

Jessica Craig-Martin

Elements of Style

Opening Thursday 4th May 2017, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 5th May 2017 - 15th July 2017

Jessica Craig-Martin sees things. Her lens reveals hairline cracks in the carefully structured surfaces of self-presentation. Taken at fund-raisers, gala events and dinner parties held for the "lucky few", her images isolate details that reveal a bigger picture, as the viewer follows clues of soft furs and hard jewels, sequins and self-tanner, gold credit cards and platinum hair.

In an interview with Angus Cook, she describes her first commission as a party photographer for American Vogue. As Craig-Martin dutifully captured the beautiful, impeccably packaged young women, she noticed that to the left and right of these impeccably packaged starlets and socialites were women she felt were more interesting subjects. They included Joan Rivers, Gina Lollobrigida and Carol Channing, legend of stage and screen, "who arrived on the red carpet poured into a white sequined gown and a golden wig to promote, at 70, her new Broadway show." To Craig-Martin, these older women were the real story. Where the pretty girls had 'pretty', they had balls. They had all conquered Hollywood in their own way, decades back, and were currently worshipping at the Temple of Nips, Tucks, Spackle and Spanx. They were spectacle and they loved it. That was the moment when Craig-Martin discovered her subject. As she says: "One is never so naked as when dressed for a party."

We are drawn to glossy surfaces that seem to promise immaculate newness and virginal purity. German cultural historian Wolfgang Ullrich has studied the phenomenon and its near-metaphysical power. He notes that most of us find the allure of unusual glittering objects irresistible. Symbolising wealth, luxury and success, they also appear to be indestructible; even immortal.

Craig-Martin often crops her subject's eyes out of the frame, occluding identity. She is not hunting identity; instead she uses the camera to capture her subject's desire for approval; optimism, the vanity and fragility. These vulnerable "everywomen" and "everyone" may well feel safer within their carapace of moneyed glamour, but the armour inevitably slips.

Page 1/2

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Part One: Elements of Style

This is the gallery debut of Craig-Martin's fashion-related photographs. The works are selected from commissioned editorials for the glossies, to which Craig-Martin has brought her signature style and wit. Here they have been printed at a scale no magazine could handle. At this scale, the luxe items they promote become almost abstract. As in her art works, the subjects of these photographs are often in a state of imminent social disaster, enmeshed in decadent tableaux in which luxury and degradation are two sides of the same coin.

Part Two: Social Security

This exhibition offers the latest of Craig-Martin's 'caught moments.' Of working in this spontaneous way, she says: "I like to slip through the crowd unnoticed, chasing perfect unposed moments. Although it would appear that I am very much in public, I experience a paradoxical state of extreme privacy and solitude at these events; a blissful simplicity of purpose in which there is only my eye and the lens."

Alice Henkes and the Artist