



Mobile Reflector, Elliptic Motif

Kenneth Martin

Not on display

Title/Description: Mobile Reflector, Elliptic Motif

Artist/Maker: Kenneth Martin

Born: 1955

Object Type: Installation

Materials: Aluminium, Duralumin, Steel

Accession Number: 31571

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Copyright: © Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

Kenneth Martin made a series of Mobile Reflector works as part of his early experiments with the relationship between movement and abstract form. In this example, made in 1955, he uses metal rods to connect five elliptic forms, which are hung from the ceiling by a single nylon thread. It is balanced so that the two circular forms remain horizontal to the ceiling when the mobile moves. Designed to be seen from below, the painted and highly polished surfaces of the metal elliptic forms create and receive reflections of each other and their surroundings.

Martin was interested in how these moving reflections could enhance awareness of the environments in which his Mobile Reflectors were experienced. In a text written in 1955, he makes a comparison with the changing patterns of light reflected in the leaves of a tree or in clouds. Martin wanted to engage these natural forces in his art, rather copy the appearance of nature:

'I have enjoyed making these planes, as it were, shear one another. I have made the black disc shear the white which related to another and then to the ceiling. The descent of the planes may increase our awareness of the ceiling and of the space of the room and our own position in the room. We lie on our backs and contemplate the ceiling. In the summer, in the open, we lie and watch the leaves of a tree, or the clouds. We see the reflected lights cast upwards on the leaves and, passing here and there, changing the colour. The clouds, too, reflect their light, so that the dark ominous cloud can be seen reflecting brilliance on the cumulous above it. And so my black disc reflects orange on to the white above it, while this sets blue upon the next white, for my forms are two faced and, like the leaf, are not the same on both sides.' [1]

Earlier Mobile Reflectors were displayed by Martin in three experimental exhibitions held at Adrian Heath's studio in Fitzroy Street, London in 1952 and 1953, and as part of a group of mobiles that he installed in the children's ward at Whittington Hospital in Highgate, London. In 1954 two of Martin's Mobile Reflectors were included in the publication *Nine Abstract Artists* and the related exhibition at the Redfern Gallery which opened in January 1955. Here, the critic Lawrence Alloway noted the significance of Martin's mobiles and in particular, his focus on basic forms:

'What is important about mobiles is that they have to be apprehended temporally. The simple and logical components of Martin's mobiles move in time with an exceptional clarity owing to their freedom from allusions to larks or flying saucers. He conveys a sense of proportionate forms fulfilling themselves in motion.' [2]

The artist and critic Andrew Forge gave a detailed account of *Mobile Reflector: Elliptic Motif* in an article for the arts journal *Quadrum* in 1957, drawing attention to its relationship with the environment in which it is seen:

'In the work illustrated a further extension of its order is carried into the circle and the ellipses of the plates themselves, for the circle refers to its own circular movements, and the ellipses refer to the circle as it is seen in perspective. But against this inward symmetry there plays an important counter-theme from the open world: not only is the final unfolding of the simple structure subject to time and chance but the reflector looks, as it were, beyond the mobile to the floor of the room, taking in changes of light and colour, the furniture and occasionally the upturned features of the observer.' [3]

Mobile Reflector: Elliptic Motif was illustrated in the catalogue for Kenneth and Mary Martin's joint exhibition at the ICA in London in 1960 and was included in Kenneth Martin's retrospective exhibition at the Lord's Gallery in London in 1962. There are further examples of Martin's Mobile Reflectors from the 1950s in the Tate collection and in the Government Art Collection. [4]

Lisa Newby, November 2020

[1] Kenneth Martin, 'On the Development of the Mobile', pp.5-7, typescript dated June 1955 for a lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Reproduced in Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.135-6. For Grieve's thorough account of Kenneth Martin's mobiles, see pp.135-148.

[2] Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: their work and their theory* (London: Tiranti, 1954), p.13.

[3] Andrew Forge, 'Notes on the Mobiles of Kenneth Martin', *Quadrum*, No. 3, Brussels, 1957, pp.93-98 (p.93, ill. p.94). Sainsbury Centre archive.

[4] <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martin-mobile-reflector-t12374>

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mobile-reflector-253148/view_as/grid/search/venue:government-art-collection-3527--makers:kenneth-martin-19051984/page/1

Exhibitions

Kenneth Martin: A Retrospective Exhibition, Lord's Gallery, London, 1962

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

'Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction from Constructivism to Op Art', Museum Barberini, Potsdam, 15/2/2025 - 18/5/2025

Further Reading

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), pp.62-63, p.64, p.100.

Andrew Forge, 'Notes on the Mobiles of Kenneth Martin', *Quadrum*, No. 3, Brussels, 1957, pp.93-98

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.135-148

Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.
