

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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HANGING ON FOR DEAR LIFE: ANN CRAVEN AT KARMA

by Zach Seeger



Ann Craven, Woodpecker (and the Moon), 2021, 2021, oil on canvas, 84 × 72 inches

Contributed by Zach Seeger / “It’s in the eyes,” a teacher told me about a Giacometti painting that hung on the wall in his den. “The sitters stare blankly and persistent. We stare back.” Ann Craven’s current exhibition “Animals Birds Flowers Moons” at Karma, separated into three locations, is a series of paintings of birds and other animals set against the moon that blearily share our collective disbelief and exhausted gaze. Their eyes betray their awareness of their privileged position as creatures that are free to move, travel, sit and do nothing, hovering above a crumbling world. Craven masterfully accomplishes this heightened aloofness not so much with the kitschy tropes of pre-teen suburban mall posters as with the casual dispatch of sharp, luscious painting. In insouciant calligraphic flourishes, her swooping brush strokes lather the canvas, seducing the viewer. Colors ease unmediated from tube to brush to canvas.

In the past, content essentially served as a vehicle for Craven’s endurance-based painterly bravado: she applied her robust colors with drags, smears, and dives that displayed visual beauty with only passing concern for what they were depicting. This show is less frenetic, more patient and pensive. The work in each space,

though not a cohesive series in itself, manifests a steady preference for the same scale (large) and source material (animals in nature) – reflecting, it seems, the tender joy Craven now takes in painting.

The real subjects of this show, of course, are all of us – artists, Zoomers, collectors, and others – whose lives have been suspended en masse in rote purgatory in the face of pandemic and discord. To keep going, Craven paints. Apparently driving her now is an evolved affection for the diverting rituals of everyday life. What might have once been novelties for her – bird watching, baking bread, gardening – have become the primary measures of time. So much of Craven’s work has turned on dazzling painterly wit that she must have found it disorienting to work without a defined audience or a clear sense of moving forward. But she persisted, and very effectively. You can feel her falling for her subjects as she anthropomorphizes their behavior, settling in with them. They are not merely transient depictions, but rather a durable record of painting in – and coping with – a trying moment with no clear end.