

Projects 27 : Michael Craig-Martin : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 9-April 24, 1991

Author

Craig-Martin, Michael, 1941-

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michael craig-martin

projects



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A musical round is a polyphonic vocal composition in which the voices enter at equally spaced intervals. A round may have more than two singers and, accordingly, may be of greater or lesser complexity. It is a simple yet rigorous form, and it depends on the singer's ability to time his entrance and exit perfectly, and to repeat phrases exactly while competing with other voices. A round is also a type of circular dance.

The notion of the round illuminates the way in which Michael Craig-Martin has composed the principal drawing in his installation—the friezelike drawing on the long back wall of the gallery. Rhythmic in its visual phrasing, the work's sequential introduction into the foreground of a set of images—book, drawer, globe, light bulb, and table—has a musical or dancelike character. And it is this character that pushes aside handy categories like Pop or systemic art, which we may be tempted to apply to Craig-Martin's impersonal rendering of some common objects.

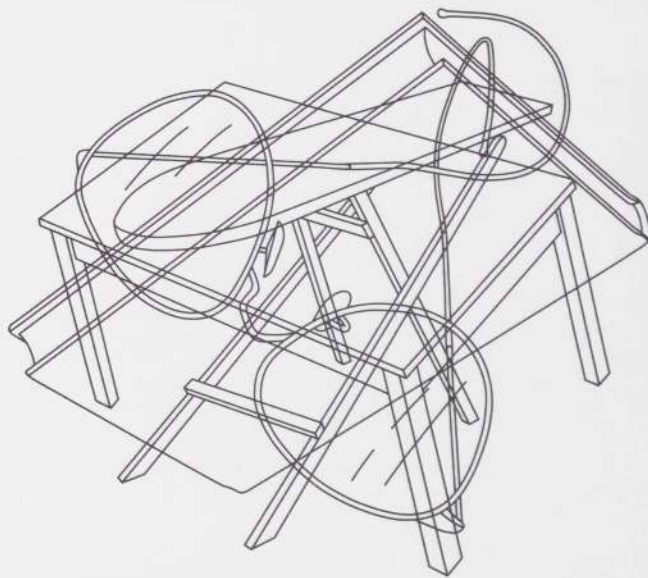
Born in Ireland, raised and educated in the United States during the 1960s, Craig-Martin as a student assimilated some of the freshest ideas of the time: the simple systems of Sol LeWitt's sculpture; the extraordinarily varied sculpture and performances of Robert Morris; the gray philosophical paintings and drawings of Jasper Johns; and the endless catalogue of mass-media images in the work of Andy Warhol. Among his fellow students at Yale were Brice Marden, Jennifer Bartlett, and Chuck Close—all young artists who, at the time, sought to clear a path beyond Pop and Minimalism. However, unlike his classmates, Craig-Martin left the United States after receiving his M.F.A. in 1966 to take a position at the Bath Academy of Art, Corsham, Wiltshire, where he began a long and distinguished teaching career.

All the stimuli Craig-Martin absorbed in America "fermented well," as the British critic Norbert Lynton noted, "in the relative stillness of England."[†] His first works, a series of boxes done between 1967 and 1969, show the influence of contemporary American art but twist that influence and undermine it. Hinged with lids that are either reversed or too large to allow the box to close properly, they turn a typical motif of Minimalism—the "whole" or "unitary" form (the Minimalists rejected the word "box")—upside down by breaking its hermetic seal and endowing it with an absurd functionalism. Craig-Martin continued for several years to play the role of skeptical observer, and in this spirit made a notable contribution to the development of Conceptual art in England.

The year 1975 was a turning point in Craig-Martin's career. In that year he made the first of what now number more than two hundred drawings of objects like ladders, books, hammers, and tables. Craig-Martin had always drawn, but this was the first time he used images of recognizable objects. This departure brought to a close his Conceptual work, and marks the beginning of an interest in imagery that continues today.

Craig-Martin begins a drawing by choosing an object, like a pair of spectacles, and selecting the plainest one available. By methodically simplifying a sketch of the object

before him, he attains a final line drawing, which he then fixes permanently by tracing it with architectural drafting tape onto plastic. Once a number of such drawings have accumulated, he composes the larger arrangements by overlapping, meshing, or otherwise combining them. Transposing these large drawings onto the wall is easy: all it requires is reproducing the final drawing as a slide, projecting the slide onto the wall, and tracing the image with wider tape. In contrast to the Pop artist, whose taste runs to images already stereotyped by a mass medium like advertising, Craig-Martin draws all of his objects, even the most unremarkable, from life. His way of composing is also far from that of the systemic artist, who begins with a procedure and not with the appearance of the thing. No matter how rigorous a scheme he might use—say, the sequential rotation of a cluster of objects to show it from four cardinal points of view—it is used intuitively and varied in whatever way might suit the objects he has chosen. In his **projects** installation, the structure matches the objects depicted in that there is a sustained contrast between open and closed forms, circular and rectilinear ones. This contrast is developed more aggressively in the contest between the depicted volume of forms and the flatness of the wall, against whose plane the objects twist and turn.



Michael Craig-Martin. Untitled wall drawing. 1980. Tape on wall. Dimensions variable. Installation view at Rowan Gallery, London. Photo courtesy the artist

When Craig-Martin visited the Museum last year to make a preliminary inspection of the **projects** room, the wall facing the garden was removed. He remarked on the "classical" nature of the space: one long wall (42 feet) flanked by two smaller walls (each 25 feet long), a configuration similar to the Renaissance monastic refectories where one might typically find a fresco of The Last Supper. He proposed to make a work in three parts in which two smaller drawings would flank the main one.

In the two small drawings, Craig-Martin turns the installation into a demonstration piece that reveals a key to his method and displays the range and power of his technique. The flat, "transparent" drawing on the right wall showing all the objects superimposed is, in fact, a large version of the small drawing on plastic from which the

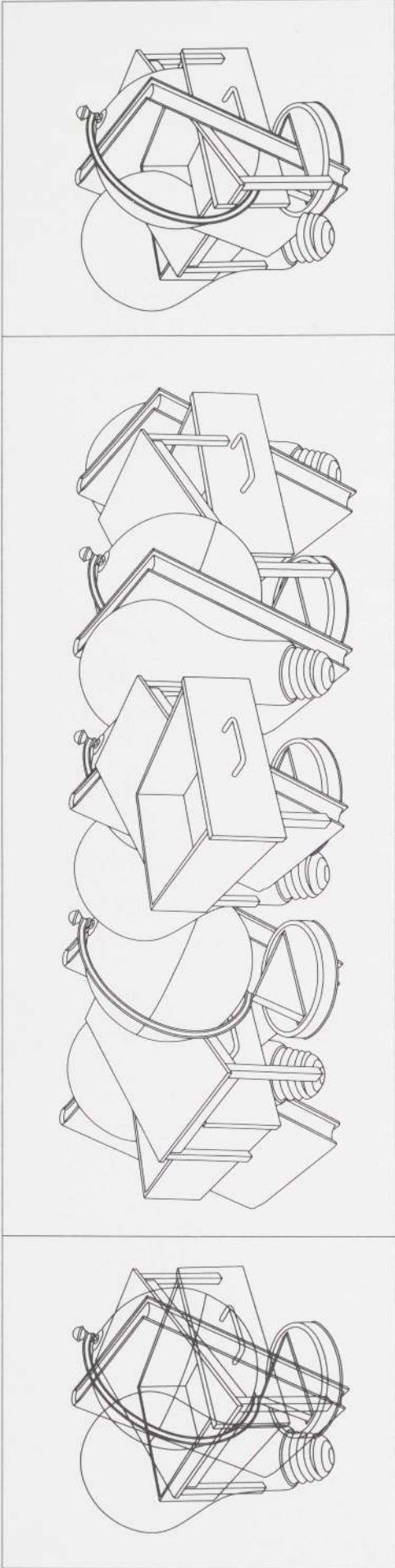
installation was developed. It quite literally contains the whole of the installation in a nutshell. The drawing on the back wall is, in one sense, only a repetition of the drawing on the right, with certain lines suppressed. The drawing on the left wall, also derived from this transparent drawing, contrasts with the one on the right by virtue of its volume. Craig-Martin thinks of this drawing as a species of sculpture, because a sculpture is a construction of complicated, interlocking volumes and contours and because it is visually supported like a sculpture by the base of the globe.

Craig-Martin has written about and often remarked on the strangeness of the human ability to make pictures of things that exist in reality. What fascinates him is how complex, rule-governed, and artificial the process is. It requires not only a special kind of recognition, but an ability to "take things as pictures," that is, to understand them as pictures rather than real things. Picturing allows us to possess a clear idea about an object and, under certain circumstances, as when the picture we see is made by an artist, to transfigure what has been pictured; to exalt or glorify or spiritualize it. One of the great lessons of Pop art is that this marvel can happen even with light bulbs and hangers, Brillo boxes and soup cans. It is for this reason that Craig-Martin prefers outline drawing, something we experience as mundane. It is also why he chooses to depict only man-made objects that suggest certain activities like manual labor, reading, eating, or dancing. Even aggressive activities like killing, or instinctual ones like sex, can surface in the guise of a gun or the phallic intrusion of an ironing board into the frame of an eyeglass (see illustration at left). For him, this faculty of picturing is both a physiological fact and a theological mystery.

In a discussion of black-and-white outline drawing, it seems absurd to conclude with a remark on color, but there is an ineradicable whiteness, a whiteness that is a color, in Craig-Martin's work. Brilliant but opaque, it surfaces persistently in different ways: in the white formica of some sculptures of the 1960s, the white light of neon in some sculptures of the 1970s, and the white of paper on dark clipboards, which he mounted like a set of drawings in 1971. It is the white of naked canvas in a series of paintings of 1975, the strange milky whiteness of the drafting film he uses for his studies and, finally, the white of gallery walls, evenly and brilliantly illuminated. This whiteness, sometimes cloudy and never the same in tone, is where Craig-Martin's work begins and ends. In his installation it functions like a magic cinematic screen, one that allows him to externalize a quiet passion for the look of things blown up to a grand scale and stripped of incidental detail. In the end, when completed by the viewer, Craig-Martin's work must undergo such a change, from image into music, ephemeral decor into philosophy, room into theater on whose stage he enacts for our pleasure a lucid dance of art and the mind.

Robert Evrén
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Drawings

[†] Norbert Lynton, Introduction to *Michael Craig-Martin*. Fifth Triennale of India (New Delhi, 1982) p. 3.



Michael Craig-Martin. Three preparatory studies for installation at The Museum of Modern Art. 1990. Tape on architectural drafting film (detail). Photo courtesy Waddington Galleries, London

biography

Born 1941, Dublin, Ireland
Resides in London

Education

Yale University, BA 1963; MFA 1966

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1989** Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.
Michael Craig-Martin. A Retrospective, 1968-1989
- 1985** Waddington Galleries, London
- 1976** Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, England.
Michael Craig-Martin: Selected Works 1966-75
- 1969** Rowan Gallery, London

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1990** Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia.
Eighth Biennale of Sydney.
The Readymade Boomerang
- 1977** *Documenta VI*, Kassel, Federal Republic of Germany
- 1974** Art Institute of Chicago.
Idea and Image in Recent Art
- 1972** Hayward Gallery, London. *The New Art*

Selected Bibliography

Craig-Martin, Michael. "Taking Things as Pictures," *Artscribe*, no. 14 (October 1978).

Cooke, Lynne. "The Prevarication of Meaning," in *Michael Craig-Martin, A Retrospective 1968-1989*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1989.

Lynton, Norbert. "Michael Craig-Martin," *Fifth Triennale*, New Delhi, India: The British Council, 1982.

Rosenblum, Robert. "A Mid-Atlantic Conversation," in *Michael Craig-Martin, A Retrospective 1968-89*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1989.

Seymour, Anne. *Michael Craig-Martin: selected works 1966-75*. Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, England 1976.

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Cover: Michael Craig-Martin. *Reading [With Ironing Board]* (detail). 1980. Tape on wall, dimensions variable. Installation view, Rowan Gallery, London. Photo: John Webb