

Art

Reviews

Weekend

Daisy Craddock's Pastel Drawings: If Landscapes Could Talk



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September 26, 2015



Daisy Craddock, "Willow By Water (2nd)" (1995), oil pastel on paper, 11 x 15.5 inches
(photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

If a dollop of paint or a chunk of stone could talk, might it reveal just how much it enjoyed having been scraped across a canvas by a Joan Mitchell or picked at by the masterful, form-seeking hands of an Isamu Noguchi?

If so, then there is something about Daisy Craddock's drawings in oil pastel or oil stick on paper that seems to suggest that, when this skilled portrayer of the landscape is at work, the surface fibers of the thick sheets she favors actually rise up to catch the fine grains of color she lays down upon them with each scratchy-scrubby stroke.

This kind of vigorous give-and-take between art-maker and her materials — call it a cooperative adventure in conjuring up an image — is evident in Craddock's new exhibition, *Four Decades*, which is now on view at John Davis Gallery in Hudson, New York. In recent years, this riverside town in the mid-Hudson Valley, north of Manhattan, which boasts a handful of good-quality commercial galleries and other art outposts, has become something of a satellite of New York's bigger art market.



Artist Daisy Craddock in her NY studio with a selection of drawings on paper (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Four Decades provides a retrospective of Craddock's work in some of her favorite media on paper. For viewers who are familiar with her paintings, it also offers a reminder of how some of her drawings have related thematically and sometimes technically to her larger, oil-on-linen or oil-on-canvas pictures.

Craddock grew up in Memphis, except for a period during her teenage years when her family lived in Panama. Her father, who then worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, had been sent there to help construct houses and schools on U.S. military installations. During a visit to her downtown-Manhattan studio a few years ago, Craddock recalled that time and told me, "It was the Cold War era. I remember the U-2

aircraft that would take off from those bases for spying missions over Cuba."

Although Craddock's parents did not make art, one of her grandmothers had made quilts, and her other grandmother had made paintings, one of which Daisy still vividly remembers. It was a picture of a baby eating a cantaloupe, which her paternal grandmother had copied from an image in a seed catalog. Craddock also had an aunt who was a close friend of the writer William Faulkner's sister. Her ties to the South and her Southern bona fides are still strong — audibly in a gentle drawl that sometimes wraps the fading end of one of her sentences in a warm embrace, and visibly in the subject matter of some of her pictures.

For if there is one subject Craddock never tires of depicting, it is trees. Over the years she has painted countless pines, oaks, poplars and other arboreal species, including those icons of the Deep South — big, luscious magnolias and majestic willows with broad branches and cascades of shaggy leaves. "Those Southern trees are some of my favorites," she says. "It's very challenging to paint them, to get the architecture of their big forms just right. My drawings of those trees have always been popular with collectors; in fact, I regret that I have very few of the ones I've made over the years in my own collection."



In Daisy Craddock's studio, "Willow By Water (2nd)" (1995), oil pastel on paper, 11 x 15.5 inches, and on the right, its related painting, "Willow By Water" (1995), oil on canvas, 34 x 46 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

During a more recent visit to Craddock's studio a couple of weeks ago, the artist showed me several of the drawings on paper that are now on view in Hudson before they had been framed and sent to the gallery. One was "Willow By Water (2nd)" (oil pastel on paper, 1995), an image in which a gathering of brusque, broad strokes in a palette of yellowish greens and dishwater-dirty whites come together on a thick sheet of black paper to portray a flu!y willow leaning across a riverbank. Its leafy neighbors serve as less charismatic minions.

Here, as in many of the landscape images in the current show, Craddock handles her oily-chalky medium in an economical deployment of strokes that suggest everything a viewer needs to know about the textures of riverside grasses, a verdant field beyond them and the reflective surface of the flowing waterway. (Craddock is one of the most self-elacing people anywhere, but for all her modesty, she has been known to transgress; sometimes, as in a far stretch of the river seen here, she gets dirty and pushes her colors around with her fingers.)

Craddock has made many of her drawings on black paper. It's a challenging choice for her kind of color-rich image-making, for the surface's potent darkness threatens to swallow up much of the light in her brighter palettes. By contrast, those colors appear more obviously luminous in the pictures she makes on white grounds. Still, in drawings like "November Snow" (oil pastel on paper



Artist Daisy Craddock in her New York studio with "Cicadas" (1984), oil on canvas, 65 x 77 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Daisy Craddock, "Copper Beeches" (1989), oil pastel on paper, 11 x 17.5 inches (photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

1989), in which her paper's blackness peeks through an impasto-like passage of blue-white sky (there is some finger action here, too) and emerges from behind clusters of spindly, leafless trees, it becomes an active part of the artist's form-defining palette. In fact, the negative spaces created by that visible black ground actually coalesce to become the lines shaping these trees' slender trunks.

In a picture on black paper like "Copper Beeches" (oil pastel on paper, 1989), with its central, tousled blob of greenery set against an azure sky, Craddock again lets her surface color show through to suggest the shadowy depths at the center of a monumental grouping of trees, while in "Thousand Islands" (oil pastel over acrylic on paper, 2008), which is set against a white ground, light-salmon clouds hover above the edge of a forest in an expanse of turquoise blue. Whereas in images like "November Snow" and "Copper Beeches," Craddock allows their peek-a-boo

black grounds to become part of her draftsmanship, in “Thousand Islands” she lets passages of color meld with their white background and become part of its surface glow. In a similar but even more shimmering vein, “Crosby Street, September 20, 2003” (oil pastel and oil stick on paper, 2003), one of Craddock’s most enticing drawings, is also one of her most ethereal. A fleeting cloud of lavender, pink and now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t peach, it resembles a sudden pu! in the atmosphere of delicately colored air or a runaway passage from one of Turner’s vast and languid skies.



Daisy Craddock, “Crosby Street” (2003), oil pastel and oil stick on paper, 11.5 x 11.25 inches
(photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

Sometimes Craddock’s works on paper serve as reference points for larger oil paintings on linen or canvas. For example, “Willow By Water (2nd)” has a companion, “Willow By Water” (oil on canvas, 1995). “The other day, when I was going through some works in storage, I found this painting,” Craddock said during our more recent in-person interview. “It was illuminating to see it again and to notice how it relates to the on-paper drawing.”

Some broad, hard-working strokes are visible in each version of this image. I asked Craddock if, in making her oil paintings, she tends to work from sketches or more fully developed drawings. “Yes, both. Often,” she replied. “I can pack a lot of the information I’ll need into my pastel drawings of a particular subject. Plus I have a pretty good photographic memory.”



Daisy Craddock, "November Snow" (1989), oil pastel on paper, 16.5 x 22.5 inches
(photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

If Craddock appears to be able to coax a lot out of her materials, it might be because she has a deep, firsthand understanding of their physical and chemical properties, never mind their expressive potential. For in addition to producing her own art, Craddock is a skilled conservator of modern and contemporary paintings who regularly repairs damaged works of various kinds by other artists. (In the past, those of Joan Mitchell and Mark Rothko, among others, have been subjected to her attentive touch.) For some time-worn canvases, she prepares detailed, acetate-overlay "maps" that indicate their every chipped, faded, scratched, torn or punctured spot. She says, "I try for the least invasive approach, and much of what I do falls into the realm of harm-preventive action." A few years ago, Craddock was a member of a team of specialists who worked on the restoration of metal banisters, doors and other architectural details at the Federal Hall National Memorial, an 1842 neoclassical building in Manhattan's Wall Street district.

After earning degrees in art at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College), where she studied with the sculptor Lawrence Anthony, and at the University of Georgia, in Athens, where a lecture visit from the New York-based realist painter Isabel Bishop deeply influenced her, Craddock moved to Boston in the early 1970s. Shortly thereafter, she headed to New York — and stayed. She earned a living as a textile designer and, in her own studio, made paintings. One day she stumbled upon a cast-o! roll of thick, black paper, the kind photographers employ as backdrops for fashion or portrait shoots. She began using it to make oil-pastel drawings and, as her current gallery show suggests, when it comes to using black paper, she has never looked back.



Daisy Craddock, "Thousand Islands" (2008), oil pastel over acrylic on paper, 11.25 x 11.5 inches
(photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

For many years Craddock has made regular visits to the Hudson Valley, where she has drawn and painted numerous views from the east side of the river, looking west. In her John Davis show, she presents several vistas from that vantage point of Mt. Merino, a hill just south of Hudson. Other works on display offer views from around the Northeast. Among them: "Birch (East Barnard)" (1984), "Field Study, Vermont (2nd)" (1994) and "Cumberland River Study" (2008).

"I can't believe I've been drawing and painting the landscape for more than forty years!" Craddock said recently at her studio as she examined the works she was planning to include in her current show. I asked her what she had learned over that span of time about her subject matter and about depicting it.

"I've discovered that the structure of a tree seems so obvious until you set out to draw or paint it," she replied, adding, "How much of the view you want to represent should you try to capture more literally and how much can or should you abstract? How much about what we know — or think we know — about how nature actually appears do we bring with us when we look at landscape pictures?"



Daisy Craddock, "Late Afternoon, North Egremont" (2015), oil pastel and oil stick on paper, 8.5 x 14 inches
(photo courtesy of the artist and John Davis Gallery)

As Craddock unpacked a box to show me another drawing, she spoke softly to herself as much as to me (and perhaps even to the vibrantly colored sheet on the table before us). "I feel that there's still a lot to learn," she said, "and that if I pay close attention to what I'm looking at and at the materials in my hands, I will. I always will."