"On our planet, the presence of nature, the enchantment of being, and the feeling of transience all go together. Every day is precious because this earth goes through its seasons, and every season might be our last; every moment of meeting an earthly creature is unique, unrepeatable."

Czeslaw Milosz

They are unblinking depictions of death. And yet Judy Cotton's "Nature Morte" paintings are powerfully haunted by life. Begun in late 2008, these extraordinary paintings show freshly killed birds and mammals discovered in the vicinity of Cotton's home on the banks of the Connecticut River in Lyme, Ct. (Cotton and her husband Yale moved there permanently that year). The animals – some of them road kill, others shot by rifle or bow and arrow by a local hunter, others simply defeated by the region's harsh winter – were brought to her studio to be painted soon after their passing.

The results are not so much paintings of death as of the transition between life and death. They radiate an unmistakable vitality. And it is this consciousness of life – slipping away, yes, but also pulsing, surging, both in the hand and heart of their creator and in the natural world around her – that is the source of their strange beauty.

Cotton’s paintings testify to a series of unique and unrepeatable encounters. The profound transition each one describes takes place quickly – usually a matter of mere hours or days. Painting them, therefore, required quick wits, tremendous facility, supreme sensitivity.

A passionate observer of the natural world, both in the wilds of America and in her native Australia, Cotton has long been drawn to the lives and movements of animals, plants, fire, floods, rivers and skies – to life in flux.

Of course, to live in the midst of the natural world is to understand that life and death have their own rhythms, their own ebb and flow. And yet, inevitably, even as it surrounds us, shaping our existence, giving it form and counterpoint, death remains for us a disaster. Unthinkable, unknowable, and terrifyingly final, death is, to the human mind, intolerable. It is this that gives our lives a quality of emergency.

Cotton’s “Nature Morte” paintings confront this state of emergency. They loosen its grip on us, draw us in closer, and admit its many paradoxical wonders. That they do so without resort to theater or histrionics is testament to the manner of their painting. Cotton’s touch is fresh, fresh, fresh – filled with particulars, but fiercely on guard against the dead hand of over-elaboration. Clement Greenberg marveled at Matisse’s ability to

allow his designs of flat color to breathe: It all came down to his touch, the critic said. Cotton has achieved something similar, concentrating her painterly "breath" in the bodies of her freshly dead subjects, which she sets boldly against neutral, unmodulated grounds.

The results feel too urgent for considerations of style. Yet they're informed by tremendous technical confidence. That confidence is the result of a lifetime spent painting and drawing, in an array of challenging, facility-busting media, from gouache and pencil to encaustic and oils.

The confidence matters, because behind it is a bracing willingness to take risks, and a love of that tradition of truth-telling immediacy in paint that runs from Velazquez and Hals, through late Fragonard, to Manet, Soutine, and Bacon.

On January 5th, 2009, a friend of Cotton's – in her diaries, she calls him simply "the Hunter" – called her to see if she wanted to paint two crows he had shot that morning. She and the Hunter had an understanding. Less than two weeks before Christmas, he had brought her two mallard ducks – a pair, male and female.

"They were still fresh, newly killed, and I could move their necks," she wrote in her journal. "Beautiful pair with brilliant blue wing patches that turned to purple in different lights. The drake's

head a brilliant green that could also look black. Brighter bill and legs than the female."

The crows were less flamboyant. She started to paint them about 3 in the afternoon. The two birds lay beside each other, one with tucked wings and witchily upturned claws; the other with one thickly feathered wing spread out to the side. Already both birds seemed slightly disheveled – the instant undoing of death. Red bullet wounds had punctured the blue-black sheen of their plumage. Intimately, the sharp beak of the first bird kissed the back of its neighbor's neck.

Cotton captured all this in her painting ("Really tired when I start… Tired when I finish," her journal notes). But she also – without in any way falsifying the reality of what she saw before her – captured a quality of reverie, of physical dissipation in league with something wholly unexpected: the euphoria of release?

From a distance, the work could be a burst of Zen calligraphy. Up close, it is heart-stoppingly direct: two dead crows, nothing more, nothing less ("If the thing is there, why there it is," quipped Walker Evans. "And yet why not say what happened?" asked Robert Lowell.).

Yet, inevitably, Cotton's grasp of the dead birds in front of her extended beyond the mute fact of their presence. "A crow keeps flying back and forth over Yale's shed as if it knew what was

inside," she mused in her journal entry for that day. "A gathering of crows is called 'a murder of crows," she also reflected. "They are said to be very smart. Sometimes they mass in the pine trees not far from the house and quarrel vociferously."

Of course, this extension beyond mute fact – beyond "nature morte" – is what we call life, and it takes place as much in the imagination and in the act of painting as in the physical world around us.

And so, as if in spite of itself, Cotton's "nature mortes" conjure not just death, but an abiding restfulness. The two crows, for example, evoke a fraternal intimacy, as of two children sleeping, limbs akimbo, in the same holiday bed.

It's an astonishing piece of painting. And there are many other, comparable works. A fisher cat killed by a woman's car, for instance, salvaged by one of Cotton's friends. It was just before Christmas, 2008, and the friend had been following with the snow plow. He picked it up and put it behind the Town Garage: "When we got there that night," wrote Cotton, "it was frozen to the snow. Yale went back with buckets of hot water, a shovel and bag, got it unstuck and put it in the bucket of the tractor in the shed overnight."

Cotton had only a limited period of time in which to paint it – she and Yale were due to leave for Maine. She did what she could –

vigorous, wristy brushstrokes in thinned paint for the fur, livid red for the mouth and tongue – and then they left. "It kept inhabiting and irritating me all the way to Maine and back. I painted it again on December 26th but its angry spirit was gone."

The Hunter played a large role in the development of these paintings in early 2009. The weather was harsh. On January 22, he found a blue jay frozen to death. Cotton painted it that day and the next – a small, exquisite painting. "Its head is almost lilac," she wrote, "the fugitive colors ripple across its body, blue, lilac, buff, grey."

Fugitive, indeed. A red-headed woodpecker found ten days earlier had been put in the freezer by the Hunter. After four days, it came to Cotton, who marveled at the black and white stripes. She painted these stripes and its flame-red head, then put it together with the blue jay. Staring at the two, so distinct, so mysteriously torn from life, one thinks of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:/ Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;/ Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came*."

And went, one wants to add. And went.

The following Sunday, Cotton and her husband left the birds out on the river's ice floe. They noticed a day or two later that the birds had been taken. "Walked out onto the ice to see prints," Cotton wrote in her journal, "but couldn't find any."

Two distinct sets of work within this wider series deserve special attention. One is the astonishing series of six deer carcasses Cotton painted in February of 2009. On the last day of January, she had felt ill, and planned to stay in bed. "Five minutes later the Hunter calls to say he has killed a deer with a bow and arrow on this the second last day of the deer hunting season. Do I want it? No. Yes of course. In 15 minutes it is in my studio, a year old buck weighing 100 lbs, no antlers, it is gruesomely gutted."

Cotton had time to do three drawings and two paintings before the Hunter returned the next day to butcher the buck and make sausages from its flesh.

Immediately after that, she began what she called the "Gutted Deer" series – six pictures each 60 by 40 inches. The results are astounding. Against empty grey grounds that get darker from one painting to the next, the buck can be seen in all the demented glory of its recent life and still unfolding death. Its limbs are shown in disarray, forming spasmodic, asymmetrical Xs.

Cotton takes us closer and closer to its gutted underside, the raw and bloodied structure of its ribs and backbone framed by the long, soft white fur of its underside, stained now by pink. The rendering calls to mind Rembrandt or Chardin, but with the rich coloration and emotional intensity of Soutine. Five of the six works are marked by vertical striations of blood-as-paint, or paint-as-blood, culminating in a curtain of crimson blood in the sixth. The effect is almost operatic – a crescendo of metamorphosis, one state into another.

The second set of works, painted just as the series of eviscerated deer was coming to an end, addresses first one owl, then another, and finally the two together.

It was on February 23rd, according to Cottons' journal, that the Hunter arrived with a dead, male great horned owl. "He found it in the woods in a dark area the owls love. He thinks it maybe broke its wing and starved to death."

Five days later, he called to say he had found another owl on the road back from Home Depot. It had been hit by a car, and had a bloody gash on its neck. "Really beautiful with eyes that seem blue and a yellow bill," noted Cotton. This bird – she looked it up in a book and discovered it was a barred owl – changed every day she

painted it. Its markings were darker and bolder than the great horned owl.

Cotton painted both birds in an upside down orientation, their magnificently feathered wings fanning out to either side, and in some cases stretching beyond the edge of the canvases. Here again, Cotton's touch is light and bold. There is no forced attempt to beautify or polish. No attempt to impose symmetry. The patterns of the birds' markings form naturally – the result of observation, not of anything predetermined or systematic. Sometimes these patterns seem to break down, to dissolve, to lose form and focus, as on the far right of the painting of both owls, and this dissolution hints at what we know lies ahead, but which is for the time being held in abeyance by the painter's attentiveness.

These remarkable paintings address the great and beautiful mystery of death in a state of concentration, sympathy, respect. And in the end they achieve something truly noteworthy: They transcend the macabre, and, without ever letting us avert our eyes, they arrive at something ineffably lovely and unexpectedly reassuring.

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