

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Studio Spotlight: Ann Craven, Painter

Joyce B. Korotkin

Ann Craven's studio in Harlem (in the middle of New York's most rapidly expanding art scene) is filled with the artist's overscaled paintings of birds. A born colorist, Craven's brilliant cobalt blues, Persian roses, buttery yellows and pinks are like candy for hungry post-modernist eyes. Painterly brushwork and an exquisite control of edges, both blended and crisply delineated, serve to bring the birds and their background of flowers from Monet's Giverny in and out of focus, which in turn evokes a timelessness that makes these images iconic.

Color, albeit gorgeous, is secondary to the subject matter, which is actually not birds at all but rather witty personified commentaries on human interactions. Images of birds portrayed in subtly recognizable, conversational groupings abound in various states of completion from pencil sketches to studies for finished works. One small, predominantly coral study slated to be redone large portrays three birds on a branch, their body language and expressive eyes implying a heated dialogue that recalls "gossiping magpies." Each bird is captured in kinetic mid-gesture; a sense of moment that is further distilled by atmospheric light.

Craven is known for her bird paintings, but a visit to the studio produces a surprise: a wall of remarkable small-scale portraits of the artist's acquaintances and collectors. Perceptive characterizations deftly and swiftly painted in three hours or less, they recall the delicate tonal harmonies of Elizabeth Peyton as well as the decoration of Matisse. Gazing from these works to the birds, one can discern similarities in expressions.

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223