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ANN CRAVEN

PRESS REVIEW

frieze
Contemporary Art and Culture

Ann Craven

Knoedler Gallery, New York, USA

Ann Craven uses conceptual precepts to guide her paintings. Beginning with clichéd, stock subject matter such as birds, deer, moons and flowers, she neutralizes her storybook content through continual variations and repetitions, shifting the conversation about her work into a theoretical frame that considers the body as a whole, rather than its individual parts. For example, in 2002 and 2004 Craven staged two identical exhibitions at the Gasser & Grunert Gallery, New York, which differed only in the size of the works on view; another time she hung simultaneous installations of a series of 400 moons: the originals were shown in New York, while 400 brand new copies were placed on view in Cincinnati.

Such stratagems eliminate any sense of individuality or preciousness within Craven's work, and the wry, cerebral installations urge viewers to approach the paintings as interchangeable objects. This trajectory continued last summer, when Craven exhibited a group of palette paintings made from off-strokes and paint pools alongside stacks of cardboard boxes in which the 400 moon copies sat, hermetically sealed.

At Knoedler, the esteemed uptown gallery more closely associated with the Frick Collection than, say, the New Museum, Craven's skill as a painter was celebrated. Working wet on wet, her deft brushstrokes have gained surety with every year, and in the new paintings rigidity and precision have been replaced by looser brushstrokes, washes of colour and a softer, more expressive touch. The installation consisted of two themes (birds and moons), which are subjects that have occupied Craven for over a decade. Six expertly rendered new bird paintings hung in the front gallery. Of particular note were *Wasn't Sorry Calla Lily #1* and *#2* (2008), mirror-image paintings in which the birds are seen beginning to dissolve into the background. Also wonderful is *Bold as Love* (2008), in which a bird sits in front of a vortex of pinks and violets that dominate the canvas and draw the viewer in. Girlish colours for seemingly girlish subjects, the paintings invoke the *grande dame* Georgia O'Keeffe in palette, subject, form and forcefulness. Arthur Dove, another American Modernist, also comes to mind with his unnerving, powerful and sometimes terrifying natural abstractions. Birds are generic and somewhat pedantic subjects, and Craven has used them *ad nauseam* as a vehicle to develop her own visual language. Here, as they veer towards abstraction, she seems to be on the brink of something new.

In the main gallery 94 moon paintings progressively wrapped around the room in a horizontal band. The works date from 1995, when Craven began sneaking outdoors to capture the moon in its various guises, and the project has grown compulsively since then (on a good night she will make as many as ten paintings). In them the sky ranges in colour from midnight blue to jet black, creating space for a yellow sliver, a lipstick smudge, a white smear or an amber orb. Around the room the moon dips and rises, waxes and wanes, slides behind clouds and peeks out from trees, a veritable skyscape that marks the passage of time.

Halfway through the installation Craven decided the moons needed to rise up further, and the entire series shifted in register by nearly three feet, from 153 to 234 centimetres above the floor. This was the first time she has rehung midway through a show, and the impact was striking, particularly in this multi-levelled and refined exhibition space. It made the installation feel alive and transitory, much like the moons themselves, which hover between a sketch and a painting. Measuring 36 centimetres square, they felt portable, conveying a sense of immediacy, even haste. Much like John Marin's five-minute landscapes of the rugged Maine coast, they are complete but not completed.

What, then, to make of these paintings, which hover between conceptual idiom and beautiful object? Installed in groups or series, the sheer volume of works triggers a debate about the conventions of both painting and exhibitions. Yet taken as individual entities, the conceptual framework recedes into the object's history, and once you move beyond the naive subject matter it is possible to luxuriate in her deft sense of colour and assured touch. That this is so readily possible is a constant surprise, for logic suggests that this type of straightforward, representational painting would short-circuit rather than open out. However, by reworking, re-presenting and returning to the same stock subject matter, Craven is building a corpus that engages the most pressing issues of today's art world, including questions of consumption, collection, authenticity, value and skill. It is a curiously compelling project, and this latest manifestation suggests that there is still far to go.

Katie Sonnenborn

Ann Craven
Late Night Song
2005–8
Oil on canvas
51×41 cm

Anna Craven
Below Left: ***Wasn't Sorry Calla Lily #2***
Below Right: ***Wasn't Sorry, Calla Lily #1***
2008
Oil on canvas
Each 152×122 cm

27.06.08-21.09.08

ann Craven/ shadow's moon

Du 27 juin au 21 septembre 2008, le Frac Champagne-Ardenne présente la première exposition monographique en Europe de l'artiste américaine Ann Craven.

L'œuvre d'Ann Craven trouve sa place dans la réflexion de certains artistes américains d'aujourd'hui, tels Wade Guyton, Kelley Walker ou Josh Smith, qui exploitent les potentiels de la surface, et intègrent non seulement la saturation de l'image du monde contemporain, mais aussi les erreurs ou les accidents que la reproduction à l'infini génère immanquablement. Son œuvre est également emprunte d'une grande intériorité spirituelle, une façon d'harmoniser sa pensée, son corps, sa respiration, à une pratique picturale d'une rigueur presque obsessionnelle. Ainsi, bien que l'œuvre s'en distingue formellement, Ann Craven reconnaît l'influence d'artistes tels que Vija Celmins, Allan McCollum ou encore Agnes Martin dont l'exigence de précision dans la pratique artistique est inséparable du rythme physiologique de leur vie.

Ann Craven est peintre, fondamentalement. Elle peint la lune. Parfois aussi des oiseaux, des fleurs, des biches, ou des bandes de couleur diagonales. Elle peint 400 lunes, non pas comme un éphéméride, mais comme si la lumière pâle de ce visage éternel appelait des êtres chers, lointains ou disparus, dans une rêverie nocturne où le pinceau serait maître de cérémonie. Les œuvres portent silencieusement cette charge affective. Puis l'artiste recopie ces mêmes lunes, pour tordre le cou à la revendication persistante de la peinture qui veut toujours faire son originale. Elle peint des sujets désuets, car elle connaît la puissance symbolique des images qui nous accompagnent, même parmi les plus insignifiantes : les images sans contenu que nos grand-mères gardent sans raisons véritables, les bons-points que l'écolier punaise fièrement dans sa chambre… Ses séries d'oiseaux ou de fleurs déclinent sans fin le rapport essentiel de la peinture entre le fond et la forme, la vibration de couleurs éblouissantes comme autant de signes du temps. Lorsqu'une couleur est appliquée, Ann Craven trace une diagonale sur une autre toile, mélangeant son pinceau à sa palette, sa palette qui elle-même est une toile. Rien ne se perd, tout « fait peinture », et toute peinture est d'égale importance à ses yeux, qu'elle soit copie, originale, support de couleur, bandes abstraites, oiseau sur la branche.

L'exposition d'Ann Craven fait suite à sa résidence à la Chaudronnerie du Lycée Val de Murigny, dans le cadre du partenariat que le Frac a mis en place avec cet établissement. Une publication rétrospective sur son travail est en préparation en co-édition avec JRP|Ringier.

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COMPTE RENDU

Lunatique Ann Craven

Shadow's Moon au FRAC Champagne-Ardenne

date de publication : 15/07/2008 // 5725 signes

Shadow's Moon au FRAC Champagne-Ardenne

A Reims, le Frac Champagne-Ardenne accueille jusqu'à fin septembre la première exposition monographique en Europe d'Ann Craven. Avec Shadow's Moon, l'artiste américaine offre un large spectre de son ?uvre singulière, mêlant l'intime, le kitsch, la répétition et la dissemblance.

Travaillant sur la saturation de l'image dans le monde contemporain, Ann Craven explore les potentiels de l'imagerie populaire, avec des sujets désuets comme les oiseaux, les fleurs, les biches, ou encore des motifs que l'on pourrait retrouver sur certains mug kitsch. Reproduisant toujours ses tableaux au moins une fois, et les stockant dans différents lieux (suite à l'incendie tragique de son atelier new-yorkais en 1999), l'artiste américaine s'inflige des règles, instaure un modus operandi, mais s'en extirpe aussi à tout moment. La répétition du motif lui permet d'exploiter les erreurs et les accidents de la surface. La reproduction de ses œuvres est aléatoire, jamais conforme à l'identique, et témoigne d'une grande virtuosité dans la rapidité d'exécution. Il s'agirait davantage d'une forme de commémoration. Le mode opératoire révèle une personnalité à la fois obsessionnelle et décomplexée. Son œuvre, bien sûr, s'en fait l'écho.

Le parcours de l'exposition dévoile sur deux niveaux plusieurs ensembles de peintures à l'huile : de grandes toiles de lunes ou d'oiseaux ponctuées de tableaux-palettes, striés par des bandes en diagonale reprenant les tons du tableau figuratif associé.
Au rez-de-chaussée, une vaste installation murale alterne sérigraphies florales et ornithologiques agencées à la manière d'un papier peint ou offertes en pile au sol. Subtilement dissemblables, ces sérigraphies couchées à terre ou accrochées se font l'écho de tableaux-palettes striés roses, privés cette fois de leur référent figuratif. D'autres groupes de tableaux-palettes aux bandes roses émergent de-ci de-là et se prolongent de façon chromatique d'une toile à l'autre, en créant des pans de murs aux toiles indissociables.

Parfois, des yeux se forment au cœur même des stries roses abstraites, faisant émerger une conscience figurative ou psychique au sein du parcours répétitif. Cette irruption du figuratif au cœur de l'abstrait rompt avec la monotonie et la systématisation d'une expression diagonale toujours semblable, qui commençait à s'instaurer en règle. Le tableau abstrait semble nous regarder. Dès lors, l'échange avec l'objet peint s'intensifie. Une irruption sans doute liée au mûrissement de l'attention de l'artiste, comme le laisse supposer la spontanéité du trait graphique de ces yeux schématisés.

Ann Craven considère ses œuvres comme des images mentales. Radicale, elle affirme que ses toiles n'ont pas besoin d'être vues. Mais la façon dont elle les expose témoigne plutôt d'une nécessité intrinsèque de donner forme et circulation à son univers psychique. Lorsqu'elle empile des toiles et les adosse contre le mur d'un couloir sombre, Ann Craven oblitère sciemment la vue possible de certaines de ses images, se contentant de les faire participer de façon vibratoire à un ensemble ou un projet plus vaste. Jadis, elle a exposé des toiles emballées dans des caisses, convoquant dans la galerie leur simple présence.
Près des tableaux de grand format entassés contre le mur, celui d'un chat gris sur un fond vert – un pré fleuri – de petit format détonne. Cette toile a été réalisée sur une pulsion, causée un matin par la trouvaille d'une boîte d'allumettes très kitsch. Ce petit félin redoutablement naïf aux accents mélancoliques provoque un écho chromatique face aux imperturbables stries abstraites, s'insérant ainsi avec pertinence dans l'exposition.

Dans l'escalier menant à la salle dédiée aux lunes, deux piles d'aquarelles très colorées sont disposées côte à côte : l'une comporte soixante-cinq fleurs de pensées – en hommage aux soixante-cinq années de sa mère à son décès en 2005 –, les toiles de l'autre représentent de petits oiseaux naïfs, cadrés serrés dans leur branchages aux tons rose fuchsia.

A l'étage, un extrait de la série des lunes, réalisé lors de sa résidence en France (1), est dévoilé. Pour Ann Craven, la lune incarne le visage de l'être cher absent ou disparu. Depuis trois ans, c'est essentiellement à sa mère qu'elle pense en peignant cet astre nocturne. L'artiste américaine planifie ses nuits de travail en fonction du calendrier lunaire et des aléas météorologiques avec une fidélité intrigante : elle date chacune de ses toiles et les reproduit une ou plusieurs fois, en fonction de la charge émotionnelle ressentie lors de leur production initiale. D'une lune bleue très angulaire, Ann Craven dit l'avoir déjà reproduite cinq fois, tant fut troublante la qualité de cette nuit de création à ses yeux. Incontestablement, elle prend plaisir à se remémorer ses captations lunaires d'absences convoquées ou dialoguées.
Cette série, qui fut initiée bien avant l'incendie de son atelier, relève d'un processus incessant qui permet, aux dires de l'artiste, d'expérimenter durant la nuit un état d'intense intériorité.
En donnant libre cours à ses émotions et ses pulsions intérieures, Ann Craven livre dans cette première monographie européenne un parcours d'une grande cohérence, qui nous fait (re)découvrir une œuvre profonde.

(1) L'exposition monographique Shadow's Moon fait suite à la résidence d'Ann Craven à la Chaudronnerie du Lycée Val de Murigny dans le cadre d'un partenariat avec le Frac Champagne-Ardenne.

> Ann Craven - Shadow's Moon , Frac Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, jusqu'au 21 septembre 2008.
>Publication à venir en coédition avec JRP/Ringier.

(Lire sur notre site : http://www.mouvement.net/index.php?idStarter=205170)

Artiste(s) :
Ann Craven artiste plasticienne
Katia Feltrin rédacteur

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Ann Craven Review by Elwyn Palmerton
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REVIEWS

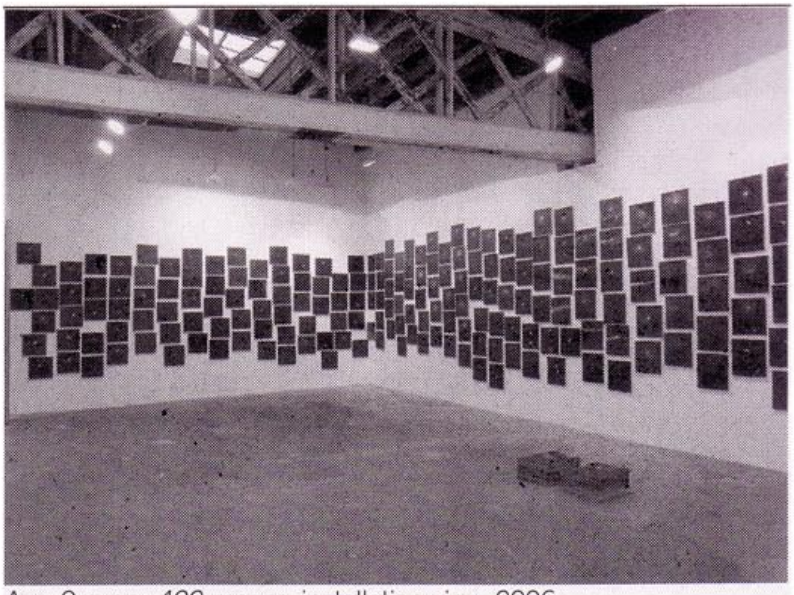
NEW YORK

ANN CRAVEN
Gasser & Grunert

THE PAINTER ANN CRAVEN has a tendency to repeat herself. In the past this has meant re-painting an entire show with a single adjustment: doubling the size of the canvases. Last year in a show featuring 15 nearly identical paintings of deer, she scattered empty beer cans all over the gallery and provided free beer for visitors during gallery hours — a concept created in collaboration with the painter Josh Smith — and titled "Deer and Beer." This time around she's painted the moon, from life, 400 times over the course of a single month — each painting identical in size and scale. A concurrent show at the Cincinnati Art Center featured a series of 400 duplicates — paintings that she made from the 400 originals. As an added twist, in a nod to Felix Gonzalez Torres, two stacks of small posters were placed on the floor. One was a reproduction of a painting from the original series, the other, a reproduction of a painting from the series of duplicates.

The 400 moon paintings are stretched around the room salon-style and resemble a sort of fragmented, off-kilter grid and call to mind the word "constellation," given the celestial subject matter. Each of the relatively small, square canvases presents a fresh variation on her theme — ranging from nearly monochromatic to cloud-obscured views, murky concentric circles of fog, moody glimpses through skeletal silhouettes of tree branches and several elegantly efficient treatments of yellow or orange crescents.

With her narrow set of constraints and carefully limited palette, Craven exploits seemingly every possibility available and reminds us that, for as long as its there, people will always stare at the moon and invest its image with romantic, emotional, poetic and meteorological significance. Adjacent paintings are grouped roughly into themes. The appearance of a single bold stroke representing a moon-obscuring cloud felt brazen and thrilling next to a stretch of nearly austere crescents. Her paint handling in each was both light and self-assured — towing a fine line between loose and controlled, though erring on the side of too loose, and was reminiscent of both Katz and Richter, yet distinctly her own.



Ann Craven, *400 moons*, installation view, 2006

At any rate, her method of repeating herself may have less to do with the encyclopedic array of art-historical references which she's incorporated into her work and more in common with a musician practicing a simple melody in order to assimilate its subtleties into physical reflexes. And while her various conceptual maneuvers are generally well-received, I did wonder if the trick of reproducing 400 paintings is absolutely necessary. This is beside the point: by tying together ostensibly disparate practices and ideas, Craven isn't simply trying to convince us of her own cleverness (or how inside of art history she is), but rather to channel the inchoate joys of art, art history, and (while deigning to dismiss the issue with sly, humble irony) the ever-effulgent possibility of the new.

— Elywn Palmerton

Craven, courtesy Gasser & Grunert

by **Katie Stone Sonnenborn**

Afternoon of a Faun

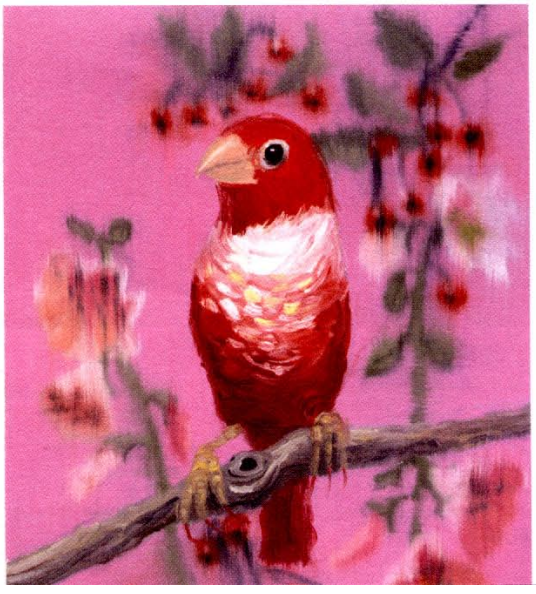
On the top two floors of a sunny walk-up in Harlem, Ann Craven is painting the natural world. At first blush, this may seem an odd choice of subject matter for an urbanite, but the studio proves an inspiring place to be. This is because a visit there—with the inundation of earthbound flora and fauna and celestial light—feels like a trip outside Manhattan. Craven herself adds to the vibe, exuding warmth from the feral cats she nurses on the back fire escape to the orchids she mists as we chat.

Craven's paintings are similarly sweet. She works with several recurrent themes, including birds and deer derived from gift shop tat, and MANY are quintessentially "cute." Palette choices of bubblegum pink, baby blue, canary yellow, and grassy green underscore the inherent sappiness of her selections, which she sharply renders atop blurry, floral backgrounds. Yet Craven paints these scenes not ironically but brazenly, delighting in a budgie's downy plumage and the dappled forehead of a grazing doe. Working her canvases wet-on-wet to achieve a rich and vital play between abstraction and representation, color and light, the imagery is utterly captivating and delightful.

The variant speed and texture of Craven's work makes it feel spontaneous, no small feat given her tendency to paint similar images countless times. In exhibitions, she has a penchant for juxtaposing nearly identical paintings, pairings that reveal the subtle distinctions between the artworks as well as their remarkable likenesses. The restrained variation invites close inspection, and in the process of looking, salient elements come to light. One is Craven's divergence away from the speedy late-twentieth-century repetition evinced in high art by Warhol's factory production and in present production by the reproductive mayhem of our jpeg age. She favors a more contemplative lineage of painters, recalling artists who have pegged their practice around the study and repetition of a few simple themes. Among abstractionists, Robert Ryman's white paintings and Agnes Martin's grids and lines stand out as nearly devotional studies of a principal idea. For those working with objective representation, Pierre Bonnard's pictures of his wife Marthe form a complex emotional homage that is his life's work, while Giorgio Morandi paeans to still-life compositions were made by reorganizing and repeating stock elements. Each practice is introspective, with recurrence serving as a pivotal point: as the same subjects cycle through, formal expression surpasses literal meanings.

Through this lens we can appreciate that Craven's thematic projects operate, in part, in an analogous fashion, one that hinges on the voluminous possibility within a single subject. Each emphatic return to a bird or a deer reveals the nuance and facility of her technique, while reflecting the sincerity, dedication, and thorough commitment of her practice. For this reason, viewing individual works is a wholly different experience than seeing an exhibition: while one painting can be independently magnificent, it blossoms still further when considered in conjunction with similar, yet slightly contrasting works.

Ann Craven, *Red Head*, 2004, 36 x 30in, oil on linen. Courtesy the artist. Private collection



Ann Craven, *Dear in Daisies*, 2007, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist. Collection of RéVive Skincare

It is through such comparison that another integral aspect of Craven's art is revealed, one which marks a key difference between her work and that of the painters cited above: her critical reappraisal of what constitutes artistic originality. Though this revision is present in her use of appropriated stock images, its impact explodes in her exhibitions which proves that Craven's project is no mere elevation of kitsch, but rather a far more complex conceptual stance. For instance, in 2004 Craven faithfully recreated a show of bird and deer paintings that she had previously exhibited in 2002. Two years apart, both installations were hung in the same gallery and in the same order; the sets of paintings were identical. The only difference between the two installations was the size of the works, which, by 2004, had doubled in size.

A second example revolves around a series of moon paintings created by Craven over several years. Painting at night, Craven alternated between her rooftops in Harlem and rural Maine. Identically sized at 14-inches square, the canvases deftly chart the wax and wane of the moon over many months. As the slivers turn from wedges into orbs, the series, which ultimately numbered four hundred paintings, became a calendar-index of passing time, and a testimony to the artist's resolve. It was so much a collective display that when Craven had the opportunity to exhibit her moons at the same time in two cities, she would not split up the series. Her solution was to expand the capacity of the moon by copying each of the *plein-air* pictures, work by work. With eight hundred paintings, she could exhibit the "original" half at one space and the "copies" at the other.

Like the duplicitous birds and deer, the concurrent moon shows challenge an exhibition system (both commercial and institutional) that is pitched around unique and novel forms. Recalling Yves Klein's 1957 exhibition at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan, where seven virtually identical blue paintings were each priced differently, Craven's approach raised all the prickly questions about valuation: how are virtually identical works distinguished? Are "copies" less good than "originals?" And is there even a difference between a "copy" and an "original" if each has a relationship to the same underlying source?

Eluding firm logic, Craven described her decision to replicate the exhibition of birds and deer in a beguiling way: "The first time I hung up the paintings it was a little snowball. Then after two years of rolling around picking up more and more snow the ball was much bigger. So that is just how I left it." Like the show itself, her account is honest but opaque, and sends her audience further into an elliptical cycle with no firm beginning or end. Many critics have written about the lasting, uncanny sensation of déjà vu that lingers after visiting one of Craven's shows. In some instances, I suspect this is because she has actually squeezed into the private space of their memory by recreating a historical situation which they believed was squarely in their past. In other instances, it is because each project implicates itself in a future proposal, offering a bellwether of what may come.

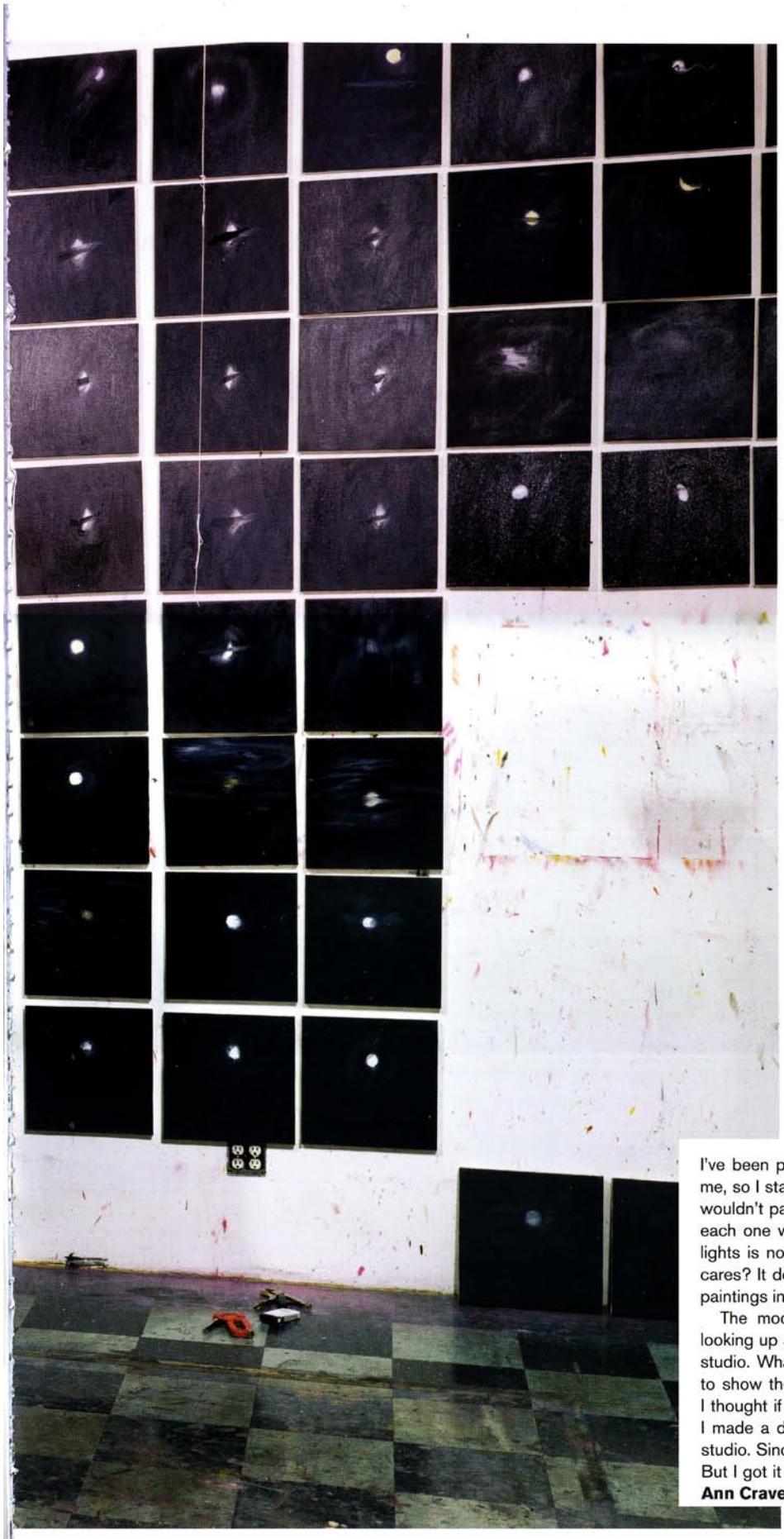
Ann Craven, *Moon Paintings* [installation detail], 2006, 14 x 14in ea, oil on canvas, from a series of 400. Courtesy the artist

At times, Craven's work evokes a sense of melancholy, as with her titular wordplays like *Mourning* in place of *Morning*, or *Dear* in lieu of *Deer*. The text, like the repetition, invites the viewer to meditate about something else, somewhere beyond the present moment. As such, time becomes both a literal tool (as in the execution of each series) and a philosophical one (as in the expanded frame of her viewers' experience). Perhaps the explanation lies in the words Agnes Martin wrote about her own artwork: "Painting . . . is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind." ♛

Ann Craven, 2007 Limited Edition Artbox giftset, is available at RéVive Skincare on October 1st. 214 S. Clay Street, Louisville, tel 502 413 0256 / reviveskincare.com

V MAGAZINE 45
SPRING PREVIEW 2007

Ann Craven, Work in Progress
Photography by Jason Schmidt
pg. 52+53



WORK IN PROGRESS

Photography Jason Schmidt

MOONLIGHTING

BY NIGHT, ARTIST ANN CRAVEN CAN BE FOUND ON HER NEW YORK ROOFTOP PAINTING THE MOON. BY DAY, SHE CAN BE FOUND IN HER STUDIO PAINTING COPIES OF IT

I've been painting the moon for a while now. It kept staring at me, so I started to stare back at it. If it didn't change so much, I wouldn't paint it so often. The paintings are a little like poems—each one wants to be a star. New York City with all its bright lights is not an ideal place to do something like this, but who cares? It doesn't affect it that much. If you ever see one of the paintings in person, you'll understand.

The moon paintings were painted outside at night, while looking up at the moon. But the photo shows me working in my studio. What happened was that I was offered the opportunity to show the paintings at the same time in two different cities. I thought if I split up the group, it might diffuse it somehow. So I made a decision to duplicate all of them, one by one, in my studio. Since there were 400 paintings total, this was a big job. But I got it done. In the photograph, I think I am copying #360.

Ann Craven

ART PAPERS

ART PAPERS, November/ December 2006
Ann Craven, New York
by Lara Kristin Lentini, pg. 62

ANN CRAVEN
NEW YORK

July in Chelsea typically signals the advent of a host of summer shows as sweet and weightless as Italian ice at the seaside, and every bit as easy to digest. With serious collectors away in the Hamptons and editors compiling museum-heavy, tourist-oriented summer listings or turning their attention to fall previews, gallerists plan their own vacations and fill their under-attended spaces with light fare suitable for lazy summer days: group shows with unchallenging themes, surveys of gallery artists, and so on. This July, however, saw a minor shift in favor of the serious stuff that usually awaits fall to rear its ugly head. Critical dissections of themes such as war, racial hatred, environmental decay, and other perennial bummers abounded.

At first glance, Ann Craven's solo show *Deer and Beer* [Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert; June 20—July 18, 2006] seems to buck this mini-trend: the title alone conveys a summery insouciance. Once inside the cool gallery space, where deer stare from the walls and a carefully arranged litter of empties recalls mindless recreational pursuits, the sweltering streets of Manhattan seem a million miles away. You may as well be sitting on the porch of your very own Fire Island summer share.

Idle questions may pop into your mind: is Ann Craven getting better at painting deer? Is she trying to? Her repetition suggests a harmless obsession—a girly counterpart to the teenage boy who practices the same Led Zeppelin riff on his guitar over and over. In this age of mechanical reproduction, Craven reproduces her works by hand, with industriousness that seems both mindless and meaningless.

But first glances are nearly always deceiving. To begin with, a few layers must be peeled away to uncover the source of Craven's deer images. *Dear*, 2004 is a reproduction-by-hand of *Dear*, 2002, which owes its existence to *Dear in Daisies (The Life of a Fawn)*, 1998. In turn, the source of this image is neither the real thing, nor a child's toy, nor yet a Disney cartoon. It's the dystopian science fiction film *Soylent Green*, which portrays a future in which the natural world, having been destroyed, is only preserved in images, in reproductions.

Considering this, Craven's project takes on a ritualistic, superstitious dimension. She paints and re-paints the same image, not for the sake of a sly deconstruction of the value of labor in an era of mass-produced consumer goods, but as part of a fervent rush to preservation. She paints to preserve herself, her work, and her world—our world—from forces as vague as they are menacing.

Deer and Beer is, ultimately, only a light summer show on the surface, and the artist good-naturedly invites us to surrender to the simplicity of that layered surface. Beneath sweet images of one of nature's most timid creatures, beneath facile puns and a rhyming title, there is the elemental satisfaction of looking at similar things side-by-side, appreciating symmetry while scanning for differences. This seeming simplicity is proffered in an appropriately relaxed, casual, summertime mode.

Craven's refusal to signal the seriousness of her intentions is quite endearing. A cursory search for underlying seriousness might generate echoes of smart-alecky fun along the lines of Warhol's silkscreens or Koons' puppies. But the similarity is misleading, as it further conceals an endeavor more earnest, more melancholy, and more contemporary.

—Lara Kristin Lentini

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Ann Craven**, *Deer in Emerald Field*, 2006, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches (courtesy of the artist and Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc.)
Ann Craven, view of the exhibition *Deer and Beer* at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc. (courtesy of the artist and Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc.)

ARTFORUM
OCTOBER 2006 INTERNATIONAL

Ann Craven
Deer and Beer, 2006
Review by Nick Stillman
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Ann Craven

KLEMENS GASSER & TANJA GRUNERT, INC.

A hint of the uncanny shadows the deer that are painter Ann Craven constant muses, and not only because the has artist been known derive her subjects from calendar reproductions, film stills, and pain ings by the likes of Gustave Courbet, Franz Marc, and Gerhard Richter. Craven's exhibitions are something like recurring dreams: On this occasion she presented re-creations of several paintings from her 2004 show at the same gallery, works that were themselves scaled-up do-overs of paintings from her previous outing there, in 2002.

While Craven's candy-colored canvases have drawn formal comparisons to Elizabeth Peyton's and Alex Katz's, her project is more closely aligned conceptually with ace appropriationists Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine. Here, although a phalanx of paintings showing a lone deer in a bucolic field of daisies are re-creations of canvases exhibited in earlier shows, the *installation* was brand-new: While a typical recent Craven show includes paintings of deer and birds, the latter were absent here, though as the show's title, "Deer and Beer," suggests, cans of mostly American domestics were available to console those who missed them.

The boozy addition was the most visible of several "conceptual contributions" that Craven invited from various artist contemporaries, including Fia Backström, Amy Granat, and Josh Smith. Making the (free) beer available during gallery hours, stashed on ice in a rubber trash barrel, was an idea that arose in conversation with Smith. Visitors were tacitly encouraged to indulge and scatter their empties on the floor; depending on the day's humidity, the offering seemed either sophomoric or the epitome of Rirkrit Tiravanija-like generosity.

Whatever one's take, those who imbibed were forced to relax the frantic pace of their Chelsea gallery–surfing and take in the paintings unhurriedly. And they're fantastic paintings. Like Richter, Craven creates the illusion of depth by painting wet-on-wet, blurring certain areas and relegating them to the background with a few deft strokes. In the just-shy-of-cloying *Deer in Pink Field*, 2006, she employs this process to obscure patches of flowers, then paints more flowers over the blurred field, pushing these dollops of white and orange to the foreground to generate visual pop.

Craven has a fondness for hanging near-identical paintings side by side, and these pairings allow her mastery of tonality to shine. *Deer in Emerald Field* and *Deer in Emerald Field* #2 (both 2006) read like identical twins, their only appreciable differences the second version's stronger, crisper colors (essentially a duplication of the effect of increasing an image's color saturation in Photoshop) and a tiny differentiation in the treatment of the deer's fur. *Young Buck (The Life of the Fawn)*, 2005, and its mirror-image companion piece, *Young Buck (The Life of the Fawn)* #2 (both 2005), stare each other down from across the room, one inhabiting a sunny day, the other a slightly overcast one.

An artist who scrambles to reinvent herself to match the pace of the market's demand for novelty can risk dilution to the point of irrelevance. Craven's strategy of recycling suggests that the pursuit of artistic innovation is, to her mind, actually a chasing after self-erasure. Does she select her imagery for its hackneyed affectlessness, thus diverting our attention to purely formal issues? It's possible, but her principal theme remains the position of the artist in a commercial system. Craven's earlier work *is* her current work but for very minor adjustments to technique and scale, and she thus removes herself from the shortsighted rush to Make It New.

—*Nick Stillman*

Ann Craven, *Deer in Emerald Field*, 2006, oil on canvas, 60 x 48".

Emerging Artists

You Must Remember This

Ann Craven's mnemonic devices

by Barbara Pollack

Like the mythological Phoenix, Ann Craven's paintings rose from the ashes of a tragedy that would have put an end to most artists' careers. In 1999, while she was away over Thanksgiving weekend, a fire broke out in her loft in the meatpacking district of Manhattan. It destroyed everything – all her possessions and artworks, as well as every last slide and scrap of documentation. It took her a year to recover. But when Craven returned to the easel, she dedicated herself to the uncanny task of recreating the originals, painting the same imagery over and over and over again.

'I just wanted to embrace all the artworks I had lost, so when I got back I started painting from memories, just trying to replicate what had been destroyed,' says Craven, sitting in her new loft space in Harlem, surrounded by lush, colourful oil paintings of parakeets and cockatoos. It's easy to see that she is still visibly shaken by recollections of the fire, and it's just as easy to fall under the spell of the sentimentality of the works, painted with sensuous brushstrokes in oil, that hang on the studio wall. Yet, it would be a serious mistake to think of Craven as either a worthy survivor or a champion of kitsch. Her project is much more conceptual, rooted in ideas about the function of painting, especially in this age of jpeg files and washed-out reproductions.

'Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,' Walter Benjamin once wrote. Like Benjamin, Craven is examining the durability of a painted icon in a world that consumes mass imagery at record speeds. She has intentionally chosen pictures that carry very little art-historical baggage. Instead, she selects cutesy birds and dewy-eyed fawns – the kind found on potholders and coffee mugs at roadside souvenir shops. She enlarges these specimens of kitsch iconography to create larger-than-life portraits, forcing her audience to reexamine their intuitive dismissal of pictures 'only a grandmother could love'.

Craven has always been mining this particular vein of Americana, even back at Columbia University's MFA Studio Program, which she attended from 1990 to 1992. But, she could not convince her professors, as she still has trouble convincing some art critics, that her interest was not some post-Koonsian celebration of middlebrow aesthetics. She was simply focused on painting, on the 'wet-on-wet' application of oils, looking for the most commonplace subject matter to avoid distractions from the process itself. In graduate school, she focused on pictures of soccer fields and her first gallery show (at Lauren Wittels Gallery, SoHo, in 1993) featured depictions of the moon in various phases. The subjects were simple and uncluttered, so her impeccable and expressive brushwork would be the focus. But, by the time of her third solo show (at Curt Marcus Gallery in 1998), Craven had turned to commercial depictions of nature – Hallmark-style birds and super-sweet Bambis – using reproductions as the source of her idiosyncratic visual vocabulary.

'I was looking at Agnes Martin paintings when I was painting the soccer fields,' recalls Craven, referring to her art school efforts. 'Then I was Alex Katz's assistant from 1992, mixing colours and blowing up his drawings to his canvases, though he painted all his own paintings.' Agnes Martin? Alex Katz? These two seemingly disparate influences were brought together only once Craven began to repeat herself after the disaster of the fire. Working from memory, Craven had the audacity to use loosely worked brushstrokes, like Katz, to meticulously recreate her earlier paintings – identical twins of her original pictures of birds and deer – when anyone would have expected her to embrace Martin's fanatically controlled craftsmanship or a photo-realist style to achieve this act of reproduction. She managed to duplicate not only the images, but the brushwork itself, in this series of auto-reproductions.

For Craven, the canaries, budgies, parrots, and parakeets are akin to Martin's grids, an image that she can hang her process on. But she also admits that she delights in their tricky simplicity and nostalgia-ridden sentimentality. They bring her back to her very beginnings as an artist, when her mother dropped her off at The Little Flower Studio for art classes held in a elderly hobbyist's livingroom in her hometown of Woburn. 'I was ten years old, surrounded by all the old ladies,' Craven recalls, 'But I don't remember

From left
Yello Fello 1; Yello Fello 2, **2004,** oil on canvas, each 274 x 183 cm
COLLECTION OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AND THE ARTIST

Ann Craven ***Self-portrait in the studio,*** **January 2005**
COURTESY THE ARTIST

what I painted, just the brushes and the oils.' They also recall the give-away glassware her dad brought home from the gas station and her mother's optimistic approach to interior decorating, embracing flagstone and wood panelling as the epitome of taste. 'They are the world that I came from,' says Craven, 'Though my mother still doesn't understand the notion of kitsch – she asks me sometimes because its all over my press – I was surrounded by it when I was growing up.'

If Craven's focus was simply kitsch, or more specifically kitschy depictions of animals, then she would merely be repeating herself, as she remains focused on this imagery, show after show. But, Craven is not only exploring this vernacular, she is absolutely re-creating the same set of paintings, an act more akin to forgery than appropriation. So, for example, *Yello Fello I* and *Yello Fello 2*, a pair of nearly identical pictures that first appeared in her exhibition at Gasser & Grunert in Chelsea in 2002, reappear in Craven's 2004 solo show there, but on a larger scale. In fact, her entire solo show was a recreation of the previous gallery exhibition, duplicated at one-and-a-half times the size of the original canvases. Entering the gallery was magical and disturbing, a memory-game for those who have followed her work over time – did she change that painting? Is that one new? – yet, due to Craven's direct and fresh approach to paint, as vital and exciting as the first time around.

This act of resuscitation is Craven's uncanny survival technique, bringing viewers back to her work time and time again. Its efficacy is proven by the tale of one work, *Dear in Daisies* (1998), one of the few paintings to survive the fire because it was in storage at the Curt Marcus Gallery at the time. Ironically, the imagery that inspired this rescued work is a death scene from a movie, the sci-fi classic *Soylent Green* (1973) in which nature films are the only remnants of greenery on a pollution-scorched Earth and are shown only to the dying to comfort them as they pass away. With this background in mind, the saccharine scene of the fawn in a field of flowers carries a decidedly bitter aftertaste.

Craven was so relieved to have one pre-fire painting in her possession that she swore never to sell it. Instead, she produced duplicates of the painting in various sizes, showing *Dear and Daisies (The Life of Fawn)* (2002) and *Little Dear* (2002) at her first Gasser & Grunert show, then reviving the image as *Dear* for her 2004 exhibition there. Over the years, she turned down offers for the painting, and only relented to sell to the renowned collector Doris Amman, whom she met at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2003. 'That painting was the love of my life, but I knew it was going to a much better place,' Craven explains.

The death mask – turning a logo of popular culture into a near-religious icon – is prevalent in contemporary art, going back at least as far as Warhol's Marilyns. But, for Craven, who is more akin to Chuck Close than Warhol in her vibrant exploration of painting, it is life, not death, that offers endless possibilities of human reproduction. While the artist acknowledges *Soylent Green* as a key influence, another science-fiction film, *The Ring* (2002), provides a more helpful parallel for understanding her work. It features a cursed videotape with the ability to kill its viewers and a heroine who appreciates that the only antidote is to make, and share, copies of the tape with others. Craven knows that reproduction may also be the only way to survive, especially as an artist facing the cruel demands for ever more novelty in the contemporary art world.

Movies perform a similar function, growing larger in our lives with repeated viewings. As do rock-and-roll tunes that use repetition to seduce listeners, then achieve immortality through releases and re-releases on iPods or as elevator muzak. Rather than making us feel foolish for falling for this kind of brainwashing, Craven lets us give in to these guilty pleasures. By repeating herself, she encourages us to let go of the stringent constraints of originality, to free ourselves from the futility of this singular pursuit in contemporary art. Some may think of this as a cheap trick. But I think of her paintings are signs of optimism, even resiliency, in an art world where recycled cynicism too often passes for an original idea.

Ann Craven has a solo show at **Angstrom Gallery**, Texas, from 2 April to 3 May

Right
***Hello, Hello, Hello*, 2004**, oil on canvas, each 275 x 183 cm
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Left
Installation view of ***Ann Craven***, 12 March – 17 April, 2004 at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc, New York. From left: ***Dear (The Life of the Fawn)*, 2004**, oil on canvas, 244 x 275 cm; ***Hello, Hello, Hello*, 2004**, oil on canvas, each 275 x 183 cm; ***Dear in Daisies (The Life of the Fawn)*, 2004**, oil on canvas, 244 x 275 cm
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Ann Craven, *Dear and Daisies (The Life of a Fawn)*, 2002, oil on canvas, 14 x 18".

NEW YORK / BOSTON

ANN CRAVEN

KLEMENS GASSER & TANJA GRUNERT / ALLSTON SKIRT GALLERY

Two concurrent and complementary exhibitions of oil paintings from the past four years by Ann Craven attested to the artist's masterful treatment of natural imagery. With these colorful works—made after a variety of sources, including bird paintings by Ed Ruscha and Ross Bleckner, deer canvases by Gustave Courbet and Gerhard Richter, vintage illustrated field guides, and still and digital photographs—Craven has invented a unique vocabulary that proves her a gifted *animalier* and a significant markmaker. Her recent juicily painted birds perched among hollyhocks, cymbidium orchids, and berries provided—despite the scenes' Audubon-like arrangements—vehicles for the painter's unconventional amplifications of scale, heightened colors, and deliberate blurring of focus and distortion of perspective.

Craven works in a variety of sizes that range from eleven by fourteen inches to fifty by seventy-four inches; each work demonstrates her equal agility with paintbrushes large and small, whether it's a fine-artist's size 8 or a housepainter's five-inch brush. In fact, the New York show was mostly a pumped-up version of the Boston show: Almost every painting at Gasser & Grunert appeared in a smaller version at Allston Skirt Gallery, with the exception of the former show's monumental *Hello, Hello, Hello*, 2002. This exquisitely rendered triptych composed of the repeated giant image of an African grey parrot sitting among white-and-purple cymbidium orchids is a kind of avian homage to Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings. Each bird varies slightly in shading and detailing; luscious shingles of curvilinear strokes make up the feathers, hinting at a gutsy AbEx touch. Like Monet, whose gardens at Giverny provided the source for many of her soft-focus flowery backgrounds—she participated in an artist's residency there in 2000—Craven is a remarkably adept series painter. But rather than use a repeated motif to capture variations of light, she addresses issues of mass-media reproduction. The combinations of yellow canaries and synthetic-pink backgrounds of blurred hollyhocks and cherries in her several versions of *Yello Fello* (all 2002), suggest a greeting-card aesthetic.

Lest the viewer mistake these paintings for modified Hallmark images, however, it should be made known that another thematic source for the work was the 1973 sci-fi classic *Soylent Green*, in which twenty-first-century New Yorkers live in an overpopulated, sunbaked world. Craven's large-scale *Dear in Daisies*, 1998, and smaller postscripts such as *Dear and Daisies (The Life of a Fawn)*, 2002, and *Little Dear*, 2002, feature an innocent-looking young fawn nestled in a sylvan field of daisies—the deer image lifted directly from the film-within-a-film of *Soylent Green*'s beautiful and antiseptic planned-death clinic called Home. (In the scene, Edward G. Robinson's dying character, Sol Roth, listens to soft classical music and gazes at movies of how Earth once was.) Using Photoshop and other digital tools to combine and layer images of the deer taken from the apocalyptic movie, along with scanned photographs of daisies on vintage postcards, Craven created her own ersatz nature.

While often linked stylistically with Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton, Craven does not share their allegiance to kitsch teen worlds. Rather, her nostalgia has to do with the place of nature, and perhaps even of nineteenth-century nature painting, in a world that is becoming more and more like that of *Soylent Green*. Her heartfelt canvases, touched by an almost religious reverence for the planet's flora and fauna, are themselves products of an artificial, digitally enhanced reality.

—*Francine Koslow Miller*

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Ann Craven

Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York

Ann Craven
Yellow Fello II
2002
Oil on linen
183 × 107 cm

Ann Craven's painting *Winner* (all works 2002) depicts a peach-pink budgerigar looming towards us like a diminutive Godzilla. Set against a brilliant blue sky, it assumes an almost monumental presence that is at once comic and slightly menacing. Like Jeff Koons' giant floral *Puppy* (1991), *Winner* presents the unsettling spectacle of absolute innocence rendered unexpectedly powerful and imposing through an unnatural change of scale. It's a simple enough conceit, but an effective one, which unfortunately makes the remainder of Craven's new body of paintings feel all the more inadequate.

Flanking *Winner* in the gallery's front room are a series of depictions of fawns picking their way, as fawns are wont to do, through idyllic, sun-dappled clearings. Most of the brushwork in *Gray Day (The Life of a Fawn)*, *Little Dear, Dear* and *In the Daisies* is suitably effortless and airy, but a hint of self-conscious tricksiness creeps in with Craven's deliberate blurring of foreground and background. The suggestion of rapid movement and the immediately visible influence of photography are somewhat at odds with the tranquil and traditional nature of the image, but the disjunction is so slight that the impression it leaves soon fades. Craven's occupation of an ambiguous middle ground is a well-intentioned attempt at subtlety that, sadly, comes off as mere indecision.

In the main gallery eight large and two smaller paintings return us to Craven's favourite subject: exotic birds. Again the artist employs a range of strokes to separate foreground and background, emphasizing the status of each painting as a montage of disparate elements. Thus birds and flowers are deliberately mismatched, their juxtaposition contrived rather than observed. Craven's feathered friends are of the cutest, kitschiest varieties, orange, yellow and blue, backed by orchids, roses and berries. She is also not averse to inventing her own sub-species, but even those birds that she renders unaltered look fantastic, unreal. Her paintings' saccharine, rose-tinted aesthetic alludes to an idealized view of nature, hinting at the exploitation of non-human life for all-too-human ends – from the keeping of pets to the destruction of the rainforests – but the context is so spare that potential interpretations are virtually limitless, any individual question that might have been worth pursuing drowned out by a twittering chorus of addenda.

Craven displays a fondness for working in series, and the show includes a number of virtually indistinguishable variations, such as *Yellow Fello I* and *II* and a triptych, *Hello, Hello, Hello*. Thus she holds out the promise of a genuine system, but delivers, in the end, mere formula. If her interest is in classification (with which ornithologists are traditionally obsessed), then her intent remains unclear. Lacking the zeal of a John James Audubon, she makes no attempt to exploit the diversity of her chosen species. If her compulsion to repeat is, as seems more likely, a post-Pop reflex action, we are still left searching for the beef. It is as if, in representing the same subject over and over again, Craven is attempting to discover within it, or invest it with, an emotional charge that never materializes. And while even this grimly alienated process might have commanded some interest of its own had it been enacted with a little more commitment, there's not enough here to suggest even this rather debased possibility.

If anything, Ann Craven's real talent is for keeping us guessing, not through intrigue but through sheer blandness.

Painters from Alex Katz to Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik have been named as Craven's precursors, but the comparisons are mostly superficial. Sure, her imagery is girlish and sweet, and perhaps ironic, according to some nebulous, catch-all definition of the word, but as yet she lacks both the stylistic assurance and the endearing eccentricity of her elders. A recent online debate saw participants struggling to uncover Craven's motivation for making such fundamentally boring images, and concluding that their only possible value other than paying the gallery rent might lie in a kind of self-deprecating comment on 21st-century painting's fruitless search for a decent subject. Of course, were this the case, Craven would have made a pretty convincing argument for her own obsolescence and could now, by rights, retire to the country. But again, she simply isn't extreme enough. If anything, her real talent is for keeping us guessing, not through intrigue but through sheer blandness. The only test of the viewer contained in her work is one of endurance; exactly how long, it seems to ask, are you willing to go along with this? For the birds, man.

Michael Wilson