays the same. Graphic, frontal and direct, the objects he describes declare themselves with blunt clarity. You look at them and they stare back.

Craig-Martin's work is more complicated than it looks, more complicated even than perhaps he knows. Something always escapes intention. The affective relationship we have with them is unconscious and volatile. The things around us conspire in our alienation. Some artists are described as looking at the world "unflinchingly". Anyone who looks at the world about them without flinching has got to be crazy. There are also those who are said to "get beneath the surface of things". Better to focus on the surface. The deep will erupt anyway.