

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# THE SPECTATOR

**Cool, beguiling, Duchampian set of still lives from Michael Craig-Martin at the Serpentine Gallery**

*But the equally cutting-edge show at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery from New Zealander Simon Denny seems hamstrung by its medium*

Martin Gayford



*'Cassette', 2002, by Michael Craig-Martin*

Michael Craig-Martin has had a paradoxical career. He is, I think, a disciple of Marcel Duchamp. But the latter famously gave up painting in favour of something more conceptual — ready-mades and whatnot — whereas Craig-Martin began with Duchampian concepts. He once exhibited a glass of water on a shelf together with a claim that he had mentally transformed these, by a kind of transubstantiation, into an oak tree. Then he metamorphosed himself into a still-life painter.

As his current exhibition at the Serpentine demonstrates, for nearly 40 years Craig-Martin's staple subject-matter has been everyday tools, gadgets and accessories. An early example, 'Vertigo' (1981), consists of elegantly pared-down line drawings of a tin-opener, cassette tape, briefcase, book, plastic sandal and refrigerator ice-cube tray spread out in a fan-shaped flourish on the wall.

These oddments differ from many more traditional painterly themes in an interesting way: they are liable to become obsolete. Making predictions is tricky, especially — as Sam Goldwyn noted — about the future, but it is hard to envision an era in which the apples, glasses of wine or bunches of flowers favoured by still-life masters such as Chardin will have been superseded.

On the other hand, some of the objects in Craig-Martin's work are already almost museum pieces. Sandals, tin-openers and —for the time being, at least — books are still around. But cassette tapes? Ubiquitous in the 1980s, they are rapidly going the way of the penny-farthing bicycle and the speaking tube. That's why the Serpentine exhibition is entitled *Transience*.

Admittedly this has always occurred. Indeed, it happened to Duchamp, who, before he gave up his brushes, made wonderful depictions of chocolate grinders, perhaps a familiar sight in 1913 but almost unidentifiable a century later. But Craig-Martin's exhibition underlines how the process is speeding up. A work from 2003, 'Palm "Tungsten" T-Handheld', represents an object — the personal digital assistant (or PDA) — that existed for a brief interval before smartphones came along. Twelve years later it has become an antique.

Craig-Martin's art also reveals how the things we use are getting more and more alike, visually at least. Old-fashioned tools such as a hammer, safety pin or gardening fork look dissimilar, and their shapes give clues to what they are. Newer essentials of daily existence look much more cloned. The card-reader, smartphone, credit card, laptop screen and Memory Stick — each of which is represented in a recent Craig-Martin — are all oblong thingamajigs with rounded edges.

Nowadays our gizmos have an abstract appearance: Craig-Martin's credit card looks like a Rothko with less fuzz. While his study of a corner of a laptop, essentially a right angle positioned off-centre on a square is, as he has pointed out, more of a Mondrian. The difference is that the austere Dutch master — who believed red, blue and yellow to be the only proper colours — would have been outraged by Craig-Martin's palette.

Actually, once you get used to it, his colour sense — suggesting a man gone mad with a Dulux colour chart — is distinctive and beguiling. What his pinks, purples and oranges have in common is that they are luridly artificial. This makes them seem modern, just as his cool, diagrammatic line — much, come to think of it, like Duchamp's — suits objects that are mass-produced by the million. If his pictures tend to look all a bit the same — which they do — that's part of his point.

The exhibition a few minutes' stroll away at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, *Products for Organising* by the New Zealand artist Simon Denny, also takes its themes from what's happening right now. His subjects here are firstly the management systems used by organisations such as GCHQ and Apple, and in the second part the modus operandi of computer hackers. So far, so cutting-edge. The problem, as far as I was concerned, was his medium: installation.

Denny stacks a lot of stuff — LED displays, flow charts, architectural models, monitors — on warehouse-type shelving, then leaves the viewer to work out the connections (or read about them from a text). While Craig-Martin has found a way to make still-life seem very up to date, in this show installation art appears curiously old-hat. Unlike painting, it does not seem able to deal with the digital world.