

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

TimeOut New York
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Ann Craven

At Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert
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by **Barbara Pollack**

"Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." -Walter Benjamin, Thesis on the Philosophy of History

By now, the beginning of the 21st century, an artist using a gallery space to critique the originality of the art object or the commodification of art is as old as the 20th century. By now—and let's leave Duchamp out of it for a minute—we all know about the artist who lived with a coyote, another who painted stripes on the floor, the one who cooked meals for a month and the other one who masturbated beneath the floor boards. Even emptied, the gallery can be challenging, as proven first by Yves Klein's *The Void* in 1958, reprised by Martin Creed's *The Lights Going On and Off* in 2001.

Reproduction or revival? That's the heart of the matter addressed by Ann Craven's current gallery show. It is in fact a recreation of her last gallery show at this very same gallery in September 2002, (which mirrored the works concurrently shown at Allston Skirt gallery in Boston that same month). Like a magnified version of Duchamp's *Boite-en-Valis*, this exhibition encapsulates and represents hand-made ready-mades so good that they may be mistaken for the original paintings.

Upon entering the gallery, there is an immediate sense of *déjà vu*. Haven't we all been here before? These paintings--of deer and birds--can all be found in their original locations. They look, if memory serves us right, exactly like the last ones. Craven isn't merely reworking her personal vocabulary. Nor is she unconsciously mimicking an earlier body of work. Instead, while other artists tremble at the accusation of repeating themselves, Craven moves right in where others fear to tread. Rather than make this conceptual framework a priority, allowing the idea to drain the life out of her work, Craven delivers a group of paintings as luscious and seductive as the first ones. And, by making them twice as big, she magnifies our closely held beliefs about the process of painting itself.

Dear, 2004, brings back to life the dewy-eyed Bambi of *Dear, 2002*, whose nearly-identical twin can also be found in the current incarnation of *Little Dear, 2002*; both generations of deer originate from the 1998 painting "*Dear in Daisies (The Life of a Fawn) 1998*". When last seen, this room of multiplied fawns seemed simultaneously awful and wonderful, a heart-felt homage to those kitschy renditions of nature found on coffee mugs and calendars and offered for sale at roadside stands outside the perimeters of national parks. Now, on second viewing, this suite seems even more disturbing. In fact, the deer that inspired the series is a specifically "unnatural" specimen pulled from a mediated source: the film-within-a-film that Edward G. Robinson lovingly gazes at as he lays dying in the 1973 sci-fi classic *Soylent Green*. In the sci-fi film, due to the ecological destruction of planet Earth, the wonders of nature are accessible

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only through reproductions. Here, in Craven's world, these simple, soothing images of nature make visible the wonders of reproduction.

Why repeat an already-successful gesture? This time around, the passage of time seeps into Craven's mimetic process and adds a new dimension to the experience of her work. Rather than standing in the gallery space and comparing one deer to another, we now must test these paintings against our own faulty memories. Can we recall what we saw just two years earlier? Do the works hold up? What does staying power and the test of time, two of the supposed hallmarks of great works of art, mean in age of attenuated attention spans?

Though Craven's use of mimeticism has been compared to Andy Warhol's silk-screens and Jeff Koons' banality series, her work is produced by her own hand, an achievement more akin to forgery than mechanical reproduction. In other words, reprisal or rip off? Working wet-on-wet, Craven builds gorgeously garish paintings that seem to be entirely spontaneous—without a whiff of mass-production or even tightly controlled photo-realist techniques—making the act of replication all the more remarkable. Hello Hello Hello, a triptych of identical parrots, dares us to find the differences. Likewise, Yello Fello 1 and Yello Fello 2 are two simultaneous depictions of the same chickadee, making it impossible to determine which is a copy of the other. As Craven's output continues, we are prepared for a deterioration of talent, as if the sequel can only be a pale imitation of the original. But, this artist defies this expectation, by producing work after work of the same image, without a single misstep or failure of attention.

Like the high-wire acrobat who cannot afford to get lazy no matter how many times he has performed his death-defying feats, Craven reenacts each painting as if it is a matter of life-and-death. Indeed, this strategy is the result of a brush with death, undertaken by the artist after a fire in her loft in 1999 destroyed all of her earlier paintings and her entire slide archive. Starting from scratch, Craven had to recreate in order to reclaim her creativity. It was nothing less than an act of self-preservation.

The success of this effort at resuscitation is not merely found in the fact that Craven continued painting, but in the ways that her approach coalesces with any number of examples of art conservation readily apparent in the culture. Recreations of artists' studios—think Pollock or Brancusi or O'Keefe—are regularly maintained by museums and estates to keep alive the myth of genius. Reproductions, from catalogue raisonnees to JPEG files, have now become standard means for archiving and distributing information on an artist's oeuvre. Craven's audacity is that she takes matters into her own hands, rather than awaiting posthumous posterity.

Rather than making us feel foolish for falling for her skillful act of tromp l'oeil, Craven's strategy lets us fall in love again with both sentimentality and painter-lieness. Just as we listen to the same love song, over and over again, or watch a home movie repeatedly, sentimentality causes us to let go of our need for originality and to relinquish our reservations about reproduction. By repeating herself, Craven acknowledges these repetitive activities—you could call it human reproduction—as something more than acts of futility or nostalgia. They are signs of optimism, even resiliency, in the face of the recycled cynicism of contemporary culture.

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