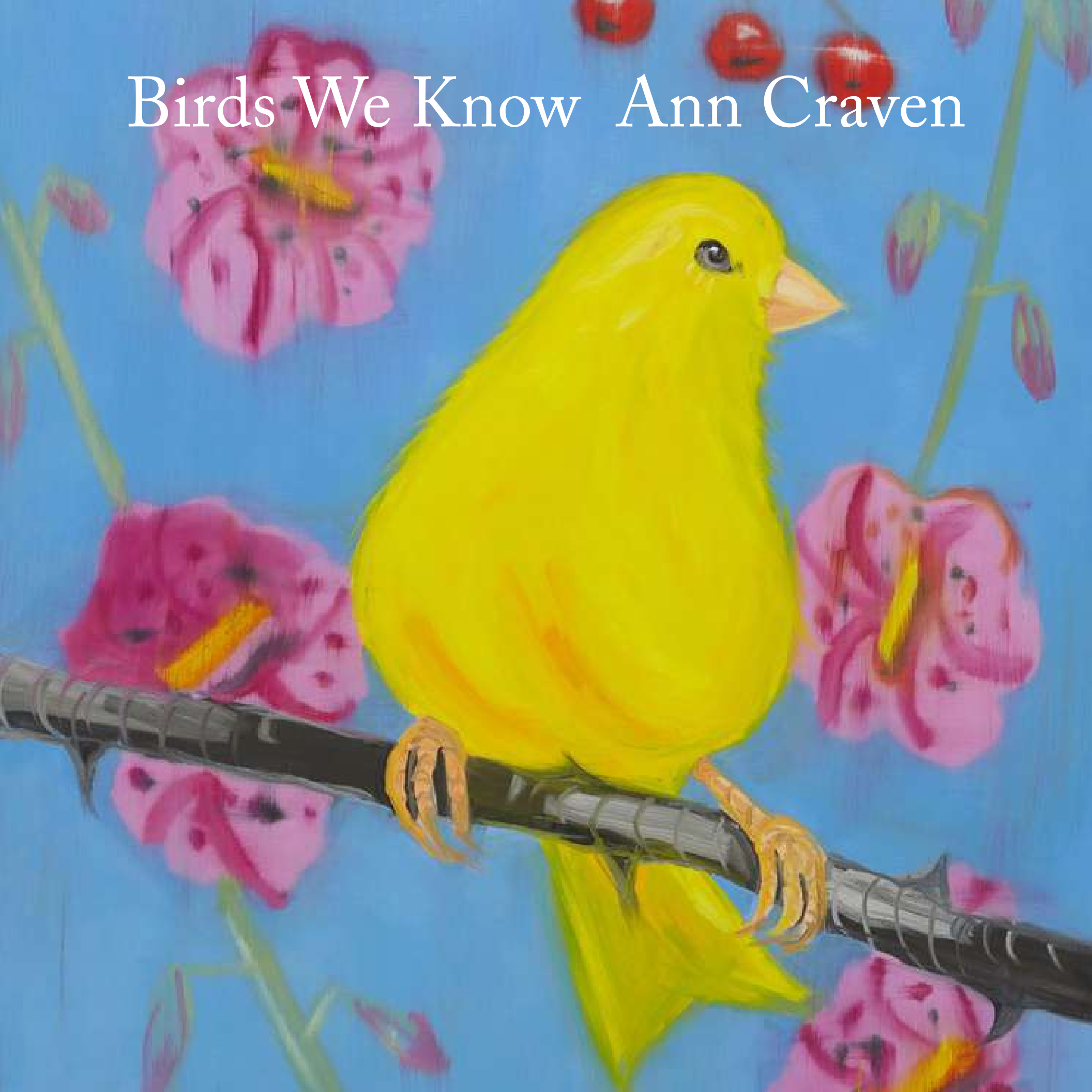


# Birds We Know Ann Craven



could make something out of nothing—the whimsical, eye-catching worlds of childhood, far distant from the adults’ hard-working, practical, and sometimes grey lives. She manages to hold onto that childhood innocence—and fearlessness. How else does Craven paint with such guileless affection for birds we know and all the rest?

As a young artist she became a studio assistant to Alex Katz and was introduced to a very special coterie of artists, many of them devoted to a kind of abstract, expressive figuration and who summered near Lincolnville, Maine—Lois Dodd, Yvonne Jacquette, Neil Welliver, Rudy Burckhardt, as well as many other notable artists, critics and curators who would gather on the lawn of Alex’s and wife Ada’s “Yellow House” for summer parties. Craven recalls painting her first moons on Lincolnville beach, finding, as she recalls, her first important subject there. And, perhaps, the possibility of being part of a larger community of serious, independent-minded, and accomplished artists.

Now dividing her time between New York City and mid-coast Maine studios, Craven has been painting and exhibiting her work for several decades. Her paintings are individually and collectively a master class in technique and materials: the way paint, mixed and thinned (or not) bites the tooth of gessoed or raw canvas; how many brush strokes it takes to make a sunflower; how color can be made to flow--colliding or coalescing, disguising or disclosing--how a contour shapes form and vice versa. Her facility with materials has become a central component and defining characteristic of her own work and an abiding concern for many contemporary artists working today in various media from painting to photography to installation to performance art. Knowing that her chosen materials—paint, ground, canvas, pencil and paper--are the essential facts of painting is fundamental to Craven’s purpose and craft. Having come of age between the “Bad Painting” and “Zombie Formalism” phases (art writers are as pitiless as they are without shame) of contemporary painting, she demonstrates how skill and authenticity are still necessary and relevant to contemporary art. Her working class background serves her well and it shows up in the paintings--like a plumber pounding on your door at seven a.m.—sudden, insistent, and there for a reason.

John James Audubon’s monumental illustrations for his *Birds of America* and Martin Johnson Heade’s exquisite, small paintings for a never realized publication on South American hummingbirds, “The Gems of Brazil,” stand behind her birds--but more as conveniently beckoning ghosts, indirectly invoked, suggestively present in the rush and flow of streaming memories. Craven’s twenty-first century birds are the progeny of multiple sources: magazines, calendars, school notebook covers and especially the internet. Many of the bird paintings—perhaps all, in terms of deep-seated personal affection--continue to hark back to particular bird-identification books that she retrieved from her grandmother’s home in Massachusetts. The found and, *a priori*, mediated images can come



Alex Katz, *Winter Branch*, 1993  
Oil on hardboard, 9 x 11 7/8 inches



Lois Dodd, *Moon with Halo and Clouds*, 2014  
Oil on aluminum flashing, 5 x 7 inches



John James Audubon, *Birds of America*



Martin Johnson Heade, “Crimson Topaz” Hummingbirds  
*Nesting Near a Palm Tree*, c. 1864–1865  
Oil on canvas mounted on board, 13 1/8 x 11 1/8 inches



Ann Craven, *Tree (9-21-12, after Purple Beech, Cushing, 8-4-12, 11:13 PM)*, 2012, 2012  
Oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches



Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park #126*, 1984  
Oil on canvas, 93 x 81 inches

from anywhere, but they inevitably become hers alone. Any source that catches her eye is fair game and if it needs different colors, positioning, or backdrops, she will make the necessary adjustments. Or she simply draws and paints directly from nature. A particular purple beech tree growing on her property in Maine is a recurring motif. “It reminded me of the moon,” she says, “because it was round and because of all the life it had seen. Families coming and going, life lived. Like the moon it’s a constant that ebbs and flows, but the opposite of the moon in that it changes with the day and becomes a silhouette against the sunset.”

Reproduction and repetition are important to her practice, partly and paradoxically, because in a technological age she is absolutely devoted to those qualities of human touch and intervention having to do with originality. In the same way we are bombarded with images--Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, E-Bay robots--Craven’s sources of inspiration are often filtered through our internet culture. Her paintings might originate as internet meme but the act of painting will always bring human agency to a machine-infused, electric-colored, digitally photographed, photo-shopped, and pre-recorded present. Part of Craven’s fearlessness is her engagement with our numbing new digital world, a willingness to confront and use media-saturated clichés and make them do something different, fresh, alive.

I believe Craven is among a select group of contemporary artists who *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl has recently observed (in the work of Jasper Johns), reflect a kind of American Pragmatism as initially defined by William James, John Dewey and Charles Pierce. This philosophy, Schjeldahl tells us (describing the “American-ness of Jasper Johns), is “about how art works work.”<sup>1</sup> Craven’s dedication to her own “work” as physical material and painting processes couldn’t be more evident, and she has said her paintings always contain “a variable that’s constant and ever-changing — the moment just past.” As Barry Schwabsky, suggests in his new book, *Landscape Painting Now: from Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*, contemporary American landscape painting enables not simply a representation of nature but uncannily “is somehow like an experience of nature.”<sup>2</sup> The more so in Craven’s work, I would argue, by calling attention to the serial-ness of nature, its infinitely variable repetitions and evolutionary replications. Ann Craven, in the best tradition of John Dewey, simply and directly shows us how she and art “work.” Pragmatism, teaches that we live in a constantly changing universe, a continuity that Craven’s paintings capture in their constancy to an evocation of immanence, of change.

When first asked to write about Ann Craven’s paintings for this show I was initially struck by her use of color. Immediately I wrote to her that not since my deer-in-headlights days as a young educator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery have I been so stunned by the paintings of an artist whose work I had not encountered before. The artist then was Richard Diebenkorn and the paintings

*Hello, 1997*  
Oil on canvas, 74 x 50 inches





*Untitled (Three Birds on Branches) (Wasn't Sorry Series?)*, 2003?  
Oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches





*Mirrored Red #4, 2004, 2004*  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches



*Mirrored Red #3, 2004, 2004*  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches



*Silhouette Fade on Red and Pink, 2006, 2006*  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches



*Silhouette Fade on Red, 2006, 2006*  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches





*Portrait of 2 Birds (After Picabia) Brussels, 2006, 2006*  
Oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches









*Pentptych (Stripe, Birds for Chicago), 2019, 2019*  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 240 inches

