

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Michael Craig-Martin, *Serpentine*, review: a modern master is welcomed back from the wilderness

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Michael Craig-Martin is one of the most prominent artists of his generation: of this, there is no doubt. You'd recognise his stuff immediately - large, graphic paintings of everyday objects such as laptops and light bulbs, floating surreally against vivid slabs of blank colour.

The objects are evoked using minimal means: just a few precise outlines, creating an elegant effect, like an architect's drawing. At the same time, Craig-Martin saturates his images with surprising combinations of neon colours. The clash between the restraint of the drawing and the fierce, riotous hues animates each composition.

There are usually one or two of his paintings in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition – and, really, they couldn't have been created by anybody else. That's always a sure sign of strength in an artist, the ability to forge a unique visual style.

Moreover, Craig-Martin, who was born in Dublin in 1941, and studied at Yale before moving to Britain in 1966, is well known as the mentor of the generation of YBAs (Young British Artists), whom he taught at Goldsmiths during the Eighties.

Yet here's the surprising thing: his new exhibition at the Serpentine is his first in a public institution in London since a retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1989.

In the intervening years – more than a quarter of a century – he has mounted 23 shows at public galleries around the world. Only two were in the UK: in Manchester and Milton Keynes. "I felt

very, very excluded,” he told me on Friday, while putting the finishing touches to the Serpentine exhibition, looking distressed at the memory of these wilderness years in his adopted country. The title of the new show is *Transience*: perhaps “Patience” would have been more apt.

Inside, we find a remarkably consistent, memorable, and well-marshalled retrospective, with work stretching back to 1981. One painting, featuring a pair of boxy portable television sets, has not been seen in public since that ’89 show at the Whitechapel.

Those old-fashioned tellies point to the overarching theme of the show, also suggested by the exhibition’s title: the rapid obsolescence of contemporary technology, as the world has shifted from analogue to digital – and so, by implication, the fragility of society in the West.

Craig-Martin, it becomes clear, has spent half a lifetime operating within a tradition begun by “vanitas” still-life painters in the 17th century: eviscerating worldly pleasure by laying bare its ephemeral nature.

His breakthrough occurred in the late Seventies. Previously he had been a disciple of Conceptual art. But in 1978 he began to make wall drawings, using thin black tape, of everyday objects piled incongruously on top of one another. “I was reconfiguring the familiar,” he explains.

We see two early examples at the Serpentine, both from 1981. In *Stack*, another portable television floats above a book, an audiocassette, a leather briefcase, and a clipboard.

Aside from the book, these objects now look like antiques. What once was fashionable has become forgettable: thus passes the glory of the world.

It is the same with other mass-produced gizmos depicted by Craig-Martin over the years. Who uses a Palm Pilot anymore? Yet here we find one, its screen painted a luminous scarlet, as though signifying its impotent rage – or embarrassment – about its own disappearance.

One of the most recent paintings is a vast acrylic-on-aluminium representation of a wristwatch. With its sombre black face, this oppressive timepiece is a “memento mori” for the 21st century.

Craig-Martin claims that he is not attacking the modern world: “I am just a witness to it,” he says, “not a judge.” Yet his pictures, with their apparently random colours, tell a different story.

For instance, a cardboard carton, reminiscent of packaging used by McDonald’s, contains chips painted a particularly bilious green. It is a radioactive snack. We get the message: fast food is destructive.

Indeed, most of the colours in the show have an intense, almost nauseating quality, as though Craig-Martin is sickened by the fever of capitalism.

Even the apparently pleasing pink-and-red colour scheme in a picture of the back of a credit card has a kick. Resembling, in Craig-Martin’s words, “a funny-looking Rothko”, it offers a satire on the fact that masterpieces of modern art are trophies for oligarchs.

The piece de resistance, though, is *Eye of the Storm* (2003), presented against turquoise walls in the central gallery. Elsewhere, Craig-Martin presents impersonal objects hovering frontally in

splendid isolation, as though imbued with quasi-spiritual significance, like holy icons. An iPhone with an empty screen appears to glow, radiating saintly peace. Or is that the blue half-light of oblivion?

Yet *Eye of the Storm* is a complex vortex swirling with a cornucopia of objects. Each one is presented on a different scale, overlapping its neighbours in an impossible fashion. No still life like this could exist in reality: like all of the artist's work these days, the painting was designed on a computer.

Yet Craig-Martin controls the chaotic clutter, as well as the lurid colours, with ingenuity and rigour. Against the odds, the composition coheres. The effect is as though all the other objects in the exhibition have been sucked into a single, infernal space, boiling with hot oranges and reds.