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ANN CRAVEN'S MOONLIT MEDITATIONS

by Julie Schneider



Ann Craven, "Moon (Green Haze Full, Cushing), 2023," detail (2023), oil on canvas (all photos Julie Schneider/Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

ROCKLAND, Maine — For Ann Craven, to paint blooms, branches, animals, and night skies, with their cycles of life, death, and renewal, is a way to mark the passage of time. About three decades ago, the artist started to record moonrises from a beach in Maine for a solo show comprised of 101 *en plein air* moon paintings. Ever since, this theme has become a mainstay in her oeuvre — and moon works form the luminous through line of her mid-career survey, *Ann Craven: Painted Time (2020–2024)*, at the Farnsworth Art Museum.

The exhibition opened in May as part of a trio of concurrent Maine museum shows that celebrate Craven as the recipient of the 2025 Maine in America Award. This slate of solo shows included three rotations of moon paintings at Bowdoin College Museum of Art and a mini spotlight at Portland Museum of Art. *Painted Time* features 30 gestural, wet-on-wet oil paintings that the artist made within the past four turbulent years, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic. The show is organized into sections focused on moons, trees, flowers, and birds — motifs that Craven returns to frequently, often meticulously reproducing her previous paintings by hand. She started this replication practice after losing nearly all of her artwork and photographic documentation in a studio fire in 1999. In the aftermath, she recreated some of her destroyed pieces from memory. Now, this spirit of remaking buttresses her creative practice.

For each "revisitation," as Craven calls her re-paintings, she channels her past movements to make the same marks, thus producing the same compositions again and again, like a dancer following the footsteps of familiar choreography. Bearing these repeated gestures, her canvases double as vessels for memory. She adds

another archival layer by retaining the canvases that she uses as palettes, smeared with globs of paint, sketches, and scrawled notations, and embedding diaristic dates and details in the titles, as seen in “Untitled (Trees, Portraits, 11-24-24 to 12-24-24)” (2024). Through this idiosyncratic creative-archival practice, Craven develops muscle memory and builds a bulwark against loss and forgetting.

Looking closely at a grouping of Craven’s duplicate artworks is like playing a game of “spot the difference.” Displayed together, her larger-than-life robin paintings, for example, share an identical color palette and composition: Each portrays a bird perched upon a branch, set against a dreamy swirl of lush leaves and pastel blossoms. But minute mutations in the brushstrokes reveal subtle variations. Something shifts with every refrain. Here, as in nature, change is a constant, generative cycle.

Moons, however, dominate the exhibition. More than half of the paintings are devoted to the subject: yellow moons streaked with clouds, pink areola moons framed by tree branches, vases of dahlias flanked by lemon moons, peach moons with glowing concentric rings that melt into ocean waves. In a film screened in an adjoining room, the artist is shown working on a New York City rooftop at night, her three side-by-side easels romantically lit by white candles. As the moon rises, the clouds drift and the nocturnal colors shift. With each flick of her brush, Craven attempts to preserve these fleeting moments with all the ritual and reverence of a poet murmuring a prayer into the ether.

In *Painted Time*, Craven taps into the moon’s timeless current of collective experience, framing its celestial light and eternal return as a steady source of solace, as well as a template for transformation: The moon slims to a sliver and leaves vanish from tree branches, but always they emerge anew, signaling hope for a new beginning.