

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

**Art Critical
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by **Benjamin Ia Rocco**

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Ann Craven, Hello Hello Hello 2004 oil on canvas, 108 x 72 inches each Courtesy Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, Inc.

Ann Craven's paintings at Gasser and Grunert are confounding. In terms of subject matter, they couldn't be more straightforward – deer in fields and birds on branches. One painting, one animal for the most part, all painted on monumental scale in saccharine colors. What makes them confounding, is that they are intentionally formulaic. If you know your next painting will look just like your last one, why paint it?

Craven's finely honed style draws heavily on contemporary German painting, particularly the work of its foremost representative, Gerhard Richter. Craven wipes her backgrounds, and allows her brushwork to show in the painting of the animals. Blemish free background, visible mark in the fore, just like a Richter abstraction. Unlike Richter, however, Craven is not interested in

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deconstructing how a painting is made. Instead, like Jeff Koons, Craven focuses on the mechanism of mechanical reproduction and its relationship to superficial beauty, i.e. kitsch. Or so it seems, judging from the fact that she literally paints the same painting multiple times as in "Deer" and "Deer in Daises" in Gasser and Grunert's first small room, and "Hello, Hello, Hello" in the rear.

The latter painting, a monumental triptych, illustrates most clearly the conundrum of Craven's work. The three long vertical panels repeat the image of a red-tailed gray parrot stretching its wings urgently. On the gray ground behind it, beautifully painted, hang purple flowers. The painting of the bird is lustrous, wet in wet scalloping feathers building to the orange eye of the sideways parrot glance. The handling here seems impassioned yet we know it can't be because it's copied as conscientiously as possible in each painting. Passion in painting has to do with inspired risk and invention. A painter intent on such passion seeks not simply to make a painting but to have an original experience in the making of it, to make a discovery. Craven gives us this kind of passion in the parrot and then throws it to the birds by repeating it in formula.

Originality, then, is not Craven's concern. Instead, she presents a stubborn lack of it. Craven's assembly line parrot paintings fall like the monotonous hellos of the parrot itself, all in service of a visual pun: three parrots, three hellos. Why paint then? She could easily make her point about dehumanizing mass production in another medium. Instead, she uses an inherently sensuous medium presumably to underscore her point by desensitizing it. Painting, by virtue of its uniqueness, draws attention to the lack thereof in so many human endeavors. The greater the apparent uniqueness, the keener the sense of its absence elsewhere. Like cultural theory, Craven's work functions in the opposite sense, taking you analytically step by step along the path mass culture travels. It offers virtuosity, ambition and artifice in service of this end, but remains obstinately contradictory as painting.

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