Recursions

Richard Kalina

Night, Ann Craven's recent exhibition of paintings and watercolors at Karma, forms the latest chapter in her ongoing investigation of representation, reference, observation, and visual memory. At first glance, her paintings seem straightforward and declarative—loosely brushed and colorful images of birds (bluebirds, doves, indigo buntings), a vase of dahlias, a fawn in a field, and an especially favored subject: the moon, depicted either alone in the sky, surrounded by gestural cloudlike forms, or framed within a landscape. Craven's paintings have an undeniable sweetness, a touch of the sentimental, and an iconic simplicity that disarms us, allowing us to walk through the door, so to speak, and relax our aesthetic guard. We do so until the sense kicks in that something else is afoot—that difficulties await us and that complex pressures underlie the calm surface.

Craven has been at this for a long time, and her work is solidly grounded historically and culturally, with roots in the expressive, color-savvy realism that followed Abstract Expressionism, exemplified in the work of artists like Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Jane Wilson, Neil Welliver, Lois Dodd, and importantly for Craven, Alex Katz. A number of these artists lived and painted in Maine, as she does for part of the year. Having worked for Katz from 1992 to 1997, Craven shares with him the ability to set down on canvas a bold, scaled-up image, rendered quickly but with formal and emotional

exactitude, and enlivened by bold, assertive color. While Katz has certain favored motifs—particularly in his portraits— in much of his work we see a roving and discursive sensibility, a desire to memorialize a glimpsed but intriguing image. Craven, on the other hand, chooses her subjects more methodically, employing sets of reproduced illustrations and found images (including other artists' paintings or photographs), as well as studio still lifes, landscapes of places in Maine familiar to her, repeated plein air observations of the moon, and perhaps her most significant arena of source material—images or memories of her own paintings. This is where she steps away most markedly from those earlier painters. Katz or Dodd's work, for example, intelligent as it is, could not reasonably be called conceptual; Craven's, on the other hand, most definitely is.

Key to Craven's project is repetition, or as she calls it, *revisitation*. Repetition and seriality are features of conceptually inflected art. We see it in Marcel Duchamp's reiterations, reproductions, and recontextualizations: the multiply remade Readymades (which were originally reproduced and reproducible items); *La Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41), a collection of sixty-nine miniatures of his work in a suitcase (or as he saw it, a portable museum); or the three additional versions, in Stockholm, London, and Tokyo, of the much labored over and, one might have imagined, singular *Large Glass* (1915–23). (How very Duchampian is Craven's practice of making loose, striped abstract paintings paired with and using the colors of her figurative ones, or turning her used palettes for each painting into works of art themselves?) Duchamp-like repetition is there in Robert Rauschenberg's 1957 paintings, *Factum I* and *Factum 2*—two nearly identical versions of the ostensibly irreproducible Abstract Expressionist gesture, and hovers over Jasper Johns's long-running series of flags and targets. We also find repetition front and center in Andy Warhol, and in the seriality of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, and Mel Bochner; as well as in the metronomic regularity of conceptual work like Hanne Darboven's gridded text and numerical formulations, On Kawara's Date Paintings, or Roman Opalka's numberings to infinity. Repetition, by definition, draws away from singularity and specificity, creating in the process both distance and a concomitant desire for close comparison. Alongside this—as an option, but scarcely a necessity—are irony and ambivalence: the interplay of "yes but," and "yes and." Just as importantly, and this is the case with Craven, repetition is a form of saving, of insuring against losses of all sorts, of deepening a memory.

In 1999, Craven experienced a disastrous studio fire, in which all of her work was destroyed, except for one painting of a deer that had been lent to a group show. In the fire's aftermath, she decided to recreate the lost paintings, beginning an overarching

Marcel Duchamp, *La Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–41

Mike Bidlow, *Not Picasso (Woman in yellow, 1907)*, 1987

project of reiteration and duplication which continues to this day. This is not merely a setting up of general thematic parameters, but a systematic and considered approach, both in image choice and presentation. In *Night*, for example, there were three distinct showing spaces—a large main room, a smaller back room, and the gallery's bookstore several blocks away. The main gallery space contained eight identically sized, vertically oriented oil paintings, each measuring seven-by-six feet. The back gallery and the bookstore displayed the same images, hung in the same order, but in smaller sizes, twenty-four-by-eighteen inches for the paintings, and twenty-nine-and-three-quarters by twenty-two-and-a-quarter inches for the watercolors in the bookstore. For this show, Craven made the small paintings first, then the larger oils, and then the watercolors, whereas in the previous show, she began with the watercolors. Even though each iteration of an image features the same subject and is composed in the same manner, these are not, by any means, exact copies, nor are they merely thematic variations. They are, if anything, the painting equivalent of fraternal, as opposed to identical, twins.

What distinguishes Craven's approach to repetition is its distance from the mechanical—either in appearance or technique. This is contrary to the automatic or self-perpetuating air that we associate with so much contemporary art that deals with seriality. After all, we are still processing, as Walter Benjamin would have it, art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Hand-rendered reproduction is more common in appropriation art—Mike Bidlo's Picassos, for example, are straight from his brush, but then appropriation is based on the work of others, and gets its conceptual heft from an often-ironic questioning of the concept of originality. To be sure, a certain pop wryness, a wink, say, at prettiness, chromatic overload, kitsch, and feminine coding, makes itself felt in Craven's paintings—but at heart, these are sincere and emotionally invested works. Their gestural facture is not "about" gesture, nor is it a mark of sincerity or the existential uniqueness of the brushstroke, but rather an inherent part of a practicing artist's toolbox—a way to put an image on canvas in an expeditious manner. If you are working on a large oil painting wet into wet, and you have the requisite skills and an expressionistic bent, you want to get it all down without a lot of fuss and overpainting—you want to address the matter at hand as straightforwardly as possible.

This attitude underscores the sense of urgency in Craven's work, a sensibility that tugs it away from irony. Mechanical or mechanical-seeming art implies emotional distancing—if one thing is the same as another, then why be invested in this one as opposed to that one? The daily appearance of the moon in the sky is regular and cyclical (very much up Craven's alley) but that periodicity is not the same as the standardized, emotionally

detached production of, for example, Campbell's soup cans—either by the corporation or by Warhol. The same could be said for his extractions of grotesque and morbid images from the popular press. Of course, the unmentioned irony that underlies the overt one is that for all of Warhol's ostensible insouciance, he was very much occupied with and afraid of death—an electric chair in your choice of red, green, lavender, or pink is still a cold-blooded killing machine, and a tangerine-tinted rendition of a horrible car crash still echoes with pain and fear. For Craven, the moon, far away as it is, is clearly an emotionally close-up and redolent image. It is a caster of light, and, rarely depicted as purely white in her work, it functions as a colored object that itself generates color—a slash of yellow on the side of a tree, a pink-topped wave, a green-swirled cloud. Her other subjects are emotionally and referentially complex as well, notably the fawn in a flowered field—but not in the way that we might expect. That image is taken from a particularly dystopian work: the 1973 science fiction thriller *Soylent Green*, starring Charlton Heston, and in his last (and one-hundred-and-first) film role, Edward G. Robinson. In the film's ecologically cratered near-future world, the vast throngs of the poor are fed on green wafers made, as it turns out, from dead humans, not plankton as the government claims. Assisted suicide centers are set up for the soon-to-be processed humans, the character played by the elderly Robinson among them. As they die, they listen to piped-in classical music, and see, projected on a giant screen, soothing images of a nature they never knew—including a version of Craven's pretty, but on reflection, quite scary fawn.

Craven had a number of sources for the paintings in this exhibition—from Georgia O'Keeffe, to Patti Smith, to Robert Mapplethorpe, but one of the most interesting (and named) is Francis Picabia. An early Dadaist and friend of Duchamp, Picabia was a protean provocateur. His paintings ranged from outsized cuboid formulations to satirical mechanized diagrams, to odd Surrealist figurations and consciously sleazy takes on softcore pulp fiction illustrations, and finally to simplified, colorful, symbolic abstractions. However, some of his most influential works, especially for contemporary artists, are the paintings from the mid-1920s to the early '30s that deal with linearity and stacked transparencies. The surfaces of these complex and highly original works are almost completely covered by transparent and semitransparent overlaid and interlocking images. In *Jezabel* (1928), for example, Picabia creates a complex, quilt-like painting by taking a woman's head and torso, rendered in black lines and tinted planes, and overlaying it with other body parts—hands, lips, and eyes—as well as flowers, grapes, and a sinuous, snake-like form. Craven's painting *Portrait of a Blue Bird (Night Song, After Picabia), 2023* (2023) repurposes the older artist's dimensional

Francis Picabia, *Jezabel*, 1928

and referential complexity, presenting what might seem to be a relatively straightforward figure-ground relationship of a bluebird on a branch, set against flowers, leaves, and cherries, and turning it into an unstable, evocative, and contingent mélange. The brightly colored bluebird at the center of the canvas is the first thing we see, and our impulse is to organize the perceptual space of the painting in relation to what appears to be the subject of the work: bird (important) in front of flowers and foliage (of lesser importance). This hierarchical reading is undermined by shifts in scale and brightness (the very large, starkly white flowers), unexpected positioning (the torqued, wreath-like format of the surrounding leaves), and the halation effect of the sprays of pink cherry blossoms and red cherries. The painting's spatial logic is disrupted, and we experience it as a shifting, constructed entity rather than an *a priori* image, a given.

Something similar is taking place in *Night Wave, Again, 2023* (2023). In the painting, two white doves, each perched on a separate, pink-blossomed branch, face each other diagonally—the left bird set higher than the one on the right. The background is dominated by a large, dark, vaguely floral or leaf-like shape. On the central axis of the painting, above the top dove's head, is a white form reminiscent of a triumphant laurel wreath. There is an open, mysterious, and expectant quality to the painting—a thing missing but waited for—explained perhaps by the work's source: a wistful Mapplethorpe photograph of his friend Smith holding two doves in that very position, used as the cover for her 1979 album *Wave* (and thus the painting's title). In Craven's painting, though, the figure of Smith is replaced by an inverted image of a blown-up and simplified O'Keeffe flower—a form that looks more shield-like than botanical. O'Keeffe's flowers and shells have often been given an anatomically feminine valence, although the artist pushed back against that interpretation. A question: is there a woman there or not? "There or not there" is not necessarily a binary: it could just as easily (and more interestingly) be "there *and* not there." Simultaneity is an attribute of transparency—seeing something through something else. That paradoxical condition is on display in Craven's *Purple Beech (Night Sky), 2023* (2023). In it we see a full and fully delineated pale-yellow moon shining through the round crown of a large tree—as if a hole had been cut out of the branches. This brings the moon closer to us, compressing the space, but also creating a powerful synthesis of the natural world (at different scales) and the observing artist—a construct in the spirit of the transcendentalism of her fellow New Englanders Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

The challenges presented by Ann Craven's paintings are there, hiding in plain sight. Under their welcoming exterior—after all, who doesn't like colorful birds and flowers

and moons?—lies something thornier, grander, and less comforting. Things really don't mesh: proximity does not imply causality, scale is unreliable, and a yearning for transcendence does not guarantee it. The provisional—"maybe" rather than "yes" or "no"—is the current coin of the realm, at least artistically. Craven's paintings are, at heart, open; their repetitions both circling back and pointing forward. Their hold on us is light but strong enough to keep us there, looking. The questions they pose—formally, psychologically, and historically—are key ones for today. They are asked, but as we see, they are best answered indirectly.