

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2006

ANN CRAVEN

by Nick Miller

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A hint of the uncanny shadows the deer that are painter Ann Craven's constant muses, and not only because she has artist been known to derive her subjects from calendar reproductions, film stills, and pairings 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".

