Everyday Objects
Michael Craig-Martin
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Michael Craig-Martin was born in Dublin in 1941 and moved to New York in the late 1940s. His upbringing in the affluence and optimism of suburban America shaped his earliest experiences of objects and culture. He fondly recalls collecting 45s, watching afternoon TV shows and listening to jazz.

In 1961, Craig-Martin enrolled in the art school at Yale University. Prior to his arrival, Josef Albers had taught his radical and influential courses on ‘Colour,’ ‘Basic Drawing,’ ‘Basic Design,’ and ‘Basic Sculpture.’ These courses continued after Albers retired and Craig-Martin took them all. He writes, ‘they proposed a unified way of looking at and thinking about the world; a way of understanding and valuing visual experience; a way of developing practical skill and confidence in the integrated use of the eye and the hand; a way of seeing and making.’

Craig-Martin moved to England in 1966 to take up a two-year teaching position at Bath Academy of Art at Corsham before settling in London.

He exhibited the now iconic work An Oak Tree (1973) at the Rowan Gallery in 1974. From the mid-1970s, Craig-Martin began to work with representations of objects. Over the years, he has built a compendium of images depicting familiar objects in his signature linear style, including light bulbs, shoes and laptops. These images have been presented in large-scale wall drawings, colour-saturated paintings, linear sculptures, digital formats and limited-edition prints.

Craig-Martin was elected a Royal Academician in 2006. In 2024, he had a retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Prints, Multiples & Objects

Craig-Martin's artistic concerns are well-suited to printmaking as it is a process that can convey directness, depth of colour and clarity of line. Closely related to mass media and pop culture, printmaking can suggest the quotidian, the up-to-date and the ubiquitous. These ideas align with Craig-Martin's investigation into how we perceive and experience our modern world through the language of images.

Alongside Craig-Martin's prints and multiples are objects selected from Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery's collections, including typewriters, telephones, a record player, watches and sunglasses. While such objects are still part of our lives, the evolution in their design reflects not only changing aesthetics but also significant technological advancements and evolving social expectations.

The world is now filled with things that are transitory
I have found myself to have become a chronicler of our ever-changing times.

[Michael Craig-Martin]

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One of the most important creative realisations I have made in my life is that everything in the world is potentially available to use in art; that you can make art out of anything; that it does not matter what the thing is, it is rather a question of how transformation occurs.

On the transience of objects

When I started drawing these ordinary, everyday objects in the late 1970s, I thought they were pretty stable in the world; I assumed that they would not change over time. When I first drew a light bulb, I had no idea that it would become a thing of design history. I realise now that the things I was drawing were objects that had been designed or invented in the period dominated by the principle of form follows function. Their size, material and shape were directly related to their use. Today this is much less true.

On drawing

The objects I chose to draw were all commonplace, easily recognisable, man-made and repeatable. They were generally mass-produced, commercially modest, ordinary and ubiquitous items. The pictures were to act like generic names: book, hammer, chair, fork, ladder, light bulb, bucket. I drew the objects that were around me - most of them were mine - but I chose them not for their personal importance but for their shared value. They seemed to me to constitute a true universal language in the modern world, objects so familiar that they had become invisible and without special significance.

On Albers and colour

Albers believed that our perception of colour was determined in each separate experience by two factors: quantity and environment. He pointed out that to see a great deal of a colour is entirely different from seeing the same colour in a small amount, that the colour as we perceive it changes depending on the quantity. He also showed that colours are dramatically altered by their neighbouring colours - that they interact - so that the same colour can occur more than once in a painting but, with different neighbours, appear quite different.

On colour

Ever since I was a student, I have loved colour and have been fascinated by its use, but for many years I felt unable to use it in my own work. From early on, my approach was to use only the most vibrant hues. And eventually I realised that I had discovered the conceptual underpinning about colour that had so eluded me in my early work. I discovered that its arbitrariness, the impossibility of having an absolute reason why something might be painted pink or orange or turquoise, which had troubled me before, was not a problm or a limitation at all but in fact colour's special gift. Anything can be any colour.

On picturing

The possibility of something being seen as a picture of something else is a capacity of the viewer, not a quality of the picture. It is we who have the extraordinary ability to see certain forms as pictures and interpret them as such; without that capacity, we would just see coloured shapes. This was a revelation for me because it meant that the viewer of a representational image was not a passive receiver as I had supposed, but was actively implicated in the making of the representation. My second lesson was that the essence of picturing is that it allows us to experience the presence of a thing without the thing itself being present.

On prints

I have done a great many prints over the past thirty years. They have come to constitute a separate and very important aspect of my work. Printmaking has enabled me to address certain things that painting cannot. I have found making sets of prints particularly useful. Each print can be seen in its own right, but the relationships within the set give additional resonance and meaning.