

ANN CRAVEN, ACROSS MANY MOONS

by Christopher Knight



by Ann Craven, "Moon (Crescent with Blue Sky and Trees, Cushing, Maine, 9-4-14, 9.35 PM)," 2014, oil on canvas. (Hannah Hoffman Gallery)

When Ann Craven paints the moon, Earth's only natural satellite is more a fugitive absence than a declared presence.

Underpainting in white or off-white, sometimes tinged with pink or yellow, is carved out in a circular or crescent shape by surrounding strokes of dark blue or purplish paint. The moon, reasonably enough, is constructed as a function of its environment.

At Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Craven shows 56 moon paintings, almost all of them 14 inches square, made near her studio in coastal Maine. Plein air painting – on site, out of doors -- isn't usually a nocturnal pastime, but Craven has been at it for nearly two decades.

Lined up around the room, the lovely repetition of moons turns typical serial imagery into something distinctive: Rather than a direct dialogue with the shifting nuances of ephemeral daylight, in the manner of Monet's meditations on grain stacks, lily pads or the facade of Rouen Cathedral, Craven converses with light's reflected glow.

Sometimes tree branches cascade across the view or clouds slice across the orb, like the knife across an eyeball in "An Andalusian Dog." Explosive curlicues of color surrounding some are painting's equivalent for the aurora

borealis or an approaching storm. The ultimate banality of the subject matter is an ideal foil for Craven's painterly emphasis.

Six large paintings, several of owls and doves, their feathers an array of lively brushwork and candy-colored hues, complete the show. Forget Audubon: These are birds as displays of painterly bravura in which Craven engages – and happily overwhelms – the natural world.