

ART

Michael Craig-Martin

by Kristína Jarošová Jul 25, 2013

Michael Craig-Martin discusses 'Young British Artists', the secret souls of art students and why the 1990s felt a lot like the 1960s.



Michael Craig-Martin, *Knowing*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. 96×144 inches. © Michael Craig-Martin.

A prominent Irish-born artist, Michael Craig-Martin is recognized as one of the most influential art teachers in Britain. Being enthralled himself by the legendary teachings of Josef Albers at Yale University, he was crucial in the creation of the YBA's (Young British Artists), with Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Liam Gillick, Sarah Lucas and Julian Opie among his most famous students. Finding freedom in questioning the necessity of meaning, Craig-Martin attempts to strip his art of unnecessary clichés. He has been able to repeatedly reinvent his visual language across a variety of media, including his minimalist boxes and installations, large wall-drawings, computer animations, strikingly colored paintings and sculptures of everyday objects.

KRISTÍNA JAROŠOVÁ After working primarily with the minimalist boxes in the 1960s, and black and white drawings and installations in the 1970s, your visual language has focused more recently on re-sized and vibrantly colored graphic outlines of everyday objects. What is your fascination with these objects and how important is their ubiquity, design, and artistic quality?

MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN I just had a sense and some instinct from very early in my career that everything that seems special in life was available through what was ordinary—the truth is not distant or obscure. It is right in front of your face; the trouble is it's hard to see.

KJ Is it the simplicity of these objects that acts as a vehicle for the projection of the viewer's internal realm?

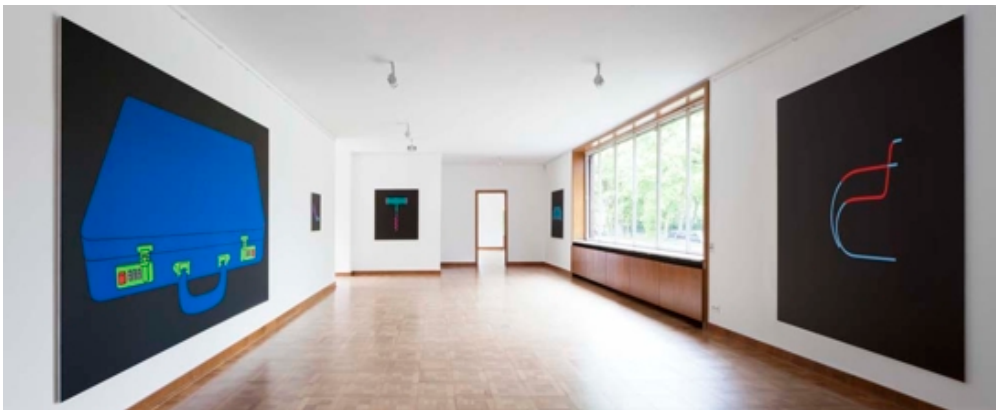
MCM Of course. You know, my iPhone is mine and I love it, I use it all the time, but it's exactly the same as your iPhone and a million other people's iPhone. So the object itself is both amazingly impersonal and completely personal. And all of the objects that I draw fall into that category. They are all manufactured, ubiquitous, they are everywhere, they are ordinary and yet there is the possibility that they

are deeply personal. So they seem to be the most accurate access point to people.

KJ Your work, with all its metamorphoses, is often classified within the realm of Conceptual Art. Where would you situate your art, and do you even feel there is a need for categorization, especially nowadays when the sense of movements is lost?

MCM Well, I have never been interested in categorizing art. It is a name applied to groups of artists by other people, because it's easier to manage. And really to me, the last coherent movement is Minimalism. So I never think of myself as belonging to any particular group. I can understand that I am sometimes referred to as Conceptualist, sometimes I'm called a painter, sometimes I'm called a Pop artist, which does irritate me a bit, but in general I've never sought categories. It's ironic, because I never wanted to have a style, I deliberately tried to make my drawings style-less, which is why I drew them in the kind of mechanical way as I did, and it has ended up being my style. That's an interesting irony.

KJ Do you think people could understand you better through your art than through a personal encounter?



Michael Craig-Martin: *Less is Still More*. Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Museum Haus Esters. 28 April – 1 September, 2013. Artwork © Michael Craig-Martin. Photos © Kunstmuseen Krefeld.

MCM Yes, that's a good question, because that is *exactly* what I think. We're all guilty of trying to slightly manipulate our personality with regard to other people to make them like us. When people really want to know the artist they ask: What did you really mean, what were you trying to express? The fact is, that's not important. What is important is what you reveal that you can't avoid, that you didn't mean, that comes out anyway. It's like with body language—we can't control it so it's often much more accurate. That's where the true expression lies. Art is amazingly honest and revealing in that way.

KJ The images of objects in your artworks are noticeably functional. What role does the functionality of these objects play and what resonance does it have with the function of art, if there is such a thing?

MCM I try to strip away everything. I try to get down to the something that is so unbelievably fundamental, it underlies the object, it underlies faith, it underlies the function, it underlies everything, and so that's why I don't do Pop Art, I don't do Surrealism, I don't make narrative work. . . I'm not interested in it. What happens when you strip everything away? Do you end up with nothing? The answer is no, and what you get is what I try to do.

KJ Sometimes the more we try to explain something, the more we miss it.

MCM My feeling is the more I can strip out of from the thing, the more room I leave for exactly the speculative play, which I think art works are good at producing.

KJ In stripping away the layers, a gap for faith can emerge, an idea enigmatically touched upon in your seminal work, *An Oak Tree* (1973). It consists of an ordinary

glass of water placed on an unreachable glass shelf and a self-conducted interview, exploring the claim of changing the glass of water into an oak tree without the change of its appearance. Although this concept resembles transubstantiation in Catholicism, you have been cautious about the proximity of art and religion. What are your main concerns when people see art in semi-religious or doctrinaire ways?

MCM I can see that people are looking for something that gives a sense of a larger meaning. The fact is that the nature of visual art is so resistant to being pinned down, to being manipulated in the same way that other things can, that it allows a degree of imaginative, speculative functioning for the individual. You were at the talk [at The Courtauld Institute] where we discussed the *Oak Tree* in terms of faith and because of that, half of the audience turned out to be Christians, because they misunderstood the idea of faith as being the idea of belief. I am not interested in the idea of religion at all, but there were more people interested in seeing art in religious terms than seeing art in art terms. It was me trying to express something artistically. And as I said I am an atheist, I don't have this belief. I am making poetry. And I think one of the great tragedies of the modern world is the failure to understand poetry. All of the great religious books, the Bible and the Koran, are works of poetry; they are works of metaphor, not reportage or instruction.



Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree*, 1973. Assorted objects and printed text under glass, glass on shelf. 5 7/8x18 x 5 1/2 inches. text panel: 12x12 inches. © Michael Craig-Martin. Collection: National Gallery of Australia.

KJ Having experienced first-hand the 1960s New York art scene with the rising popularity of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, and later the critical moment of Contemporary Art in Britain, does it feel nowadays like tranquility after the storm? Where the 'promise' of the avant-garde has faded into nostalgia, and a wishful mourning for the times when art would 'blow you off your feet'?

MCM It was a very exciting and creative time. When you're 20 years old, you only know what you've experienced yourself and that's very limited. So you don't know, has it always been like this or is this a special moment? I realized afterwards that the level of creative explosion that happened in the 1960s was very special and that life does not sustain like that, life goes in cycles. For me the period of the early 1990s was the closest thing to my experience of the 1960s. There was the same sense of renewal, and excitement about new things, where lots of things were happening simultaneously. I didn't find the 2000s terribly interesting, although there is always good art, but as a big period of creative change, no. But I assume that everything is cyclical and so you need to lose things in order to find things. If everything stayed the same, it would be very boring. And sometimes your character is made by terrible times. But nothing is ever lost.

KJ Moving on to your education at Yale University in the 1960s, how did you draw upon the influence of Josef Albers, whose key objectives expanded from the former teachings of Bauhaus?

MCM Josef Albers had invented a set of four or five courses that were very clever, interesting and intelligently designed. They had an enormous influence on the whole history of American art, because so many people who studied at Yale went out into the world and taught those principles. Albers was absolutely adamant that art was visual and that there was such a thing as visual intelligence and that visually we were lazy, inexperienced and that you needed to develop visual skills. This was not a very popular view then and it's not a very popular view now, but it has always struck me as extremely important and I see it really at the heart of what I do. I am more interested in how things look than I am in what they mean and I use one to find the other. And very often this is dismissed as a kind of empty formalism, but I think it is a misunderstanding to think of it in those terms. And everything that Albers did, what was so clever about it, is that he tried to deal with such basic things in visual experience that it allowed everything.

KJ Beside the proclaimed emphasis on experimentation, visual, non-traditional materials, juxtaposing colors, the knowledge of forms, it seems to me that the structure, and the overriding philosophy behind the courses were the crucial element of the teaching. . .

MCM That is true. I think one of the things that is really misunderstood in education is that people think when they go into education they're learning the subject and of course to an extent they are, but the more important thing is that they're learning a structure of thinking. The way in which you are taught teaches you more for the long run. You may forget the subject, but you may never forget the structure of how you are taught.



Michael Craig Martin, *Signs of Life*, June 10 – August 13, 2006. Kunsthaus Bregenz. © Michael Craig-Martin. Photo Markus Tretter.

KJ And possibly it is also the passion that the teacher radiates and transmits to the students. Once we are passionate about something, we can do it well, because we end up dedicating much more time, thought and energy to it, right?

MCM Yes, a passion for teaching is absolutely critical. And when you learn from a teacher who is passionate, you learn to be passionate, that's what you're actually learning. You're not learning the subject, you're learning passion.

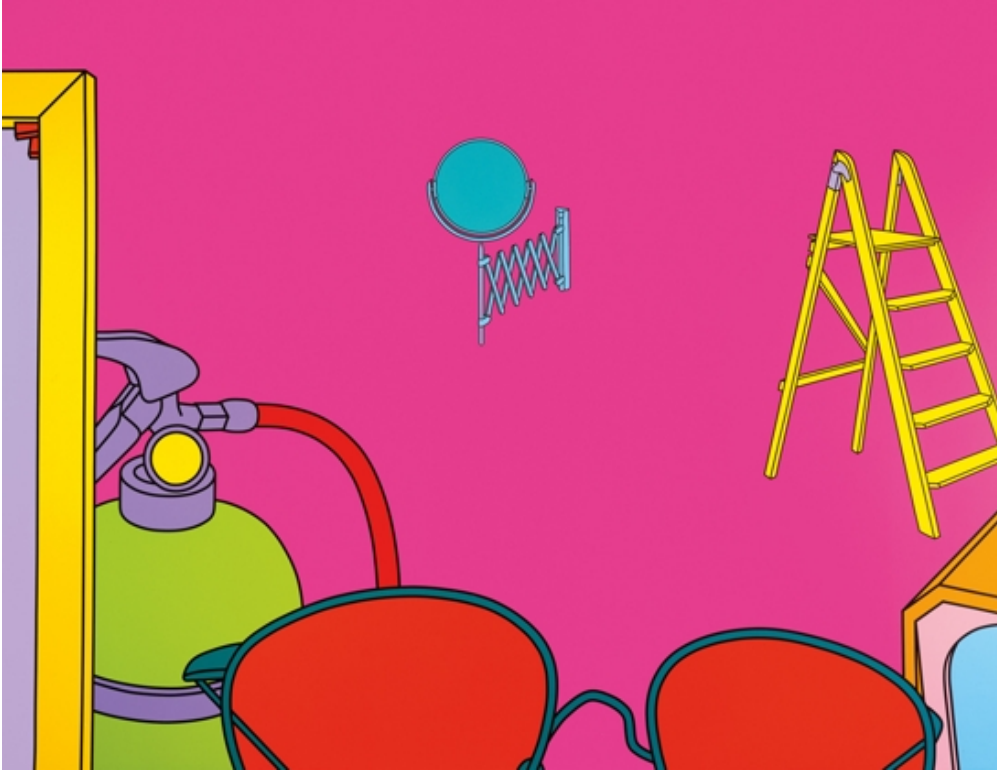
Many young people go through life and hardly ever come across a passionate teacher. And if you never come across a passionate teacher, you have no idea what it is to be passionate about something. And you see that's why all these government things about teaching people and doing things to get them jobs, it's all empty rubbish and these things will never help them. By the time they get out of schools, the jobs that they were trained to do won't exist because the world has moved on.

KJ You have been instrumental in a significant shift that has occurred in British art in the last 30 years, especially associated with your influence on the YBA's at Goldsmiths University in London. What were your principles and values while teaching there?

MCM The thing that I always thought was so brilliant about Goldsmiths, was that

it was basically teaching a structure of thinking for yourself, of being confident, of trusting your instinct, of knowing how to evaluate things and knowing how to change. Many people who have been to art school when they leave it are at a loss because the school provided a kind of structure of meaning and when that's taken away they are left adrift. Whereas with Goldsmiths students that wasn't the case. When they leave, they take with them the flexibility of mind and the imagination to be able to change with the changing demands of the world and of themselves.

KJ And it is often the talent of the teacher that spots the particular, and often undervalued thing. It reminds me of something you've mentioned in a previous interview about that little, hidden notebook, that a person doesn't even bother to present, that can be the important key. Could you expand on that?



Michael Craig-Martin, *Las Meninas III*, 2001. Acrylic on canvas. 108×141 inches. © Michael Craig-Martin.

MCM Students often undervalue what they do best and what they really care about because they think it's too easy or not what's expected of them. They sometimes have a notebook they never show anyone. That can reveal the secret soul of a person, which they think is too embarrassing, too banal, too minor but in fact is the key to their real creativity. I once had a student, in the late 1960s, and she did boring and empty paintings and you could tell that they were lacking an engagement on her part. But everyday she came to art school she wore so much make-up, it was unbelievable! She looked absolutely sensational! And I said, You know, why don't you paint like you do your face? And of course, what she was doing, all the expression that was lacking, and all the passion that was not in the painting went into her make-up. As soon as she started to recognize what the painting had needed, not the look of her make-up, but the passion that she gave to her make-up, her work changed.

KJ Many of your students at Goldsmiths, such as Damien Hirst, have had incredible commercial success. What do you think was crucial in their breakthrough?

MCM No one would ever have imagined in those days what has happened would ever happen. But actually, one of the things for which the YBA's were very important was, when they did the first exhibition Freeze, it made an immediate impact, much more than any other student exhibition I've ever seen, and the work was extremely interesting, it would never have happened if the work hadn't been

good and new and fresh and people often forget that. None of them ever expected to have any commercial success at all. They were students and all they wanted to do was to survive for the next six months. But the exhibition itself focused a new kind of audience, and that interest kept growing as they grew and then the whole thing seemed to take off. And that transformed the situation.

KJ So they were doing the right thing at the right time at the right place.

MCM Yes, the art world—of which the YBA's are only a small part—became dramatically more commercialized during the 1990s everywhere in the world.

KJ How do you perceive the seduction of the art market in influencing the creative process and the evaluation of an artist?

MCM I find it very distressing. But the art market is a market determined by market values and by thing's salability. There are things that people want to own and there are things that people admire and they don't want to own. There is no way in which the market is the sole way of valuing works of art. Bizarrely from the point of view of someone from my generation there are now people who go into art with the idea that they are going to make money. Well that's a laugh to me. To me, it's hard to be an artist, it is very expensive and it is very hard if you're not making any money at it. It costs a staggering amount of money to make anything.

KJ You are represented by one of the world's most commercial galleries. So how do you find a balance between sustaining a certain level of expected production and remaining autonomous and honest to your art?



Michael Craig-Martin: *Less is Still More*. Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Museum Haus Esters. 28 April – 1 September, 2013. Artwork © Michael Craig-Martin. Photos © Kunstmuseen Krefeld.

MCM Yes, and I am delighted that's the case. But if money had been my motivating force from the beginning of my life, I'd have done much better financially across the whole of my life. And to find that balance is a part of the artist's job, to find it individually.

KJ So what has been your motivation?

MCM Well, just to do the works that I wanted to do. That's what I have always done. I just do what I do.

KJ Jean-François Lyotard identified a certain sublimity in the art market, where the secret of commercial success "resides in the balance in what is surprising and what is well-known." What role does narrowing down artist's expression, themes and vocabulary play for you?

MCM This is not different to what Rembrandt did. Obviously “recognizability” over the body of work is commercially useful but it is also useful in terms of meaning. How are you supposed to express yourself as an artist if every single time you make a work of art you have to reinvent your whole way of understanding it? If you want to understand an artist’s work you can never do that by looking at a single work, you have to understand what they’re doing. So although it has a commercial impact, it’s also a logic of how one works. You see, the thing that people identify most clearly as representing an artist’s work, their style or whatever, is actually the thing that the artist hardly ever thinks about. Some people work out a visual language that is extraordinarily narrow. Like Albers is recognized by his repeated use of the square, but his paintings are not about squares. They’re about color. He only needed the square to enable the color. Within extreme limitation, that’s where freedom comes.

KJ Once you allow yourself too many possibilities, it is like a trap distracting you from what is important. In order to find freedom in the creation of art, does an artist have to renounce their personal life?

MCM I think I have made loads of personal sacrifice in order to do what I did.

KJ And would you do it again?

MCM I don’t know, I am not sure. I don’t find the art world today as interesting to me as what the art world was when I began. But I am not at the beginning. So if I were 19 years old today, would I go to art school? I don’t know. I don’t automatically think yes, because I think it’s a different world. I mean if you have something in life that you really want to do, you just have to do what it takes to do it. And life is about giving up certain things in order to do other things that you want more. I never gave up anything without wanting something else more. But if you’re going to be an artist, you’ve got to be totally, stupidly focused. It overrides all personal relationships, it’s got to be the main thing in your life and if you don’t do that, I don’t think it can work.

KJ But then is it a sacrifice if you can’t help to do it, and nothing else will satisfy you?

MCM That is absolutely true. I think people don’t have as much choice in life as they like to believe, I don’t mean predestined, but you are who you are.

KJ And sometimes you are an artist. . .

MCM Unless you *have* to be an artist, you can’t be an artist. You can’t decide just like you can decide a career. You have to absolutely *have* to do it.

Craig-Martin’s solo show, *Less Is Still More*, is up at the [Kunstmuseen Krefeld](#) until September 1, 2013.

For more on Michael Craig-Martin, please visit his [website](#).

Kristína Jarošová is a gallerist, curator, art critic, and independent art journalist.

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