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ANN CRAVEN
by Sarina Basta

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Ann Craven

PAINTING TO ITS BARE ESSENCE

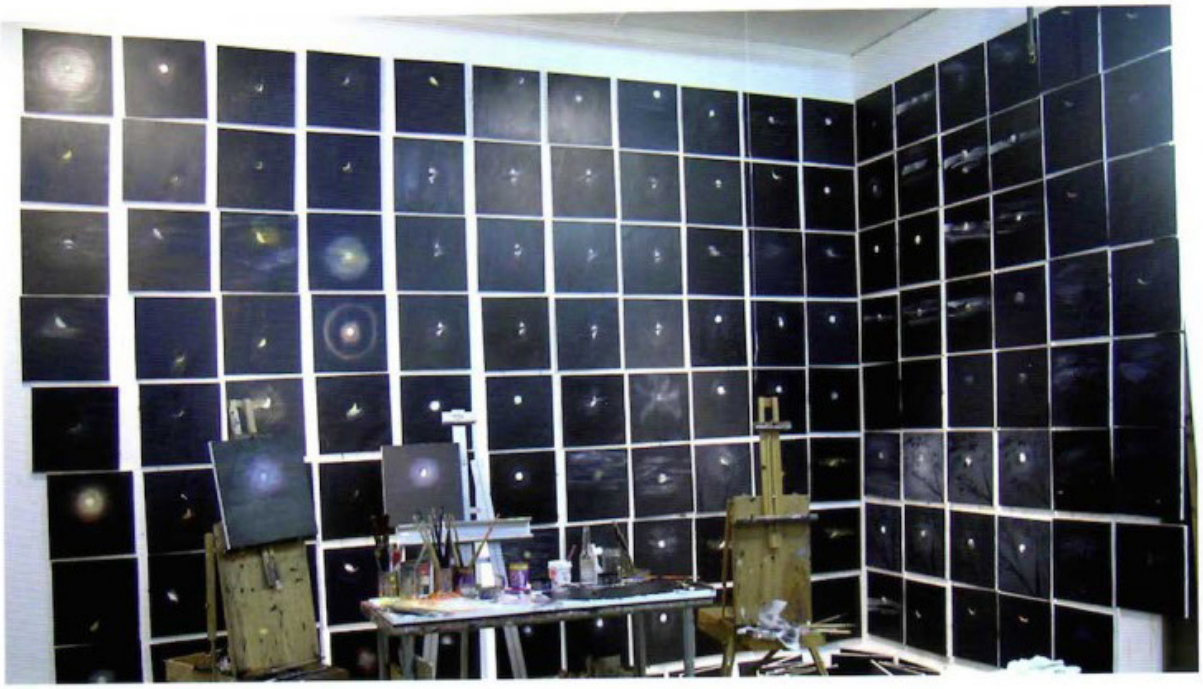
Sarina Basta

ANN CRAVEN'S EXHIBITIONS have the richness of an opera populated with animal characters conscious of having an audience and posing for it. Birds, deer, moons, cats or stripes are repeated in closely copied sequences and subtle variations. The portraits are often derived from existing reproductions of fauna in calendars, cards and the covers of high-school notebooks, but with the enhanced allure of paint strokes that have mindfully awakened them. Exhibitions have the richness of an opera populated with animal characters conscious of having an audience and posing for it.

Adaptations and animations give the impression that the animals might be freely moving about in Craven's universe. Many of these paintings' backgrounds are appropriated: in *Two Birds for Johnny Cash* (2008) doves from Patti Smith's album cover *Wave* stand on an inverted version of Georgia O'Keeffe's painting, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit IV* (1930), while in *Barred Owl Calla Lillie* and *Calla Lillie Fade* (both from 2007) various birds are on O'Keeffe's *Calla Lillies with Red and Anemone* (1928). Figures also return in reconstructed habitats; the big-bosomed canary of *Yello Fello with Cherries* (1998) is transposed to *Yello Fello 1* (2001) and *Yello Fello 2* (2002). Adaptations and animations give the impression that the animals might be freely moving about in Craven's universe.

Within a repertoire of recurrent backgrounds and characters, the real subject of Craven's work is the painting process. Craven often executes a brushstroke over three canvases in rapid sequences; one paint stroke at a time, repeated three times, lightly and confidently. By painting three canvases at once, she decodes one movement into three, in a way distilling the process of painting. Craven is one of the rare artists to have ever presented four identical figurative paintings at a time in an exhibition, as she did at Conduits in Milan, with the sequentially named works *Puff*; *Puff, Puff*; *Puff, Puff, Puff*; and *Puff, Puff, Puff, Puff* (all 2009). It's a strategy that places her within a specific lineage of painting.

Opposite: ANN CRAVEN, Against the Stream, 2008. Installation view at SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Top left: ANN CRAVEN, Yello Fello with Cherries, 1998. Oil on canvas, 76 x 61 cm. Private collection, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz. Top right: ANN CRAVEN, YELLO FELLOW #1, 2004. Oil on canvas, 457 x 183 cm. Collection Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.



In Greenberg's terms, "The very values in the name of which [the poet or artist] invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God — and here I use 'imitate' in its Aristotelian sense — but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the 'abstract.' In turning his attention away from the subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. […] If, to continue with Aristotle, all art and literature are imitation, then what we have here is the imitation of imitating." Craven is no longer copying an image — she is copying a painting, her painting. In these sets of operation, she stands as both the disciple and the master.

In 2008, Craven executed a 15-foot mural of lines on the corrugated metal gate of the SculptureCenter in New York. This mural was painted over Olivier Mosset's *Golden Shower*, a partial commentary by Mosset on Buren's authored stripes. Craven covered these lines with monumental magenta and blue stripes, slightly off register, blurred, derived from the palette of a 'bird' painting. Craven called the work *Against the Stream*, after a 1946 romance novel by Barbara Cartland. Craven's approach is a loaded and good-natured commentary on the male lineage of painting where the common element is the imitation of the imitation of painting. But, unlike Daniel Buren for example, her lines derive from the palette of a previously executed work — something growing out of something else. Taking over a whole show, Craven's stripe paintings — stacked side by side onto a wall — become a pure exercise in abstraction; exhibited together with her figurative works they are meta-commentaries on painting, while demonstrating Craven's mastery of rhythm and form. Almost paradoxically, the gestural exercises inherent to her process distill painting to its bare essence, finding their origins in action painting. At the same time, like in Gerhard Richter's *Stag* (1963), the artist's photographic eye gives an intensified foreground/background distinction, an out of focus habitat to her characters. Through the process of repetition, intensification and scaling, the images are turned into what they never were before: icons, sometimes even mirroring themselves. And much like one of Andy Warhol's "Marilyns" or "Elvises," the multiplied images of "Puff" stare back at the viewer.

In 2006 Craven painted over 400 moons in the span of 10 months, live from the viewpoint of her Harlem rooftop and the coast of Maine. A few months later, she methodically copied the same 400 'originals' into a new set. Both bodies of work were then shown simultaneously in New York and Cincinnati. The paintings themselves seem to almost depict the optics of a camera or that of a spotlight. The moon wanes and waxes, shadows occur against a black background like snapshots or film stills when captured in numbered sets of 3 up to 100. Craven's friendship with artist Amy Granat also led the filmmaker to show her moons on film, and to work with Craven on the piece *Moonshadow Part 1* (2007). Craven's moons are more structuralist than their romantic subject can imply. Within an exhibition context such as *Shadows Moons*, the colder eyes of the camera from which most of Craven's images originate are turned back onto the paintings.

It could be argued that the sensuous display of nature, color and form is too sweet to be entirely innocent. The careful depiction of textures, plumage, patterns and fur capture a spirit of intensification. Elizabeth Grosz, in her anthology of lectures in *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008), describes intensification as a state when things in nature are even more hyperbolic or complex than they need to be out of an excessive libidinal energy, making the creature more vulnerable to predators in exchange for its visual or auditory potency. This is how, in many ways, some of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings deliver a sensuous charge — not only through a literal analogy between a flower and sexual organs as much as through a dionysian saturation of color and form, at a scale and with an availability that invoke an immediate sensorial response in the viewer. The mixture of libidinal bravado in the light of the purely functional is something Craven masters without losing herself within it.

It takes guts to paint deer, birds and flowers in an age when no one bats an eye at the pornographic content of a Thomas Ruff. Craven as provocateur comes through in paintings such as *Deer on Dots* (2002 and 2006), a figure of a deer placed in the artist's kitchen upon a magazine reproduction of a Damien Hirst. To use a small square cat painting, *Shadow's Moon* (2008), as a central piece in a major exhibition is somewhat startling. Sourced from a French box of matches, a stand-in for her cat Shadow, it derives its title from *Rabbit's Moon* (1950 with subsequent versions in 1972 and 1979), a film by Kenneth Anger, where a rabbit stands-in for

the moon. This work can be compared to Kippenberger's quaint dog painting from the 1981 series "Dear Painter, Paint for Me" executed by a commissioned painter after photographs provided to him by the artist. If Kippenberger uses his status as an icon to denounce the commodification of art and celebrity (through the accessorized portrait of a dog), Craven uses the same genre, and with equal humor, to reify the ordinary to the status of an icon (other examples include her *Farrah Fawcett Bird* from 2006). It also seeks to address itself to a wide public, while engaging the specificity of painting and the image in a digital world.

In this regard, a quiet yet dramatic scene of the science fiction film *Soylent Green* (1973) is a central influence in Craven's work. Within the hyper-sophistication of a death clinic in a world on the verge of an apocalypse, the euthanized client, Sol, lies in a death chamber, surrounded by huge projections of a pastoral living nature that once was. The music that accompanies this visual procession garnishes the individual's timed death, and the tragedy of the moment is in sharp contrast to the bliss and aesthetic pleasure of viewing. The client's own immediate reality is disassociated from what they see — this is a paradise they will never come to experience, at a scale and a proximity they could otherwise never experience, shown through a video databank. Similarly, Craven's source materials are images we identify as nature, even though they are only part of a mediated reproducible reality and a collective memory. Everyone watches the same movie as they are programmed to die. As Guy Debord points out in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), "Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at."

The repetition factor is one that pervades the work of many of Craven's contemporaries such as Wade Guyton, Josh Smith and Kelley Walker. If Craven's process of copying her own paintings is primarily conceptual, it is also a safeguard against loss. When her studio burnt to the ground in 1999, she was forced to start from scratch. After retreating to Giverny's Le Jardin de Claude Monet residency program, Craven started again with a renewed drive. If her paintings are not directly about loss, the process of their obsessive repetition might be. The loss of her parents was another trauma Craven had to contend with, to which she responded with flowers, literally and figuratively. In 2010, painting from life, she started draining these bouquets of color, working only with grays much like Luc Tuymans, or before him Gerhard Richter — without this time working from photography. In describing Richter's approach to social history, trauma and grief, Kaja Silverman, in her book *Flesh of My Flesh* (2009), puts forward Walter Benjamin's notion of redemption in discussing Richter's transposition of subjects and repeated abstract treatments of the image. She also draws on his admittance to drawing from *Stimmung*, state of mind, or mood, an empathetic link between the author and subject, however formally his works like to be described by critics. Similarly in Craven's case, the bouquet paintings — one of the most iconic of all still life subject matter — are not capturing loss itself, but the adornment of loss, converted into the more aesthetic moment of the gift; the gift being a gesture that can be endlessly repeated.

Less about the characters themselves, Ann Craven's work is about constructing icons through a mastery of contemporary visual language while inscribing herself within a history of painting. There is something unique about the energy that pervades these works — and an uncommon mastery of a unique aesthetic language and painterly process. Before all else, Craven's paintings are about making a Craven — the experience of an image, and the story of a painting. ■

Sarina Basta is a curator and art critic based in New York, where she co-runs Kunstverein NY.

Ann Craven was born in Boston in 1969. She lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 2010: Maccarone, New York. 2009: CIAP, Hasselt (B); Conduits, Milan; LHK, Paris. 2008: Sculpture-Center, New York; FRAC Champagne-Ardenne; Reims (F); Delaware Center for Contemporary Art, Wilmington (DE); Knoedler & Co., New York; Shane Campbell, Chicago. 2007: Mandrake, Los Angeles. 2006: Catherine Bastide, Brussels; Klemens Gasser + Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York. 2005: Angstrum, Dallas (TX): The New York Horticulture Society, New York. 2004: Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles; Paolo Curti / Annamaria Gambuzzi & Co., Milan; Klemens Gasser + Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York; Mario Diacono, Boston (MA). 2002: Klemens Gasser + Tanja Grunert, Inc., New York; Allston Skirt, Boston (MA).

Opposite: Ann Craven Studio, New York City, 2006. Top left: ANN CRAVEN, Two Birds for Johnny Cash, 2009. Oil on canvas, 152 x 122 cm. Courtesy Maccarone, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz. Top right: ANN CRAVEN, Deer on Dots, 2006. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 cm.