

Marti Cormand

JOSÉE BIENVENU

"Offside" was the title of both Marti Cormand's third solo exhibition at Josée Bienvenu and of its signal work. This oil-on-linen painting, one of six on view, retools the romantic sublime for a digitized, global warmed present—Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, 1809–10, as a tiny macaw dwarfed by a range of polar ice caps. The parrot, rendered in exacting hyperrealism and comically alien to its frozen surrounds, looks like a Photoshop addition. Brooklyn-based Spanish artist Cormand thus engages the apparent theme of this show: imperiled nature as a parable for the encroachments of the digital on the practice of contemporary painting. It would be trite if not for Cormand's evident sincerity, which comes across as a form of what might be paradoxically termed benign emotional blackmail. Drawing a parallel between ecological degradation and the disappearance of the analogue risks a certain banality, but it's hard to fault someone for fretting about the fate of his medium or his environment, or for trying to evaluate one in terms of the other.

The remaining paintings in the exhibition all feature Cormand's signature mark: a small, variegated dash that usually appears in clusters resembling spines of books or sprays of pick-up sticks. These glyphs, his shorthand for "the artificial" or "the digital," show up in earlier paintings of parks and forests and here surface in more watery climes. They have been dragged in by a wave breaking on the beach in *Tide* (all works 2006) and adorn clumps of frozen matter in *Iceberg* and *Ice*. In *Macaws*, these abstract ciphers have infiltrated the painting's subject matter to the point of being constitutive of it: Resembling scrambled bytes of data, they are executed in the same deep jewel tones as the endangered birds they surround. Cormand paints what look like digital images that are trying to be paintings but that are fumbling in the attempt. His digital characters can't be naturalized, and nature is accordingly blighted, forevermore beyond immediate access (that none of these paintings reference actual locations is very much to the point).

But Cormand's intention is not to condemn technology for polluting waters and causing glacial retreat; instead, he figures its inescapable mediation of the natural world as an allegory of his own practice. This project is most evident, and most successful, in *Untitled (Day to Night)*, a set of five small oil-on-paper works hung apart from the rest of the show (across from the reception desk). The pictorial structure of each painting is simple and identical: Its surface is bisected by the sea, and between water and sky sit a row of Cormand's signature dashes. Yet the compositions get darker as one moves from left to right; in the lightest work, the marks resemble the outlines of a candy-colored industrial city on the horizon, and in the darkest, with sea and air both black, they look like nothing so much as a line of code. Cormand's work, for all its lofty feints, is obvious in a disarming and welcome way. What I take to be his worries about the role of the digital in contemporary painting are expressed with reference to the sublime using less-than-exalted means, and that's not always a bad thing. As Edmund Burke wrote, explaining the sublime's necessary obscurity, "When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes."

—Lisa Turvey

Marti Cormand,
Offside, 2006, oil
on linen, 48 x 66."

