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Michael Craig-Martin, Review

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Michael Craig-Martin

Irish Museum of Modern Art Dublin October 4 to January 14

When and how does a glass of water on a shelf become an oak tree?

Michael Craig-Martin has developed his practice and philosophy as an artist around such questions of transubstantiation, visual and

spatial perception, cultural values and materialism. While art

obviously develops through the ages by just such a forceful line of

querying its parameters, Craig-Martin's questions have

simultaneously bred a type of conceptualism endemic in

contemporary art that has yet to be usefully harnessed by anyone

else in the prosaic world of gallery spaces. Even though Craig-

Martin continues to contribute magnanimously to the idioms of

today's art it seems that what surrounds the exhibitions of his

protégés – the talks, glossy monographs, pithy interview texts and

critiques – is at times more engaging than the work on exhibition.

To some extent this phenomenon is relevant to his retrospective at

the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 'Michael Craig-Martin: Works

1964-2006'. In this instance this is in part a result of how effective

Craig-Martin's more seminal pieces have been: their echo resounds

so loudly through installation art over the last four decades that it seems unnecessary to see the origin of the myths.

In relation to the earlier works from the 60s and 70s the familiarity of the pieces, along with their remarkably slight presence, somehow undermines the proven importance of their connotations. And so, in a cramped space between galleries, the showcasing of the only film made by the artist, *Film*, 1963, comes as a major surprise. From its steady gaze and measured cropping and cutting a rare unadulterated glimpse of Craig-Martin the poet emerges. The short film is an evocative portrait of a West of Ireland no longer to be found: a eulogising quality transcends the lingering black and white footage of cottages with smoking chimneys, a bracing coastal breeze rippling through fields, stonewalls, a vigorous sea and later a sequence of statues of the Virgin Mary dotted throughout the Connemara landscape. The only people knowingly presented in the work are groups of laughing children who appear toward the end, just as the viewer begins to think the land is eerily empty.

This film, his degree submission at Yale University, has only otherwise been shown in Ireland and may only make sense here, or at least to those who have visited and known the rural West. On this point, the work has an obvious relationship to the rest of his oeuvre:

the familiarity of Craig-Martin's subjects to his viewers is consistently the point around which his practice revolves. A fascination with both society's and the individual's perceptions of familiar objects – and the perception of familiarity itself – pervades all the works on show at IMMA. From sculptures first made in the 1960s, of deconstructed boxes for example (*Long Box*, 1968, *Formica Box*, 1969), to more recent pieces reconsidering works by historically celebrated artists such as Piero della Francesca, *Deconstructing Piero*, 2005, and Georges Seurat, *Reconstructing Seurat (Orange)*, 2004, Craig-Martin's interest in art about art is also clearly in evidence. In *Coming*, 2006, an LCD monitor and computer regenerates images constituted of elements of famous art and design works, all of which are reconfigured in simplified outline forms and shrill colours. Text panels beside this work and *Piero* point out that the compositional programming of the regenerating images means that each viewer should see a unique arrangement on each viewing. With trademark cleverness, Craig-Martin confounds the ultimate digital medium of reproduction and uniformity with an essay at visual unpredictability and historical reinvention.

The first rooms of the exhibition are indicative of the route Craig-Martin took to achieve his more recent work represented in

the latter and main parts of the exhibition. The differentiation between painting and picturing, playing with and eradicating text in the works, using linear overlapping forms with and without colour, the complexities of realisation and explanation in art all form the context in which he refined the chosen language he has so articulately developed. *Narrative Painting*, 1995, sums it up: the back of a canvas suspended in a sea of pink/mauve is presented to the viewer while a yellow/ochre sidebar in the painting contains a closed blue book. The blandness of his pictorial devices and animosity towards gesture in his painted works belie the fact that these are personal expressions. The works constitute an artist's interrogation of his practice and a questioning of the lineage into which he must place himself. So while the understated silence of *Film* seems at first to be at odds with the visual brashness and over-iteration of the other works in the exhibition, with its persistent search for the integrity of its subject the piece may have more in common with them than an initial viewing suggests.

En route to the indoor exhibition at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham – the fabulous 17th century building modelled on Les Invalides which houses IMMA – the courtyard displays the first introduction to the artist's work. *Courtyard Installation*, 2006, is a series of brightly coloured panels placed along the interior of the

terraces facing onto the open square. Craig-Martin is at his most arresting in such perceptually unsettling and spatially invasive colour-saturated installations. The ways in which he alters a space through cartoon-like images of everyday objects, drawn with formal directness on a provocatively disproportionate scale in penetrating colours, encourages a contemplation of the roles ordinary material things play in daily life. Not only is a set of objects already known to the viewer reinvigorated, but a historic site and a cultural expectation are altered through such reflective encounters with art. This surely proclaims the grand conclusion of Pop Art.

Niamh Ann Kelly is an art writer and lecturer at the Dublin Institute of Technology.