

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Modern Painters  
March 2005

## Emerging Artists | You Must Remember This

Ann Craven's mnemonic devices  
by Barbara Pollack

Like the mythological Phoenix, Ann Craven's paintings rose from the ashes of a tragedy that would have put an end to most artists' careers. In 1999, while she was away over Thanksgiving weekend, a fire broke out in her loft in the meatpacking district of Manhattan. It destroyed everything — all her possessions and artworks, as well as every last slide and scrap of documentation. It took her a year to recover. But when Craven returned to the easel, she dedicated herself to the uncanny task of recreating the originals, painting the same imagery over and over and over again.

'I just wanted to embrace all the artworks I had lost, so when I got back I started painting from memories, just trying to replicate what had been destroyed,' says Craven, sitting in her new loft space in Harlem, surrounded by lush, colourful oil paintings of parakeets and cockatoos. It's easy to see that she is still visibly shaken by recollections of the fire, and it's just as easy to fall under the spell of the sentimentality of the works, painted with sensuous brushstrokes in oil, that hang on the studio wall. Yet, it would be a serious mistake to think of Craven as either a worthy survivor or a champion of kitsch. Her project is much more conceptual, rooted in ideas about the function of painting, especially in this age of jpeg files and washed-out reproductions.

'Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,' Walter Benjamin once wrote. Like

Benjamin, Craven is examining the durability of a painted icon in a world that consumes mass imagery at record speeds. She has intentionally chosen pictures that carry very little art-historical baggage. Instead, she selects cutesy birds and dewy-eyed fawns — the kind found on potholders and coffee mugs at roadside souvenir shops. She enlarges these specimens of kitsch iconography to create larger-than-life portraits, forcing her audience to reexamine their intuitive dismissal of pictures 'only a grandmother could love'.

Craven has always been mining this particular vein of Americana, even back at Columbia University's MFA Studio Program, which she attended from 1990 to 1992. But, she could not convince her professors, as she still has trouble convincing some art critics, that her interest was not some post-Koonsian celebration of middlebrow aesthetics. She was simply focused on painting, on the 'wet-on-wet' application of oils, looking for the most commonplace subject matter to avoid distractions from the process itself. In graduate school, she focused on pictures of soccer fields and her first gallery show (at Lauren Wittels Gallery, SoHo, in 1993) featured depictions of the moon in various phases. The subjects were simple and uncluttered, so her impeccable and expressive brushwork would be the focus. But, by the time of her third solo show (at Curt Marcus Gallery in 1998), Craven had turned to commercial depictions of nature — Hallmark-style birds and super-sweet

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Bambis – using reproductions as the source of her idiosyncratic visual vocabulary.

'I was looking at Agnes Martin paintings when I was painting the soccer fields,' recalls Craven, referring to her art school efforts. 'Then I was Alex Katz's assistant from 1992, mixing colours and blowing up his drawings to his canvases, though he painted all his own paintings.' Agnes Martin? Alex Katz? These two seemingly disparate influences were brought together only once Craven began to repeat herself after the disaster of the fire. Working from memory, Craven had the audacity to use loosely worked brushstrokes, like Katz, to meticulously recreate her earlier paintings – identical twins of her original pictures of birds and deer – when anyone would have expected her to embrace Martin's fanatically controlled craftsmanship or a photo-realist style to achieve this act of reproduction. She managed to duplicate not only the images, but the brushwork itself, in this series of auto-reproductions.

For Craven, the canaries, budgies, parrots, and parakeets are akin to Martin's grids, an image that she can hang her process on. But she also admits that she delights in their tricky simplicity and nostalgia-ridden sentimentality. They bring her back to her very beginnings as an artist, when her mother dropped her off at The Little Flower Studio for art classes held in a elderly hobbyist's livingroom in her hometown of Woburn. 'I was ten years old, surrounded by all the old ladies,' Craven recalls, 'But I don't remember

what I painted, just the brushes and the oils.'

They also recall the give-away glassware her dad brought home from the gas station and her mother's optimistic approach to interior decorating, embracing flagstone and wood panelling as the epitome of taste. 'They are the world that I came from,' says Craven, 'Though my mother still doesn't understand the notion of kitsch – she asks me sometimes because its all over my press – I was surrounded by it when I was growing up.'

If Craven's focus was simply kitsch, or more specifically kitschy depictions of animals, then she would merely be repeating herself, as she remains focused on this imagery, show after show. But, Craven is not only exploring this vernacular, she is absolutely re-creating the same set of paintings, an act more akin to forgery than appropriation. So, for example, *Yello Fello 1* and *Yello Fello 2*, a pair of nearly identical pictures that first appeared in her exhibition at Gasser & Grunert in Chelsea in 2002, reappear in Craven's 2004 solo show there, but on a larger scale. In fact, her entire solo show was a recreation of the previous gallery exhibition, duplicated at one-and-a-half times the size of the original canvases. Entering the gallery was magical and disturbing, a memory-game for those who have followed her work over time – did she change that painting? Is that one new? – yet, due to Craven's direct and fresh approach to paint, as vital and exciting as the first time around.

This act of resuscitation is Craven's



From left  
*Yello Fello 1; Yello Fello 2*,  
2004, oil on canvas, each  
274 x 183 CM  
COLLECTION OF THE WHITNEY  
MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AND  
THE ARTIST  
Ann Craven *Self-portrait  
in the studio*, January  
2005  
COURTESY THE ARTIST



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uncanny survival technique, bringing viewers back to her work time and time again. Its efficacy is proven by the tale of one work, *Dear in Daisies* (1998), one of the few paintings to survive the fire because it was in storage at the Curt Marcus Gallery at the time. Ironically, the imagery that inspired this rescued work is a death scene from a movie, the sci-fi classic *Soylent Green* (1973) in which nature films are the only remnants of greenery on a pollution-scorched Earth and are shown only to the dying to comfort them as they pass away. With this background in mind, the saccharine scene of the fawn in a field of flowers carries a decidedly bitter aftertaste.

Craven was so relieved to have one pre-fire painting in her possession that she swore never to sell it. Instead, she produced duplicates of the painting in various sizes, showing *Dear and Daisies (The Life of Fawn)* (2002) and *Little Dear* (2002) at her first Gasser & Grunert show, then reviving the image as *Dear* for her 2004 exhibition there. Over the years, she turned down offers for the painting, and only relented to sell to the renowned collector Doris Amman, whom she met at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2003. 'That painting was the love of my life, but I knew it was going to a much better place,' Craven explains.

The death mask – turning a logo of popular culture into a near-religious icon – is prevalent in contemporary art, going back at least as far as Warhol's Marilyns.

But, for Craven, who is more akin to Chuck Close than Warhol in her vibrant exploration of painting, it is life, not death, that offers endless possibilities of human reproduction. While the artist acknowledges *Soylent Green* as a key influence, another science-fiction film, *The Ring* (2002), provides a more helpful parallel for understanding her work. It features a cursed videotape with the ability to kill its viewers and a heroine who appreciates that the only antidote is to make, and share, copies of the tape with others. Craven knows that reproduction may also be the only way to survive, especially as an artist facing the cruel demands for ever more novelty in the contemporary art world.

Movies perform a similar function, growing larger in our lives with repeated viewings. As do rock-and-roll tunes that use repetition to seduce listeners, then achieve immortality through releases and re-releases on iPods or as elevator muzak. Rather than making us feel foolish for falling for this kind of brainwashing, Craven lets us give in to these guilty pleasures. By repeating herself, she encourages us to let go of the stringent constraints of originality, to free ourselves from the futility of this singular pursuit in contemporary art. Some may think of this as a cheap trick. But I think of her paintings as signs of optimism, even resiliency, in an art world where recycled cynicism too often passes for an original idea.

Ann Craven has a solo show at Angstrom Gallery, Texas, from 2 April to 3 May

Right  
*Hello, Hello, Hello*, 2004,  
oil on canvas, each 275 x  
183 CM  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



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*Left*  
Installation view of **Ann Craven**, 12 March - 17 April, 2004 at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc, New York. From left: **Dear (The Life of the Fawn)**, 2004, oil on canvas, 244 x 275 cm; **Hello, Hello, Hello**, 2004, oil on canvas, each 275 x 183 cm; **Dear in Daisies (The Life of the Fawn)**, 2004, oil on canvas, 244 x 275 cm  
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