



Lois Dodd. "Burning House, Night, Vertical" (2007). Oil on linen, 64" x 48". © Lois Dodd, Colby College Museum of Art, Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.



Lois Dodd. "Blue Night Window" (1983). Oil on masonite, 20" x 16". © Lois Dodd, Private Collection, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.



Lois Dodd. "Shadow of Painter Painting 'September Light'" (2009). Oil on linen, 32" x 50". © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

IN CONVERSATION

LOIS DODD WITH JOHN YAU

Shortly before her exhibition at the Alexandre Gallery, Lois Dodd and *Rail* Art Editor John Yau met at the gallery to discuss her new paintings.

JOHN YAU (RAIL): I want to start with a little background, and with you wanting to become an artist.

LOIS DODD: I grew up in New Jersey and went to Cooper Union. I commuted from Montclair, taking the train, ferry, and subway. I didn't think that I would be an artist. I thought it would be nice doing it, making art that is, but I didn't know if I wanted to be one, because what the heck was that? No one I knew was an artist.

RAIL: And you got out of Cooper in 1948.

DODD: Yes, I went there from '45-'48.

RAIL: When did you help start the artist-run Tanager Gallery?

DODD: In 1952. I was married to Bill King and we had an apartment on 29th Street. Ely was born in '52 at just about the same time we opened the gallery. Angelo Ippolito, Charles Cajori, Fred Mitchell, King, and myself were the original group. Bill King and I were in Italy on his Fulbright where we met Angelo and Fred there on the G.I. Bill. Cajori had been at Skowhegan with Bill. We had reunited in New York after our return from Italy.

RAIL: Tell me about the gallery.

DODD: It was on 4th Street in this tiny space that had been a barbershop. The elevated subway was still running up and down the Bowery. There was a bar across the street and a lot of Bowery guys were around the corner, completely different than it is now.

RAIL: Were you an observational painter then? Have you always been one?

DODD: Always I never could be really abstract. I think it might be because the painters that I studied with at Cooper were both realists. I studied painting with Byron Thomas and drawing with Tully Filmus. Peter Busa was teaching basic design. Thomas and Filmus did figurative art. They were lovely teachers, very nice. So who knows? My friend, Jean Cohen, who became an abstract painter, studied with Nick Marsicano who had just started at Cooper. She stayed an extra year because Alex Katz was a year behind and she was interested in Alex at the time.

RAIL: So you think that to some degree it might just be circumstance.

DODD: Yes. I wouldn't have known what the first thing was to do. Whereas, if there is something in front of me, I can look at it and figure out what to do abstractly, but still there is something there.

RAIL: Did you ever set up the subject that you painted?

DODD: No, I never set them up. I remember teaching and hating to set up still-lives because I just didn't want that.

RAIL: So you always found the subject in your immediate circumstances?

DODD: Yes, I would find it, see it, and say "that's exciting," but I don't want to set things up.

RAIL: You have been on this path for 60 years.

DODD: Pretty much. The thing that changed at one point was: I used to paint from drawings. When I was painting cows, I went out and drew them because they weren't standing still long enough.

RAIL: So you originally painted from drawings?

DODD: Yes, and they were my more Abstract-Expressionist looking paintings, being more fluid with blank spots on the canvas. Then at a point when I moved to Cushing, Maine, I began just directly painting outside or inside.

RAIL: You would do small ones, always in one shot. Did the paint get thinner?

DODD: Yeah, lots of small ones. The paint was always thin. I never painted heavily. I admired the juicy thick paint on other people's canvases, but that's not what I do.

RAIL: I find it really interesting that at a time when people were, and they still are, focusing on subject matter, you decided to paint your immediate circumstances without trying to make it be more than it is. "No ideas but in things," the poet William Carlos Williams famously said.

DODD: There's no story, I don't want to tell stories.

RAIL: But emotion and feeling does come through.

DODD: I don't think you can avoid that.

RAIL: You can't, and I don't think you're trying to suppress or push it aside either. The paintings are imbued with solitude. I always feel like the painter is alone, looking at the subject. You're inside a plain apartment on a winter day looking out at a bare tree. There are things to read into that.

DODD: That's always interesting because other people always read things into your work, which you can never see. That's fine, that's great. For me it was just exciting to look at and try to do something with it.

RAIL: I felt that way the first time I saw the mirror and chair paintings. I had no idea where they were made, nor that they were done in New York on the Lower East Side. I was probably only living seven or eight blocks away. There's not a narrative, but there's a feeling to those paintings and ever since then I've felt that about your work: that there is no story, but there is a feeling that you can't name, and the painting quietly stirs things up. There is no human in the painting, just a mirror and chair in an empty room, but you don't feel like they're about loneliness. There's no angst to them. You get feeling into the work, but don't name the feeling. What got you to do those paintings?

DODD: One of the reasons I bought a house in Blirstown was because it had such wonderful windows with arched tops. I thought I could paint them because of the shape. And with that wonderful old mirror—it was hanging on the wall for the longest time, but it broke—so I just kept moving it around on the floor with different stuff being reflected. It was just visually exciting to me. I started those after the paintings of the view out my window, the stuff that was in last year's show. I did those because, as I said, I was painting from drawings. Then I moved over to Cushing from Lincolnville and I started painting directly from life, which meant that when I went back to New York in the fall, I had nothing to paint from. Usually I would go back to the drawings and spend the winter slowly building the paintings. That's why I looked out the window, and said "I can paint this." Everyday it was different.

RAIL: Those paintings demarcate a difference from the earlier approach, and since then your work has stayed on that course.

DODD: It has until I got to the paintings of naked ladies. Then I'm back to the drawings after I thought I would never go back, but we have a drawing group in Maine and the model's outside and it's gorgeous. I come back with a pack of drawings every week. Again, it was outside circumstances, it was boiling hot one summer and I wanted to paint the barn without standing in the heat. So I began using the drawings, making up surroundings for the figures. That was back to square one. Now there are two ways of working.

RAIL: The ones that are painted from drawings almost always have figures in them.

DODD: Now, yes, at this late date. In the beginning it was cows, now it's human beings.

RAIL: Robert Berling once observed that you are like a Shaker artist in that there is nothing fancy about your paintings.

DODD: I don't want fancy stuff, or even a lot of stuff. Minimal.

RAIL: The artist Forrest Bess said that he didn't want to elaborate. There is no elaboration in your painting.

DODD: They could be much more descriptive, but I don't want to do that. In that sense, one always puts the blame on the abstract painters. That's what I looked at and loved. I don't want to get too descriptive. You can go so far and stop. I can just feel when to stop.

RAIL: You paint on linen, various sized masonite panels, and very small aluminum sheets. Could you talk about that?

DODD: I stick the aluminum onto a board with a wad of tape, they've got gesso on them and are sanded because they're so shiny. These small panels are for subjects that change quickly, like the sky. The panels are gessoed and sanded. I use linen for larger works, not cotton, because cotton gives when you push.

RAIL: The other thing is that you find a subject and examine it over and over again, like the mirror and the chair.

DODD: Yes, well it's like one idea doesn't do it. It's when you're in the middle of the first that you usually see the second one, and on and on.

RAIL: In your paintings of laundry on a clothesline, there's a rectangle or rectangles within a rectangle. There is this side of your painting that evokes the notion that a painting is a flat surface.

DODD: Right, well, the window serves that purpose too. The laundry was useful because it puts something right in your face, but you would squeeze the space around it. I don't like distant views, I wouldn't be happy going to the top of a mountain. When people say they know a wonderful view, it's not for me.

RAIL: You stick something in the middle of a painting, right in your face, over and over again. Someone's going to read that psychologically.

DODD: I'm keeping everything flat. We live in the city where everything you look at is like that.

RAIL: But it's always about blocking your sight as well as seeing—you can see past it, but you can't see everything.

DODD: It provides this wonderful form. That's what I discovered about windows when I first started, "Wow, here's this frame and all I have to do is fill these rectangles" and, if you put it in the right place, it's all very organized" if you can get your head in the right place.

RAIL: And you mix all the colors as you're painting because there can be 10 different greens in one painting.

DODD: I'm cheap with the paint.

RAIL: It doesn't feel stingy; it feels like you just don't want to make a thick painting.

DODD: If you want to change your compositional idea and you use heavy paint, then what do you do? I started thinking I'll paint thinly and then I can paint more heavily later, but I never got to the later part. In some cases, it's just barely colored drawing.

RAIL: Let's talk about the shadow paintings, which are two large, new paintings for you. You told me the other day that you were looking for something to paint.

DODD: I was wandering around out in back of my house. It was one of those *sharp* light days, and, seeing my shadow I thought, I'll try that. The easel was there, I thought, well, this is fun, here I am painting myself painting.

RAIL: The thing that strikes me about the one with the easel is that there are three discrete views: the palette, the painting of the landscape on the easel, both of which are cropped by the painting's edges, and your shadow on the grass.

DODD: Yeah, it was the way it looked. I mean there was my easel, I'm looking at the painting, and then my shadow is out here in front of me.

RAIL: But your eye is moving to make this painting, and that seems to me the one difference. Even in the large views out the back window you do feel like the eye is moving, but it's not moving quite as radically as it is in this painting.

DODD: Yeah, that's true. With all those window paintings, my eye is fixed. You can't really move your head, otherwise the whole thing changes.

RAIL: Right, but I felt like the palette and landscape painting are discrete views, and the shadow on the grass is another.

DODD: Oh, okay, and yet it wasn't, it was really—

RAIL: I believe you, I'm not disputing that.

DODD: If I move my head, it's very little, it's not like I'm going like that [*gestures*]. I mean the fact that it's on the ground is what's confusing. The fact that that's actually flat, going away from us on the ground, because it looks like I more or less tipped it up.

RAIL: Yes, but I think what struck me about the painting is that, of course, things change even if your eye moves a little bit, but we're not always conscious of it, that even within a short space, things change very much, and your focus has to change. And it goes back to the windows, that as much as you put in your painting, we're always reminded there's something else beyond the painting's edges, that the window is one view. That's pretty poignant, because you feel like, what's the rest of this world you are looking at? And also—I mean this as a compliment—there's something very nondescript about the buildings you pick.

DODD: Well it is, it's a real little-town kind of house. They are older, plain houses on Main Street there.

RAIL: Plain houses, but I don't think they're nostalgic. I think they evoke a certain moment, a certain aspect of America, that there is this kind of plainness that we *like*. It was a *dream* to own a house like that.

DODD: It's for sale, you know. The lady died and her house is up for sale.

RAIL: Would you consider your paintings to be kind of a diary that doesn't tell a story? Is that possible, a diary that doesn't tell a story?

DODD: I never thought of it that way, hmmm.

RAIL: I mean a diary without the "I." The paintings feel very day-to-day, season-to-season, and they are diaristic, this is what held my attention. At the same time, you don't tell a story, they're not autobiographical, they're not social. There is no clue that you knew the woman living across the street and visited her. Your paintings have no—

DODD: —social content, yeah.

RAIL: There are no parties in them, no gatherings of people, no record of who you knew, like this is my friend.

DODD: No, no. Well, I do have some portraits. I did that briefly.

RAIL: But that clearly wasn't something you wanted to do regularly.

DODD: No, not forever, I just thought it was a challenge I should try, so I did.

RAIL: So part of you likes the sense of being by yourself?

DODD: I don't mind some solitude.

RAIL: But it's a solitude that's embraced, and people don't generally embrace solitude, I think. There's something almost, I mean, I'm hesitant to use this word, but there's something almost spiritual about your work, but in an earthly way.

DODD: Oh all right, as long as it's an earthly way. [*laughs.*] You know, my birthday happens to be on Earth Day, which didn't exist until a certain year. All of a sudden they made my birthday Earth Day. I thought, oh that's nice. I like that.

RAIL: There's something *monastic* about your paintings, but it's not about transcendence or any of that. It's really about: this is my circumstance, and this is what I'm going to paint, and I embrace this solitude that I inhabit, and I get pleasure out of it, through color, through making the painting, through engaging with this everyday world. I had no idea that you knew the person who lived in that house, for instance, or that you'd go and visit her. So there it has another meaning, maybe, for you, but you don't let that into the painting.

DODD: Yeah, it's just there out the window. It wouldn't be that great to paint if it weren't all snowed over and stuff. Somehow that stuff does look beautiful when it's completely—

RAIL: Hushed, it's a hushed painting.

DODD: Well, in this painting it's the fog, I had a nice unifying thing that day. It was a foggy day. So what was close to you, you could see, but everything else was kind of disappearing.

RAIL: The other thing you said to me recently was that you didn't paint every day.

DODD: No, I don't paint every day. Does that surprise you? You hear other people, or the students, they ask you; what's your schedule like? I don't really have one.

RAIL: I think my students were shocked when you said that. Were you always like that?

DODD: Yes, I know, that's not good; they should be shocked. They get up, go into their studio, and work. I can't. That's great, but, I mean there's life, right? You've got to have other stuff besides. That's probably why they're so one-shot too, really.

RAIL: I think there's something interesting about the fact that you don't paint every day, because what's striking about these paintings, and really all your work, is that you see the most plain things in a fresh way. You've looked out the same window at the same pine tree covered in snow, but gotten two paintings that look and feel different. You can't instantly figure out what it is about them that's different. On one hand it's obviously the specificity, but it's not so specific to be, as you say, descriptive, so then what comes across is a feeling, and at the same time the feeling is not nameable, to my mind. One of the tensions and powers of your paintings is that you feel it, but you don't feel manipulated by it.

DODD: The other thing about the solitary thing—I'm not always alone when I'm doing paintings. I often go out with other people. I enjoy it. This weekend, we were both painting this house. My friend Elizabeth O'Reilly came out, so she did a little painting of that house. I was again looking at that house this weekend, because again there was snow, but then it got brilliant sky, and the shadows were wild and stuff, and it was too cold to go out, we were too chicken to go out. Although I used to do that. The good thing about painting with other people outside is there's somebody else there, and the other thing is you make a date and you *do* it. Because by yourself you can think of reasons not to, like, I don't want to go out, it's too cold, it's too something. But you go do it when there are others, it's a very good support system.

RAIL: As a viewer, you would have no sense that there's anyone else.

DODD: That's always true with painting. When you hear what the circumstance was, it's often shocking.

RAIL: And you have a studio, but you don't have a studio.

DODD: It's a room. There's nothing in it but my painting stuff, but it's just a room, and I like the windows.

RAIL: So the studio is not this world separate from the world, and it never has been really.

DODD: No. In Maine it's the barn, so that's the most studio-looking one that I've got. Then at 2nd Street, you saw that, it's just kind of—

RAIL: It's in the same room as where you eat, it's part of the dining room. [*laughs.*]

DODD: Yeah, it's all mixed up together. It's intimidating to go see people that really have a studio. They look so professional, I feel completely amateurish when I go see somebody with a studio.

RAIL: There's that whole thing about art and life, you know: what's the relationship?

DODD: I was looking at photographs of Magritte. He seemed to be painting in his dining room, and I thought okay, well if Magritte can do it, I can do it.

RAIL: I think of you as painting in your kitchen, basically.

DODD: Yeah, it's kind of like that.

RAIL: So to go back to that notion of art and life, with you it's like the window both separates you and connects you to what's outside. Behind you might be the studio, but we'd have no idea of that. The studio can be that. You're outside painting, the studio is out in the world.

DODD: Well that's true, there's no clue as to what's going on in the room.

RAIL: No, there never is. Or the room is empty, it's not like we know there's people in the room when you're painting. At the same time, there's lots of ways you paint. You have this kind of brushy mark, and then you have this very calligraphic line, and then you can work tonally, where all the colors are close together. You don't have a style, you really have different things you bring to each painting, depending on what you're painting.

DODD: I'm not conscious of that, but afterwards I can see it, not when I'm doing it.

RAIL: And have you always painted in New England? Did you ever go to Europe and paint?

DODD: I went to Italy a couple times, but you connect yourself to a place, and you do know more, or more comes out. It's been that way with me, it's been some years in New Jersey. I mean it's fun to make trips and work, but I don't think, looking at it afterwards—

RAIL: I don't know your Italian paintings.

DODD: Well, you're never going to see them. [*laughs.*] There's just a few left, and they're not that exciting. I guess you can't know that place.

RAIL: Right, so it's really, you're painting what you know.

DODD: Yeah, although you're unconscious that you know it, and then you don't know that. You think you can go there and just, you know, paint. And I think we have an advantage being here, because there's so much art history in Italy. Why would you waste your time painting when you could be looking at all this wonderful stuff? And then if you paint, your references are all wonderful art that already happened. It would be difficult to see it in some fresh way.

RAIL: So do you think of your work as having references?

DODD: Well, yes, other American painting.

RAIL: And was American painting something you always liked? Like, early American Modernists? You said you liked the Abstract Expressionists.

DODD: Right, and Hartley, Hopper, and that generation of people.

RAIL: Did you look at a lot of them when you were younger?

DODD: Not so much, no. It's funny, someone had given me a John Marin book when I was in high school. I had no idea what that was about. And then later I met his son and his daughter-in-law, Norma and John, so it's interesting the connections that come up in your life.

RAIL: So who were the painters you were looking at when you were younger?

DODD: Oh god who were they? That's a good question. It seems to be that I always looked at a lot of people. I mean I guess Picasso was the big name at Cooper Union when we were going there. But I preferred Braque, I felt closer to him.

And I always loved Mondrian. I mean, early Mondrian, the ones where he's out in nature, they seemed so great to me. So that was kind of an influence. And everybody looked at Cezanne; that always was important to do. And you learned a lot from looking at him, you just learned everything. Who else? Those big American painters of the American west; Barbara Novak wrote that wonderful book about the transcendentalists, and that seemed great to me.

RAIL: So you mean people like Bierstadt and Church?
DODD: Yeah, right. I love looking at their paintings, not that I want to paint like that. But I do think they were sort of great. I once saw some Church paintings of ice flows that he'd done. They had them in a gallery, and they weren't that much money, but they were too much. Boy, they were just great, I had never known he did those.

RAIL: They were oil sketches right? Those are beautiful.
DODD: Yeah, amazing.

RAIL: You mentioned Braque, Mondrian, Cezanne, and Church. Have you ever set out to paint something—you know, pursue a subject that you found?
DODD: When I got to the windows, for instance, I did one; and it was my own house that I was doing, from outside, not inside, but outside. They were a perfect geometric thing, thinking Mondrian. So after I did the smaller ones, I thought, I'll do it a little bigger, and they finally got to be the size of the actual window. And then I started going all over the neighborhood in Maine looking for windows, because windows are cleaner there, so you get beautiful reflections. That became like, I'll look at this building, I'll look at that one. The local grange hall, nobody was there, I could go stare at those windows. And then it was the empty house down the road.

RAIL: And then there's the one with the broken windows.
DODD: Then the broken windows, the next year I came back and windows were broken. Birds or something. Then out near Blairstown, the federal park there along the Delaware, they were taking buildings out as they made more of it into federal park. They took down buildings. There were a million broken windows there, so I was pursuing windows at a point.

RAIL: Well, the sheets on the clothesline.
DODD: The sheets were another fascination I was busily arranging—that was my still life, arranging my sheets. It also involved movement, when the wind blew the sheets.

RAIL: And then there's the quarry.
DODD: Then there's the quarry. I went up to Maine with friends; we had a model who lived near the road to one of the quarries. We would draw all morning and then we'd go over to the quarry and paint in the afternoon. So we spent a number of years doing that, so there's a fair number of quarry paintings. I did a few big ones actually—two, and a lot of small ones.

RAIL: And with a lot of your paintings, not all, but there is a shape within a shape. It's a rectangle or something within a rectangle, a geometric form within the rectangle.
DODD: Right, that's the first thing I take note of, to tack it down. What's the geometric shape? And then I make a decision about what size board I need. I've got various boards cut up, there's no two that are the same size. I don't have a favorite size and shape. Some people go for one and stick with it, but I don't. It depends on what I'm looking at, what I find. So I have to go out with a pile of different sizes and shapes, if I'm going out somewhere, and I'll look around and say, okay this looks right.

RAIL: That's very practical on your part. I mean you could go to a Lois Dodd show and it's not like five paintings are going to be the same size. You've even worked on very narrow rectangles.
DODD: Those are the leftover little edges of something, but then I realized that sometimes I could use them. I take a chart to the lumberyard, where they cut a 4 by 8 foot masonite panel into smaller panels for me, according to how many inches I tell them.

RAIL: And of course you couldn't throw anything away.
DODD: No, no, I don't want to throw any away. That one is pretty skinny, and that's about as skinny as they ever would get.

RAIL: And you work on them vertically and horizontally.
DODD: Yes, it could be either. You just don't know until you find the spot where you want to set up.

RAIL: So within what you paint, the everyday circumstance, you have a lot of latitude. You paint on different sizes, which you use to frame the subject. Obviously there's more to look at, but you only really want this. And you haven't gotten tired of it.
DODD: No, no I haven't.

RAIL: You haven't said, oh I have to move to another house.
DODD: Well, sometimes you do have that thought, it's time to get another place. No, so far so good. Well, you know what happens, like, this view, this window here, where the plant is. I did a big painting a number of years ago, it wasn't real big, of somebody's window in the house across the way. It was just their window, from the outside. I left out most of the house. And then I realized this year, I can't see that house because the tree has grown. Everything changes, because of stuff growing.

RAIL: And you notice the change, because you keep going back.
DODD: It occurred to me after I did it, oh yes, I painted out of this window before, but I was looking at the house across the street, now I can't see it anymore. So there's that. I wonder how many years I'll be able to live here, and then I'll have to move because I'll have painted everything. It's used up. But the place changes, you change, everything changes, so it doesn't seem to run out. And then in Maine, my friend Leslie Land who has the garden, all the flowers, at a point she made this garden, it's on my property but it's at the other end of it. That's her art form, and the garden is different every year.

RAIL: So even though it's the same room, everything in it changes.
DODD: Yes, and then I change I guess. Somehow you bring other stuff to it than you did.

RAIL: Do you feel like you've had to paint differently as you got older?
DODD: Well, I'm not hauling great big canvases around outside. Although the only time I ever did that was in Maine; I could cross the road, and there's the woods. Those woods were within walking distance, so I could take big canvases and just leave them in there, cover them with plastic and they'd stay overnight. But otherwise, it isn't that big, I don't go as far, that's for sure. I'm not driving all over the countryside looking for stuff.

RAIL: Right, more like you're walking.
DODD: Yeah, I'm not hiking through the woods and stuff. Yeah, so that's what old age is doing, that's the effect.

RAIL: We've talked about the window paintings, the mirror and chair paintings, and the laundry on the clothesline paintings? Recently you did these two shadow paintings. Are there other subjects that haven't been seen or seen in a long time?
DODD: I've got many tunnels that never get shown anymore, and that's the same subject. There is an area of New Jersey that used to have the railroad, and every few miles there's another tunnel for the road to go under. And the ends of tunnels make good views. So I've got tunnel paintings, but they don't seem to get into any show for whatever reason.

RAIL: The tunnel frames a distant view. Where are you standing when you make these paintings?
DODD: Well yes, there is through the end, but then there's a little bit on this side of the tunnel, too. Usually, I'm pretty close to it, but not so much that it completely obliterates this side.

RAIL: And there are the paintings of the same window framing the same tree.
DODD: Wouldn't it get kind of boring? I mean, you know, you might just get sick of looking at it.

RAIL: Is there any advice you have for a young artist?
DODD: Advice? [laughs.]

RAIL: If I think about your paintings, I get the feeling you like summer and winter more than spring and fall?
DODD: Yes, my work is more summer-winter. Fall is, again, so glorious. There's a red maple tree out in my yard in Blairstown, and it turns redder. It's red, it's maroon, and then it turns magenta—some years, not every year, some years, the whole thing falls on the ground, and it's just spectacular for several days.

RAIL: Right, and you painted that.
DODD: I feel like, if the tree's going to do that, I have to paint it. That's the way I feel about Leslie's garden. At first I ignored it, because I really didn't want to be painting flowers. And then you think, oh my god, but look at what these plants are doing, they're trying so hard! They're so spectacular! I have to pay attention, you can't ignore them. And then they're gone, I mean all year long there's absolutely nothing there but mud, and then this miracle happens and you're going to ignore it? You can't.

RAIL: I don't think of you as a flower painter, but you have painted flowers.
DODD: I have painted flowers, but only if they—well for example, those globe thistles were great because they were all circles, and I was involved with some eclipse paintings at the same time, and then I realized afterwards, oh my god they were all the same. It's all the same subject. Some flowers are bold enough, or there is something about their shape, but I can't deal with the whole beauty of the garden.

RAIL: No, beauty doesn't seem to me the thing you're after.
DODD: I'm not after ugly either.

RAIL: No, you're not. You're after everyday circumstance, but then there's those night paintings you did, then there's the paintings of the building on fire.
DODD: Right, right. That was exciting. I feel sometimes that I'm a reporter. There's an event, like the fire, and I'll go down and do something with that. And there was a time when I was painting, they'd lift up a house. I said, gee look at that, I have to come down here and paint this scene, whereas anybody with a camera would just take a lot of photographs, but I could go and paint it.

RAIL: And what do you think is different?
DODD: It takes me longer. [laughs.]

RAIL: But it's also that it's a painting, right?
DODD: It's a painting, yes, you've got this crazy painting, it's a crazy thing. I think what I like about that too is when groups of nice people come to see your paintings, or their students or something, everyone is so set on what they *think* is a proper subject to paint. They think that goes with it; that you have to know what to paint, and only certain things are proper.

RAIL: So, to go back to the beginning, you were never interested in proper subject matter.
DODD: Hopefully not, no.

RAIL: There are the paintings out the back New York window overlooking the cemetery. There's a bunch of paintings I saw in your studio of trees that had fallen down.
DODD: Yes, if they fall down, it immediately makes a composition right there. Or like those houses burning down, which again was not a tragedy, but everybody looks at them that way. There had been a man who had owned that house, he was very upset by it, which I can understand. But the people that owned the house wanted to get rid of it, so they called the fire department to burn it down. That's what it was, so it went on all day because they were practicing putting out fires. It was a staged fire.

RAIL: Which we would never know.
DODD: Right. That's not what interested me. 