

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

**Art Net
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Birds & Beasts by John Reed

Ann Craven, Sept. 4-Oct. 5, 2002, at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc., 524 West 19th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011



Ann Craven at Gasser & Grunert, installation view

At a time when rebellion is the primary form of conformism, and most of us have been shocked so many times that we barely jerk when we are touched by the enlightening intentions of some new cattle prod, Ann Craven's paintings of birds and deer are genuinely disarming. Having indulged ourselves and suffered through every spectacle, most of us, on the Chelsea amble, are prepared for just about any eventuality. Except this. Cute, big-eyed, brightly painted animals.

One may attempt to fit these 17 paintings into the generally approved kitsch category. Other birds have touched down lately -- such as, in stark contrast to Craven's birds, John Newsom's sado-birds. (More related to Craven's subtle anthropomorphism is Michael Joo's current show at Anton Kern, which includes many four-legged coyotes and a single five-legged one.) Cultural sentimentality is always an appealing target, whether it is bulls-eyed in the form of iconographic personas or objects, or pop-culture signifiers. Yet Craven's animals, for all the outward corollaries -- the brightness, the adorableness -- extend no invitation to an interpretation of sentimentality, and, therefore, no juxtaposition of irony.

At the opening of Craven's first show at Gasser & Grunert, one overheard a good deal of painterly debate on Craven's brush strokes. There's a bold variance at work -- from broad, blurring backgrounds to the fine feathers of Craven's canaries. In the

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bird paintings, Craven's avian figures "pop" from a somewhat diffused background. The technique, besides being dimensional, helps Craven to straddle the dividing line between ornithological study and a Tweety Bird cartoon. The soft focus of the background, as well as being common in *National Geographic*-type photography, implies the cell process of animation, in which the foreground figure, perpetually mobile, is suspended on a static scenic stage. By either reference, we are reminded that this creature was doing something before it was interrupted, and whether or not



Ann Craven
Stepping Out, 2002
oil on linen, 60 x 48 in.



Ann Craven
Stepping Out (detail), 2002
oil on linen, 60 x 48 in.

that something was enjoyable or tiresome to that creature, they'll likely go back to it when we go away.

There is a suspended reality to Craven's paintings, which is compounded by an inability to understand Craven's subjects -- to look across the expanse that is between them and us. An association is immediately made to childhood -- and the ethereal nature of recall. Like memories, Craven's simple images suggest larger cognitive and emotional roles. Colors, which might at first seem archetypal in their purity, are transformed, such as the case of the backdrops of Craven's yellow canaries, into a purple pink, a red pink, a green pink, a yellow pink and an orange pink. These slight variations create wholly independent environments, and suggest not only the similitudes of experience, but psychologies, by dint of minor differences, of unfathomable separateness.

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The one thing all the paintings have in common is the fixed stare of the subject -- be it pied mynah, white-tailed deer or African gray parrot. Across the inter-species divide, they look out, in terror and elation -- the thrill and threat of having made contact. Either you go or I go, say their postures. Always, we are on the brink of departure. In the black eyes of Craven's animals, we are faced with the seeming viability of an empathic exchange, as well as the impossibility of that communion.

Such fleeting instances are significant not only of memory, but of dreams and self-reflectivity. There is that moment when we all wonder how "here" we are, and if even that wondering isn't somehow illusory. We are real and absurd -- evolutionary wonders, and cartoons. Infinitely active, and infinitely divorced from the blurred settings behind us.

The canary peering out from Craven's announcement gives the impression of being one of those strangers on the subway -- those ones we wonder about, those ones that trigger our wondering about ourselves. And no, according to Craven, we are not the exotic animals that we fancied we were. We are just parrots, canaries, deer and starlings. World-over and common animals -- animals exported, owned and thoroughly understood.



Ann Craven
Dear, 2002
oil on linen, 50 x 74 in.

Even the deer, to some degree, carry with them the idea that they are preserved only for hunting. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder if all of Craven's animals are being viewed through the sight of a gun. The claws of her canaries are woefully inadequate to fend off the threat that we, the looker, engender. The animals that Craven chooses as our totems are those animals that, within the humanity context, are allowed to live.

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And yet, at the price of the subjugation of "wildness," Craven's animals -- defenseless and dependent -- have taken over the Earth. While the exact origin of Craven's particular pied myna is not readily apparent, as a New Yorker, she can't help but emphasize that all North American pied mynas (starlings) are descended from 100 birds released in Central Park in 1890.

The story of these European starlings is not so much remarkable as typical of Western take-overs -- a Shakespeare lover endeavored to introduce into North America every bird referenced by the bard. The tale of escaped parrots who now flock in San Diego is similar. Exciting, yes. Curious, yes. Nice for the parrots, yes. Environmentally catastrophic, yes.

And it's not just the trashcan birds and rose garden does, it's us. We too, are adaptable and insidious. Perhaps our animality is endangered -- but we are many. That said, our multitudinousness brings no kinship or unity. We are each alone in this new environmental constant. Only one painting in the show depicts more than a single animal -- and that pairing is an apology, and an evidence of isolation. The very title of the work, *I'm Sorry*, stresses the relationship between a couple (of canaries) who can only look at each other one eye at a time, and who are always, as well, looking at something else.

The triptych of African gray parrots, *Hello, Hello, Hello*, is emblematic of Craven's (characteristically American) lonesomeness. Multiples, which figure prominently in the show, are highlighted by the parrots -- both by the form of the triptych, and by the association of the linguistic repetition of parrots. (Interestingly, though Craven depicts the pied myna, the hill myna is a renowned repeater and talker, far more capable of imitating human speech than its chief rival, the African gray.)



Ann Craven
Hello, Hello, Hello, 2002
oil on linen triptych, 74 x 50 in. each panel

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The multiples of Warhol come to mind -- the comparison of Marilyn Monroe to a yellow canary being particularly appealing. Like Craven's canaries, the African grays, in their sameness and variety, are charged with potential energy. In their distinctive manner, the parrots tip their wings -- to take their flight of fancy, or flight of fear.

Unsettling and amiable, rigorous and spectral, Craven's animal portraiture is that of an environmentalist pursuing birds and beasts that have escaped the environment. She is the gamekeeper of the incidental zoo. And hers is the chronicle not of bared teeth and slashing claws, but of the tranquil conquest -- and her demeanor is not snarling, but chirping, and cooing, and just as charming and pleasant as the song of the wrong animal on the preservation.

JOHN REED is author of *A Still Small Voice* (Delacorte).

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