

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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ANN CRAVEN: ANIMALS BIRDS FLOWERS MOONS

by David Rhodes



Ann Craven, *Big Moon (After Pink Full Moon over Quiet Water)*, 2021, 2021. Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York.

Something seems to have changed between Ann Craven's last Karma exhibition in 2018 and *Animals Birds Flowers Moons*, the current exhibition. Individual works now advance a particularly estranging form of romanticism with even more boldness and adventure than before. Together with this, Craven's animal pantheon has expanded to include bear cubs, peacocks, woodpeckers, and horses. The paintings and watercolors here are all recent, so it is perhaps the restrictive circumstances of pandemic life that resulted in a longing, nostalgia, childhood memory: notional time travel rather than geographic movement. The painterly devices—expressive, broad brushstrokes, subtle blurring, radiant color—are fresh and vibrant. This amounts to subversion, as the given imagery is so void of obvious gravitas—the cute, amenable bear in a tree, the eager group of friendly horses. It would be all very faux-naïf if it weren't for the painter's clear tradecraft. I think of the discrepancies found in Martin Kippenberger's work: his painterly ability, intelligence, and humor in deploying "bad painting" and found imagery.

The exhibition spans all three of Karma's East Village spaces. The advantage of walking between the galleries and getting a partial take on the exhibition is an increased awareness of Craven's recursive use of motif. She has preferred the term "revisitations" to the more usual series, implying a convening process with the image and its production, like repeating a remembered song, a mantra, or a spiritual encounter in the form of a visitation. The motif enables, on its repetition, a more direct engagement with the essence of the subject, as formal structure alone is known beforehand—more séance than science, the artist experiencing a discovery each time. Animals, birds, and flowers look back at the viewer; a pantheism of equally sentient, present, and co-existent creatures and phenomenon.

Little Portrait of Two Cardinals (after Picabia) 2021, oil on linen, is 40 × 30 inches. The two birds, the cardinals of the title, one pink the other red, face each other in profile as if in conversation. Four white flowers with green leaves comprise a background stage for the birds—the image appears emblematic, like a coat of arms or a crest. Craven sees the birds themselves as symbolic of hope and faith. The reference to Picabia, of course, indicates the territory of this painting and the license Picabia has given Craven to pursue her own singular expression. There is a larger version of this painting, a “reiteration” in Karma’s main gallery window. The scale change is transformative, from a more intimate picturing of the image to an exuberant larger rendering. *Big Moon (after Pink Full Moon over Quiet Water), 2021*, oil on canvas, and at 84 × 72 inches another painting that has other, smaller versions—titled with dates, so in this respect they can be seen as diaristic—this painting is explicitly another iteration, titled “after” one of Craven’s own paintings. The sublime of Casper David Friedrich and Frederic Edwin Church come to mind, so powerful is the connection to such subject matter, and successful the romantic displacement of rational, limiting thought in painting. *Roses (on Blue with Orchids, after Buffet), 2021* features a group of roses that is painted from life together with a background sourced and copied from one of her archived photographic images. This is another of Craven’s approaches to composing and superimposing: complex, composite paintings that for all their directness and apparent simplicity reveal themselves gradually to be sophisticated, highly skilled paintings, though they are to be enjoyed for the visual pleasure of color and paint just as much.