

NEWCITY ART

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TO CAPTURE THE MEMORY OF LIGHT: A REVIEW OF ANN CRAVEN'S "PROMISE (BIRDS FOR CHICAGO)"

by Cody Tumblin



Ann Craven, "Green Horizontal Promise," 2019, Oil on canvas, 48h x 60w in. Courtesy of the Artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Evan Jenkins

I have always been enamored with Ann Craven's ability to capture the joy of painting. Over the past few decades, Craven has developed a diverse ecosystem of moving parts that celebrates the many facets of painting production: she paints intimate portraits of birds and flowers, plein air paintings of the moon, paintings of stripes made from leftover palette paint, and paintings that are palettes themselves used to make said paintings. When I last saw her work three years ago at Maccarone in New York, Craven was showing a wide range of these subjects in an assortment of dimensions.

In contrast, Craven's solo exhibition at Shane Campbell, "Promise (Birds for Chicago)," appears to be a distillation of these capacities. Craven has hung twelve portraits of birds, all four-by-five feet and evenly spaced throughout the gallery, and one twenty-foot long painting of diagonal stripes that stretches out along a single wall. The portraits are nearly identical images from one canvas to the next, and there are only two variations of subjects. Six feature a small blue bird with an orange chest surrounded by yellow orchids, and in the remaining five paintings is a bright yellow bird with an assortment of pink cherry blossoms and red cherries on all sides. The most marked difference from one canvas to the next is the background color, a rotation of charcoal black, periwinkle blue, canary yellow, Kelly green, and a vibrant red-orange.

Because the paintings vary in only slight perceptible changes from canvas to

canvas, they function much like a burst of photographs, the flickering shutter capturing the fragmented whole of a moving image. The depth of the paintings themselves are a shallow, short focal range. Each bird is painted with thick impasto brushwork and is the most defined and in-focus area of the painting, while the surrounding flowers and branches are reworked, while wet, with large sweeping brushstrokes, into a soft blur that suggests a quiet motion.

I spoke with Craven at her opening, and she almost immediately began showing me pictures she had taken of Monet's haystack paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago, remarking on his miraculous use of light. We also discussed Craven's Italian grandmother, from whom she received many books of flowers and birds after her passing, eventually becoming the source imagery for the paintings in the show. "Birds are a very superstitious thing for Italians, and yet my grandmother still kept these books in the house," she told me.

I can see how Craven is drawn to Monet in the way he chases the memory of light. By revisiting the same subject repeatedly, painting in dazzling refractions of color as the day waxed and waned, Monet was able to capture the many shifting guises of light. The changing light transformed the subject, again and again, never reappearing as quite the same thing. In a similar way, Craven revisits the image of the bird perched on a branch, conjuring its likeness to the canvas over and over, in an endless ethereal procession. Even when we revisit a memory, it is often a fading phantom tucked behind the darkness of our eyelids, slowly taking shape as we reconstitute its innumerable colors, sounds and edges. Each time we recall the image, the details change ever so slightly and maybe some small portion of its reality dissipates with each visit until we have forgotten entirely.

In recent conversations with Craven over email, she described her grandmother as a fiercely vibrant feminist who shrugged off the absurdity of birds carrying ominous tidings and took to studying and collecting books about them. Now carrying the same books and painting their bold and colorful pictures with titles like "Yellow Horizontal Promise" and "Pink Thinking of You (on Black)," Craven successfully conjures up the emotional resonance left behind in her grandmother's well-worn pages. Searching beyond the cheery countenances of her paintings, we may also stumble upon some unknown warmth hidden there.