

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Ann Craven

by Matthew Bede Murphy

Ann Craven's show at the Gasser and Grunert gallery reminds me of visits to an eccentric ornithologist I knew in upstate NY. The woman had rare and expensive birds that fluttered about her large country estate at will. Visiting her home meant enduring a cacophony of squawking catcalls and staccato rants but the rewards were a bouquet of fluttering little darlings that always kept me entranced. Ann Craven has an equally lively collection of painted birds at her disposal, minus the sound and smell. Her obsession with these fine-feathered friends has captured her artistic energy for the past 4 years. Executed in a Rococo/Van Gogh style, her big bird paintings take flight in a lavish way. Through use of scale, weight and repetition, Craven catches her woodland creatures in various states of activity. The result is a mix of psychology and pageantry. The richly painted parade of hot chroma colors makes it seem as if the subjects have come straight from the bird bath/salon (these chicks look done!).

The titles of paintings personify their subjects and allow for lasting questions. In "Winner," a bloated little songbird drapes her feathers as if they are a fur coat. Her beak is painted with a series of simple yellow strokes and the blue sky is hemmed in on all sides. There is cockiness to the little finch's full frontal stance while the clouds breeze by like cotton candy, embellishing the work with a humorous simplicity. Equally as instructive in title is a large garish number called "Uptown Bird." The profile of this sharp-nosed bird gives it definitive power. Tipped in a sharp diagonal, there is an aggressive nature to her talons, which grip the branch with sculptural intensity. Lacquered red and painted in a brazen number of strokes she looks ready to take flight. The jet-black flip and steely eye give yet another descriptive seasoning. Who is she and where does she shop?

While Ann Craven does love to capture birds in moments of telling stillness and magnify their beauty to monumental scale, she also has a penchant for deer in headlights. While the birds inhabit one room, there is a smaller and more reserved space set aside for her woodland creatures. The two almost identical pieces "Dear" and "Dear in the Daisies" catch their subjects in tranquil moments. Looking like a Bambi centerfold or a nostalgic Disney cell, the expression is surprisingly tame. It's almost as if they are saying "oh its just Ann painting me again." By emptying the canvas of gimmicks, tricks and distractions she is being infinitely more daring than many conceptualists. She lets the paint fall where it may.

In the back room there is a stunning painting that illustrates how intensely Craven feels for her subjects. This piece called "Hit Song Bird" depicts an open beaked bird caught in mid song. Its chest is swollen with air and the feathers on its stomach cascade from creamy white to pumpkin orange. The head and cap are a smeary blue, while the wings are delicately delineated and the eyes are highlighted with a cadmium white dollop. The background is as elaborate as any traditional Chinese Chepow, vibrant yet harmonious with the winged diva on the branch. The volume and color are spot-on, creating a powerful and subtle portrait.

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One could mistake these paintings as nothing more than greeting card kitsch, but that would be a disservice to the honesty that resonates in this work. Craven's efforts offer us a bird's eye view of attitude and identity. The sincerity of her application brings home a sense of both truth and grandeur and if the viewer allows a certain flight of fancy.

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