

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

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Dodgy Anthropology But Formally Engrossing: Matthew Craven and the Ancient World

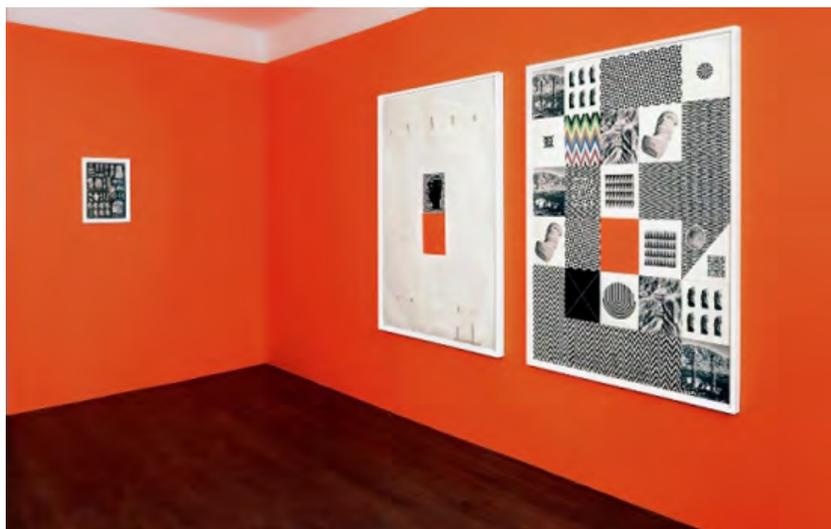
by Noah Dillon

Matthew Craven: *Oblivious Path* at DCKT Contemporary

September 7 to October 20, 2013

21 Orchard Street, between Hester and Canal

New York City, 212-741-9955

Installation shot of the exhibition under review, Matthew Craven: *Oblivious Path* at DCKT Contemporary

In his landmark 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the mythologist Joseph Campbell described the formulae he saw as the basis of all folklore, giving parallel examples from ancient Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and others. He called their broad narrative structure a monomyth and clad it in then-popular Freudian and Jungian terms. The archetypes and operations of ancient stories, Campbell claimed, transcend national, cultural, and temporal boundaries, but he also acknowledged their peculiar variations as much as their affinities. Matthew Craven, in his solo show *Oblivious Path* at DCKT Contemporary, seems to take a similar anthropology as his starting point. The exhibition is modest, with nine works hung on the gallery's walls, which were painted orange for the show. But the pieces are bold, with scholarly photographs of ancient statuary and architecture (clipped from found books) collaged on to geometric drawings, on blank paper, or on other found book illustrations.

This makes formally engrossing work: his collaged drawings are beautiful. But it also causes problems. Craven's focus on formal beauty and coincidence between the pictured artifacts steamrolls their ethnographic and political differences into an amalgam that obliterates the contingencies that distinguish one relic from another. Mere formal congruency in these combinations of pictured objects reduces discrete images to free-floating signifiers of antiquity and prestige.

Although some works include hand-drawn elements, many do not. Pieces such as *Oblivion I (Horizon)* (all works 2013) and *Arrangement I (Unclassified)* are composed solely of matrices of clipped photos of artifacts, arrayed across their respective surfaces. *Oblivion I* features prehistoric tools, archaic altars and walls, cairns, and a runestone, distributed in rows on two excerpted book pages printed with a photo spread of interstellar space. The relationship to the cosmic is accented by a small image of Stonehenge included here and the tessellation's mystical allusions are emphasized by the roughly gridded composition. Some elements are repeated (the stone tools for example) in such a way as to refer almost grammatically to esoteric geometry or codified rituals. *Arrangement I*, on the other hand, is made with a sprawling, unstructured mosaic of reproductions of ancient statuary and artifacts, all variously sized, on a large sheet of blank paper. Mesoamerican effigies mingle indiscriminately with vases, crumbling Greek columns, coins, and African masks. The sort of *wunderkammer*-on-paper looks like a throwback to early ethnography, focused more on titillating Orientalist curiosity than in disinterested scientific study.

Those pieces that include the artist's hand are especially powerful. The large drawing *Stare* is among the most persuasive and colorful works in the show. A repeating chevron pattern vibrates across nearly all of the paper's expansive surface in flat primary and secondary colors, the waving zigzags built like tiles from tall rectangles outlined in graphite. Against this angular motif, Craven has pasted a photo of an Egyptian black stone bust in the upper left corner. A small teardrop of bright orange paper covers its sole visible eye (eyes are blotted out in many of the figurative sculptures that Craven includes). Kitty-corner to the bust, at lower right, is another contrast to the vibrant patterning: a black rectangle of paper marked with a thin white "X" running corner-to-corner, its triangular sections echoed by the zigzags and by a triangle of similar size cut away from the drawing's

lower left corner.



Matthew Craven, Arrangement I (Unclassified),
2013. Found book pages on found paper, 51 x 37-
1/4 inches. Courtesy of DCKT Contemporary

Although Craven's surfaces appear flat and textureless, looking closely at *Stare* one can see complications such as mislaid pencil lines, shaggy areas of damaged paper under swathes of paint, uneven X-Acto cuts. The work creates tension and draws contradictions through its four elements: the asceticism of the picture's black rectangle speaks to, but opposes, the black stone figure. Both are contrasted by predominating, hip-looking polychrome patterning. All of those visual stimuli are slightly cooled by the missing triangle at the bottom right. Craven freely cuts and pastes, both with his collage materials and with regard to historical and stylistic particles.

Craven was also included in a concurrent group show, *Totem*, at Asya Geisberg. Of his two pieces in that exhibition one is much like the best drawings at DCKT, while the other is far more manic, with similar colored and black-and-white patterning rendered in exceptionally intricate, symmetrical motives, and punctuated in three places with repeated photos of two archaic objects. That piece, called *Summer (Totem)*, is overwhelming, but also exhilarating, letting Craven's weird, Neo-Geo-esque drawings shine, the photographic elements introduced subtly but with hypnotic, beguiling power.

The press release for Craven's exhibition acknowledges that "our view of history is deeply flawed," and proceeds to describe the artworks with mystical language commensurate with their liberal use of revered images in pursuit of formal grace. This comes dangerously close to reducing all the appropriated illustrations to stock referents suggestive of an undifferentiated, distant past. Storytelling of this sort is really interesting—it's why legends can get such a deep hold on our psyches. But grand narratives can also lead to lax thinking about the world: irrational, relativistic, schematic, flattening. We should understand that things like visual similarities exist more because we read objects and images with 21st-century biases, and that they may be fallacious. It's not reasonable to ask Craven to be a social scientist, but it may be useful to remember that the past is bigger than the images and stories that we see in it.



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