

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Bird's-eye view Ann Craven has two luscious large-scale paintings of an eastern bluebird up at Mario Diacono at Ars Libri. For Craven, a painter's painter, birds have proved over the years to be an opportunity to explore tone, composition, gesture, and material. For this reason alone they're worth a visit: the delicate brushwork at the breast, the clean lines of the claws.

But there's more at work here than beauty. Craven paints the same bird again and again. She duplicates paintings if she's got more than one show going at once. The element of reproduction conflates Andy Warhol's penchant for mass production, the student's copying a master, even cellular replication. And it all satisfyingly flies in the face of the hallowed ideal of the unique art object, which is so often associated with painting.

Craven copies her birds from photos. She sets them against grounds that refer to nature -- here, they're laced with hollyhocks. In "This way No This way (Aut Aut)" (the title is a reference to the philosopher Kierkegaard), Craven sets mirror images of the same bird against the fuzzy red and green of the hollyhocks, on a vivid pink ground. The pink is a more traditional background for portraiture, but here, it pops off the panel; it deliberately competes with the vitality of the bluebirds.

The two sides of the painting are imperfectly symmetrical; the gestures from one side enter into a dialogue with those from the other. Craven's works have a painterly grace, but almost despite their beauty, they're high voltage.

(Ann Craven: This way No This way (Aut Aut); At Mario Diacono at Ars Libri, 500 Harrison Ave., through Feb. 4; 617-560-1608.)

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