

Artist Michael Craig-Martin: 'My big moment is now'

One of British art's most influential figures on YBAs, passion versus money and the 'miracle' of having a major new show at 82

Jan Dalley JULY 5 2024

"I really like grown-up restaurants," says Michael Craig-Martin. "I like tablecloths." He strokes the white linen at Spring, in London's Somerset House, appreciatively. At 82, and with his career reaching a new peak, the artist has about him a sense of fulfilment, and readiness to enjoy the good things.

He is waiting for me, smiling warmly, when I arrive. We've met before and spent some happy hours talking, so we seem to know each other well enough to get the menu out of the way pretty quickly: without much discussion, we aim firmly for à la carte.

In recent years, Craig-Martin has established a home in Venice, where, he assures me, lunch is more significant than dinner. But, given those Venetian lunches, does he really want the wild nettle risotto? He gives me a humorous look, as if to say — *pace* Dr Johnson — that to be tired of risotto is to be tired of life.

Craig-Martin is certainly not that. In fact, he is almost fizzing with enthusiasm for what is absorbing most of his time at the moment: his forthcoming retrospective at the Royal Academy.

"It's just extraordinary for me, I really didn't expect a show of this scale, at this point. It's a kind of miracle.

"The funny thing is, I feel ready for it. If I'd have been offered this show five or 10 years ago, of course I'd have said yes, but I wouldn't have been so ready."

That seems hard to believe, given that Craig-Martin has been at the forefront of Britain's contemporary art scene for many decades, and that this show can draw on a vast body of work across so many mediums from 1967 onwards. How much more ready can someone be?

"I feel like my sense of the centre of gravity of my own work has shifted over the years. I feel as if I know exactly who I am, what I've done, and what's important. Every different thing I've done is represented in the show by at least two works."

In between enthusing about the Royal Academy, and its director Axel Rüger, he points out that the exhibition will be an eye-opener for many people who might think they're familiar with his practice. Although he has had dozens of prestigious shows across the world, from Boston to Seoul, there have been few large exhibitions in London.

"I'm known for a certain kind of work which really only starts in the 1990s. I'm in my fifties when my known career starts." He laughs, but a little ruefully. "So I have a whole other career before that, which my present audience has never seen."

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The “known” work he refers to is what became his signature style: in vivid colours, he draws, paints, sculpts everyday objects — a spoon, a shoe, a chair, a corkscrew, a lightbulb, a pair of specs — in flattened perspective, playing with scale and negative space. He reflects our world in a way that evokes Pop Art, draws on commercials, tech, film and a host of other contemporary references, yet contains a wealth of art-historical allusions too.

Another enduring highlight is now thought of as a milestone in contemporary art thinking: “An Oak Tree”, created in 1973, consists of a glass of water on a shelf, and is accompanied by a Q&A-style text in which Craig-Martin explains why it is, in fact, an oak tree. Deeply thought and cleverly argued but always playful and humorous, the text is not only worth reading in itself but provides clues to much of the work that came afterwards: nothing, as this message conveys, is as simple and light as it might look.

The forthcoming show encompasses all this chronologically, revealing “how each thing leads to the next”. The giant task of locating and assembling work from across the decades means “there are things I know about but haven’t seen for 30 or 40 years”. However, he says, “I own a lot of my own early work — which is because nobody bought it — and I have kept it in storage . . . If I sold it all now I probably wouldn’t pay the storage bill for the last 40 or 50 years. But at least it’s there.”

Moving through different mediums, he branched out into computer portraits and drawings, whole-room installations and much more. For this new show there is another departure, which he describes as a “compendium”.

“I’m working on one new thing this year, which is an immersive work: one whole gallery will be transformed into a video room in which all four walls will be animated, using more than 300 of my images. I’m working with technicians. It’s going to be quite astounding — what they can do technically today, I had no idea.”

Called “Cosmos”, it draws, he points out, on 45 years of content. So, despite his exceptionally long career, “the key work in the show is one that I’m currently making”.

No one would ever describe Craig-Martin as effusive, but his evident delight in this exhibition is infectious. Creating the retrospective, he says he’s been “forced to look back” and “I’m just astonished at what I’ve done. I look back and think, how did I even do that?”

This spotlight on his life’s work is all the more welcome, perhaps, since his career has been what he describes as “unusual”.

“Usually at some point as a successful artist you get a lot of attention, in your twenties or thirties, and the rest of your career is built on that early success. To be honest, I never had that big moment. Of course, I was disappointed early on in my career that I didn’t have that, but on the other hand I never went away.

“I’ve been around for 60 years, without ever really having that big moment, the time when I was exactly the right person involved in exactly the right thing at a particular moment. So, to be honest, my big moment is now.”

Craig-Martin is in a position to know all about big moments, since — in parallel with his own career — throughout the art world he is highly respected (I'm going to say revered, though I'm sure he would balk at that) as a teacher. At Goldsmiths college in the late 1980s and early 1990s he taught some of the best-known young British talents of the time, including Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume — leading lights of the group that became known as the YBAs — and he has strong views about arts education.

Before we get on to that, though, our starters arrive: his is a brilliant emerald risotto (almost one of his own searing colours), with wild nettle and spinach; mine a prettily fanned-out carpaccio of sea bass, transparent slivers dotted with citrus and tiny punches of chilli. It's so good that we don't bother to say anything for a few minutes.

But not for long — Craig-Martin, after half a lifetime as an educator, has thoughts to share.

“In all the years I've been teaching, I never advised anyone to become an artist.” He laughs. “But I passionately believe in art education. It would be a great idea if more people who did different things actually went to art school. It produces a different kind of mentality from any other form of education.”

Explain, please?

“With other [types of courses], there's a subject with a store of knowledge, and accepted parameters, and you're supposed to work through those. When you go to art school, you're at an advanced stage the day you start, because the problems you're facing are the same things all artists face at any stage — you are immediately confronted by ‘what am I going to do, how am I going to do it?’

“There isn't a subject. The closest thing to a subject is you yourself. So art education teaches you your own parameters: self-discipline, adaptability, a kind of self-discovery which you exercise through what you produce. If you don't have self-motivation, nothing is going to happen.

“So all the things people think they want from other forms of education are there — it produces people who are self-motivated and adaptable in any situation. Skills that are super-transferable.”

Menu

Spring

Somerset House, New Wing, Lancaster Place, London WC2R 1LA

Wild nettle risotto £22

Carpaccio of sea bass £24

Grilled monkfish £38

Slip sole £34

Roasted apricot sorbet £6

Alphonso mango ice cream £7

Glass L'Insolite Saumur Blanc, Thierry

Germain x4 £64

Double macchiato £4

Double espresso £4

Total inc service and charity donation
£231.41

This attitude to education, he believes, is an under-recognised British virtue — “The basic education system is very suitable for the teaching of the arts; it's much less prescriptive [than in other countries].” It was one of the things that drew him to London, in 1966. He was born in Ireland in 1941, but his father, an economist, was working for the British government and the family was based at that point in London.

Once the war was over, however, his father got a job with the newly formed World Bank in Washington, DC, and in 1946 Craig-Martin's American childhood began. He still carries a distinct American accent — "Everyone thinks I am American." But his Irish identity is strong, "although I never lived there". Meanwhile, his travels around Europe with his family made him a confirmed Europhile.

After growing up a typical American kid, as he puts it, with all the excitements and stimuli of the 1950s — music, sport, cars, not to mention many of the consumer goods that appear in his art — plus an MFA from Yale in fine art, he was drawn to London by "a nagging curiosity", an offer of a teaching job and "the whole thing — the Beatles, Mary Quant . . ."

"I'm one year younger than John Lennon and one year older than Paul McCartney: that was my generation." He has made his life in Britain — with the addition of a home, for many years, on the Spanish coast near Barcelona (partly, he says, so that he could tempt his US-based daughter and grandson over to stay for the summer), now swapped for an elegant palazzo apartment in Venice.

We've been working our way through deliciously cool glasses of Saumur Blanc, and as our main courses arrive, we decide that a second one each wouldn't be an entirely bad thing. (When will I learn to order the bottle in the first place?) Craig-Martin's choice is monkfish with lemon butter sauce, sitting on a vegetable he proclaims delicious but can't quite identify: it turns out to be a purée of fennel.

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My sole with pak choi has a curry butter sauce: once again, my tape goes silent as we apply ourselves, and I think what a pleasure it is to share lunch with someone who loves to eat as much as I do.

Back to work, though, and discussing the life of the artist. Not only through his own experience and those of his successful peers, but also through watching what must be hundreds of students, his thoughts seem spot on. He must have seen, I suggest, a massive change in the art world since the 1960s.

Not just the growth of the market, but so many shifts in attitude, a whole different way of looking at artists and their view of themselves.

"It's an entirely different world from the world I entered," he agrees. "In my generation we never really thought about making money because we assumed we wouldn't. You did it out of passion because you couldn't help it. It was all you wanted to do and you were prepared to sacrifice other things."

He has no romanticism about life in a garret, however — "One wanted to do a little better than get by" — and no illusions about the difficulties. He resents it when people describe the YBA group (some of them his star pupils) as being ambitious about money: what they had, he explains, was simply "survival ambition".

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Now a very long way past those first years, and about to turn 83 next month, he feels there's another thing about the artist's life, "one that's rarely talked about — sustaining a creative career. It's comparatively easy to be creative when you're young, comparatively easy to be creative when you have that big moment, but sustaining creativity over 30, 40, 50, 60 years — that's something else. On top of that there's the career aspect — success, no success; money, no money — and this goes up and down. Sustainability and survival; it's underestimated how big a challenge that all is.

"When you're an artist you are constantly creating your own history. The things you do are the things you've done, that's it. All the other people in the art world — dealers, collectors, auction houses, critics — they can move from one thing to another. Artists can't do that."

By now our plates have been cleared and we quickly agree on two things. One: we almost never eat dessert. Two: we're going to. A roasted apricot sorbet and a mango ice cream, with four spoons so that we can each taste both.

Perhaps surprisingly, the mango wins out over the apricot. And perhaps distracted by that thought, I ask some rather banal question about how over the years he has kept his fount of creativity going. Influences? Reading, movies, other artists?

Most of my life I've been mildly dissatisfied with what I've achieved. My dissatisfaction has been the impetus to challenge myself to do better

"It's internal," he replies, without needing to think. "Most of my life I've been mildly dissatisfied with what I've achieved, and about what's happened to me. My own dissatisfaction has been the impetus to challenge myself to do better. That's why a kind of late blossoming has worked out quite well: the incentive has been my own sense that I could do more."

No resting on the laurels, then? "I haven't ever felt able to." He laughs again, though easily, a successful man at home in his skin.

There is, though, less laughter when he talks about the current state of culture in Britain. "One of the great ironies of Britain" — he seems to be speaking now as an "immigrant", as he describes himself — "is so much scepticism about the arts, when in fact it's the most successful aspect of British society, the arts. People come because there's something special here."

The past years of Tory rule have made him almost apoplectic: "How can they be called 'conservatives' when they have destroyed so much?" In his view, so many of the things that made him stay in Britain "have been swept away", and "incredible harm has been done to the very things that make Britain important in the world. That's the way I see it."

Recent governments have been made up of "people who have absolutely no self-understanding at all. People who know *stuff*" — he says the word dismissively — "but they are empty people. They subject other people to their emptiness because of their own limitations."

Despite this, his natural optimism and undimmed energy can't be quelled for long. His adopted country has warmly recognised him: he has an astonishing reputation in the art world and far beyond, and a knighthood in 2016 topped other honours. "I have had," he says, "an extraordinary life in Britain."

Jan Dalley is the FT's arts editor

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