

## South End News

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### A companion guide to bird watching

Ann Craven's paintings, color, kitsch, our experience of them, how they communicate to us

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The legendary Polish filmmaker Ladislav Starewicz is regarded as a pioneer of the medium with the invention of the 3-D stop motion animated film (or puppet film) in 1910. In his experimental and progressive films, Starewicz would create extremely complex scenes mixing such things as dozens of simultaneously moving puppets, intricate blowing leaves, rhythmically beating lights, rippling water and rear-projected figures.

Even by today's standards, Starewicz's films are technically astonishing and visually dazzling. In the hand-colored fable, "Voice of the Nightingale" from 1923, the saturated pinks, violets and greens create a fantastic world where a bird convinces a young girl to set it free.

Ann Craven,  
Allston Skirt  
Gallery, 450  
Harrison Ave.  
Through Sept. 28.

As the bird turns its head with robotic thrusts from the branch of a Cherry-blossom tree, one cannot help but sense the tension between the eerie, fabricated natural world and the sensual, color-filled dream world.

The Boston-raised and New York-based painter Ann Craven, in her concurrent exhibitions at Boston's Allston Skirt Gallery and New York's Gasser and Grunert, invites us into her own fabricated natural world where birds of all colors and kinds gaze across the gallery at fawns grazing in the greenest of grass ("Fawn and Daisies," 2002).

Color-drenched flora is coupled with a big, blue sky which easily draws the viewer into a world not too dissimilar from that of Starewicz or even the Disney version of Felix Salten's "Bambi" (before we are

faced with its horrific de-blooming). Indeed, it is nature as we most want it to be, in our most cherished memories and lunchtime daydreams.

Aware of both the naturalist tradition of painters such as John Audubon as well as the mass appeal of a portrait of Elvis on black velvet, Craven walks the line between "sophistication and lousy taste" (to borrow Bill Arning's phrasing). Were it not for Craven's sincere interest in nature and her skillful handling of paint, the paintings would fall into the category of the latter. However, she carefully navigates through the formal presentation of her subject matter by contrasting the im-



Ann Craven, "Hit Song Bird," 2002, oil on canvas, 60" x 48".

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pressionistic, blurred backgrounds (which appeared in her work shortly after her time at the Foundation de Claude Monet in Giverny, France) with the careful, but painterly, brushstrokes of the figures themselves (which are reminiscent of Alex Katz, whom she previously assisted).

With that said, it is obvious that with this most recent body of work, Craven has come into her own with a unique blend of almost rebellious subject matter and an evocative style of representation. In our current art climate, where irony and pretension often abound, it is truly refreshing to witness a sincere pursuit.

Consequently, the impatient viewer might be tempted to dismiss a brightly painted pink bird upon a night-sky black ("Sorry," 2002) as a kitschy product of an assembly line of "starving artists." However, once Craven's paintings have our attention with their sensual appeal and monumental scale, she subtly prods the viewer with questions: What is it

about the nature of bright colors that causes us to dismiss them as cheap? Why do we as a culture continue to preserve our thoughts and ideas in paint? What is it about nature that appeals to us as humans and why do we romanticize the idea of untouched land? It is within these dialogues that Craven's paintings become much more than wonderful decoration (although this is a space which they comfortably occupy as well).

With a keen eye for color Craven's world is brought to life in delicious pinks, yellows and blues that trigger a range of emotions and offer an endless potential for visual pleasure. With a childlike naivety, her titles, such as "Red Breast," "Pink Pecker" and "Pecker With Cherries," humorously accentuate the numerous parallels between the voyeuristic tendencies of both gazing upon nature and sexual pursuit.

Craven is truly in tune with the

manner in which color has the unique capability to evoke emotional, sensual and even sexual responses. From the breathtaking appeal of a well-tended rose garden to the giddiness one feels when gazing into the deep blue eyes of a lover to the heart-throbbing excitement of a fleshy pink, there is a great dialogue between one's love of the natural world and one's experience of the most human of life experiences. As the poised, butterfly bird puffs out its chest and glances away from the viewer in "Yellow Fello with Cherries I," 2002, we are confident that this lovely creature enjoys our gaze. In fact, most of Craven's birds are indeed flirtatious and beckon for us to caress them with our eyes.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 51.3 million Americans spend their free time watching birds. Bird watching is the fastest growing outdoor activity in America. Although anyone can participate in

bird watching, only a focused eye can consistently hone in on the greatest of these joyous creatures. Lucky for us, some of the best bird watching is from the birdbath of our own backyard.

Ann Craven exhibits Wednesday through Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. For information, please call 617-482-3652 or visit [www.allston-skirt.com](http://www.allston-skirt.com). Craven's paintings are also on view at Gasser & Grunert, 524 West 19th Street, in New York City through October 5; for information, please call 212-807-9494.

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