

“More famous than famous”: Michael Craig-Martin on the changing nature of “ordinariness”

“I started making drawings of individual ordinary objects in 1978 and I’ve been drawing them ever since.” Michael Craig-Martin tells *It’s Nice That* as he sits in a swanky central London tearoom ahead of his new show *Present Sense* in Vero Beach, Florida (which opened at the end of January). There are several critics who would argue that this self-aware statement pretty much sums up Michael’s career as an artist.

Aside from having taught many of the Young British Artists when he was a tutor at Goldsmiths College School of Art in the 1990s, Michael is best known for his signature colourful paintings, based on pared-back line drawings of everyday objects. Compare his 2002 painting of a tape cassette with his 2018 painting of a set of wireless headphones and you might not see much progression in his style or concept. But that is exactly the point. The consistency is essential to what Michael is doing in his art, it’s what he has always done: recording the changing nature of “ordinariness”.

Born in Dublin in 1941, Michael moved to the United States with his family when he was young, so – even though he moved to the UK back in 1966 – his voice retains a soft American lilt. As a young artist starting out, he was greatly influenced by Andy Warhol. “Andy did something very interesting with regard to portraits – in the beginning, he never did portraits of anybody who wasn’t famous. He didn’t even do self-portraits until he became famous,” says Michael. “And the reason was, I think, that Andy gives you the most basic image of Marilyn and you bring everything you know and feel about Marilyn. The image triggers that in you.”

The next thought that spun out of this was: “What’s more famous than famous? And more famous than famous is ordinary, because ordinary is everywhere, ubiquitous, instantly familiar and so familiar that it’s invisible.” The young Michael quickly realised that “a lightbulb is more famous than Marilyn Monroe”. And by simply referring to an object like that in the most reduced way possible, he realised he “could bring to the foreground in anybody who looked at it an unbelievable wealth of associations and feelings”.

He describes having a “conceptual breakthrough” around this time, when he realised that the viewers of his pictures were participants in the work. “I tended to think that the viewer was passive, that there were certain artworks that you

participated in and there were other works in which you were passive,” he explains. “But being able to *read* a picture, to be able to look at a picture of a shoe and see a shoe, when there is no shoe, and it doesn’t actually look anything like a physical shoe, is a kind of miracle of perception.

“That’s why people’s pets are not at home watching TV while they’re out at dinner,” he continues. “Because they can’t see pictures. It’s a human gift and we take it completely for granted.” This realisation changed his work forever. “If you’re the one [as the viewer] who’s making the thing happen, if it doesn’t happen without you, then obviously you have an active rather than a passive role. It was such an important realisation and everything I’ve done since has seemed to stem from that.”

This realisation is perhaps most obvious in his sculptures. The [new show](#) of his work in Florida, which is an exhibition pulled together by the Royal Academy of Arts and the Gallery at Windsor there, also includes a handful of Michael’s sculptures. With these, too, Michael is playing with the viewer’s perception and drawing attention to the act of what he calls the “high-level gift” of “reading pictures”. Unlike Michelangelo’s *David*, which seeks to mimic “all the things that you associate with the way a person exists in the world”, he is working with “two-dimensional illusionism”. They are sculptures but “they don’t mimic the look of the object at all, they mimic the look of the drawing, not the object”.

Viewers have often seen in his work an implicit criticism of consumerism or built-in obsolescence, but Michael is quick to disavow this interpretation. “I have no view,” he says. “There are lots of other people who are interested in consumerism. That’s not an interest of mine.” Again, though, these are “associations” and “feelings” that viewers readily bring to his work beyond his control as the artist.

What’s most interesting is how such interpretations are now perhaps more likely than they were in the 1980s and 90s, when he produced some of these works. Because Michael has been doing this so consistently and for so many years, his oeuvre has taken on new meanings over time, as his viewers have changed.

Whereas once his pictures were of ordinary objects that he believed “would be around kind of forever”, now his older drawings take on the feeling of an archive of lost and forgotten artefacts. Instead of being a documenter of the everyday, the mundane, Michael suddenly becomes a meticulous documenter of transience. (Indeed, his 2015 show at the Serpentine Gallery was entitled *Transience*.)

“Things go out of usage,” he explains today. “In the 80s, I did a wonderful drawing of a tape cassette. I loved my own drawing of a tape cassette, but I can’t

use it anymore because nobody under a certain age has any idea what it is. And all the things I'm drawing now that are very contemporary, you can be pretty sure in ten years people will be saying the same thing. What's a memory stick?" Although he's aware of this, there's no sense that he feels deflated. "Things come in and out of use, and I've decided that's not a reason not to draw them. If things have a short lifetime or a long lifetime, it doesn't matter."

The "ordinariness" of ordinary objects has changed too. In 2018 he presented *Double Take (iPhone)*, a painting on two panels of the ubiquitous Apple smartphone. "When I first started drawing things, my sense of ordinary was associated with the idea of things being inexpensive, cheap," he says, referring to this work. "That's why they were ordinary, because anyone could have them. But there came a point when I had to accept that iPhones are very expensive and yet millions of people have iPhones. You can't think about something being ordinary and not being expensive."

He has also noticed how the design of ordinary objects has shifted. The objects he drew in the first ten years were mainly 20th-century utilitarian objects and, with them, "form followed function", he notes. "Form no longer follows function. The iPhone doesn't look anything like a telephone. It doesn't actually look like anything. It doesn't show you where to speak, it doesn't show you where to listen, it's taken the place of a camera almost completely and yet it doesn't look like a camera." Again, thanks to Michael's ongoing fascination with the quotidian, his life's work records this transition.