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JUNE 2020

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Above: Lois Dodd's house and barn are seen through a fallow field of irises and blooming Jerusalem artichokes. Opposite: the artist spends cool Maine evenings reading in her living room, heated by a cast-iron stove in autumn and winter. Firewood is stored in the brick cupboard to the right. The embroidered rhinoceros cushion on the sofa is one of the owner's creations, designed and executed in the 1950s

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## THE BLOT THICKENS

Lois Dodd has been quietly making her mark on the art world for decades - as well as her kitchen floor. When not recording the world around her Maine farmhouse, the acclaimed realist painter has used her brushes to flick and dribble oils underfoot in the manner of Pollock. Vying for attention with bosky murals, trompe-l'oeil windows and contemplative works, this ever-evolving 'action painting' fascinates Faye Hirsch. Photography: Antony Crolla

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Above: the clouds scudding across the blue sky on one side of the Painted Room were created by patch-plastering. The yellow door originally closed off the living area. Opposite: a detail of Dodd's 1982 free-standing trompe l'oeil - now in the collection of Maine's Farnsworth Art Museum - that depicts the room

Above: propped on a rush-seated country chair is a small painting by Julie Jankowski that shows Dodd's decorative handiwork. A sculpture by the late William King, *Standing Man*, completes the tableau. Right: the window looks out over a road towards the same pine trees that inspired the bosky mural





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Above: one of Dodd's first acquisitions, when she bought the house in 1963, was the old Brookline cast-iron range for her kitchen. Combining a wood-burning oven and a gas stove-top, this monolithic bit of kit is still going strong decades later. The doors at the back lead to a mud room (left) and pantry

Above: the artist says the floor is 'a work in progress'. This accidental Abstract-Expressionist tableau began life in the 1960s, when she tore up the lino to find patches of tar that couldn't be sanded. 'Every time I get a new and interesting colour, I add it to the floor.' Right: shingles-as-splashback in the tiny pantry



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Above: Dodd picked up much of the furniture in the house in junk shops long ago, or otherwise rescued it. This bed, minus its finials, came from the yard of an old friend, the late artist Bernard Langlais. In front is a hooked rug that was her senior project for a design class at Manhattan's Cooper Union in 1948



Left: 'We ought to have a view,' Dodd said of the featureless front foyer. Her solution: a trompe-l'oeil sash window. Above: Maine's state mammal - the moose - makes an appearance in the guise of an Ann Weber sculpture and a Janice Kasper painting. The owner's bedroom is glimpsed across the landing





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**LOIS DODD** has spent most of the past 57 summers painting around the environs of her home in Maine. She lives in a modest shingled farmhouse in rural Cushing; her studio is a spacious barn a few steps away. An observational painter given to distilled views, she seeks her subjects in the near-at-hand. She trains her gaze on the spare geometry of the house and its out-buildings as well as on tidy, linear woods across the way. Gridded paned windows in ruined roadside farmsteads, once the vernacular of a depressed region, have long been her stock-in-trade. Spiky weeds that fill surrounding gardens to profusion, insects mad for industry in a short season: these, too, make repeat appearances in her work. In the studio, paintings of various sizes nest on the timbered walls; many are small scenes she paints on roof flashings.

Dodd is experiencing an overdue commercial recognition, lagging behind an avid following by critics, fellow painters and students; to survive and thrive, she kept her career frugal and charming. Her homes – in Maine, New Jersey (her native state) and Manhattan’s East Village – were purchased early and cheap, and dwelt in over many decades, as she set up her life to facilitate her art. According to her son, Eli King, an architect, the foundations of the Cushing house date to the late 18th or early 19th century; you can still see the original horsehair and plaster over lath in the basement. While the main entrance is now on the north, King believes the original faced the sea, about three-quarters of a mile away at the very end of the road, the location of *Christina’s World* (1948), the famous Andrew Wyeth painting.

Dodd made her first trip to Maine in 1951, accompanying her then husband, the late artist Bill King, and three friends from Cooper Union in New York City. King was headed for his first summer as a student at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture; the painters Alex Katz and Jean Cohen, then married, were making a return trip after their own stint the previous year. These were not the first or last artists in the Skowhegan circle to attend the school then stick around, drawn to the landscapes surrounding the inland town and beyond. For years, a bottomed-out housing market would allow artists to own properties there. Dodd

and King were soon divorced, but she and the Katzes were to go back repeatedly in the 1950s and 60s, buying a house together in coastal Lincolnville for \$1,200, where Alex Katz lives to this day. Dodd shared it with him and Jean, then him and his second wife, Ada, for a decade after they purchased it in 1953. Eventually the Katzes bought her out and she moved into the house in Cushing.

Dodd saw possibilities in its raw state, and although she and Eli have made many improvements over the years, they have retained the freshness of what they found. Her father was in the Merchant Marines, and she, her mother and sisters ‘took the hammer right away’, tending to their Montclair, NJ, house during his long absences. The Cushing house is a combination of that handiness and its owner’s painterly predilections. Upon moving in, she tore up the old linoleum in the kitchen, concerned that if it was left the wood beneath would rot. Finding the floor speckled with tar, and unable to sand it, she added drips and pours of paint to create a Jackson Pollock-like tableau. This comes as a delight to visitors who recognise Dodd as a Modernist Realist who in many ways resisted the dominant style of Abstract Expressionism. For her part, she notes that splatter-paint floors were common in Maine houses, and her own is a tribute to them.

Art by friends and colleagues fills the house, as in a spindly bow-legged sculpture by Bill King in the first-floor guest-room, standing before a mural by Dodd. Hand-embroidered pillows on one old chaise are her creation from the early 1950s; her degree was in textile design, but she never seriously pursued it. Nearly all the furniture has been acquired over the years from junk shops, yard sales and markets, creating a practical aesthetic balance. The one modern addition is a sunroom designed and built by Eli in 1989, just after he finished architecture school. He enclosed within it the shingled and clapboard outside walls of the house, built at different periods, and left intact the rustic red exterior door and a window, features that feel like an extract from one of his mother’s paintings. Most entertaining takes place here and on the adjacent deck. Upstairs, Dodd painted the walls and floors of low-ceilinged rooms a warm lemon yellow, which offsets cold rainy days that can be a feature of Maine summers.

Dodd’s muralled room brings together her artistic sensibility and her playful approach to décor. From 1968 to 1978 she was depicting the spruce woods across the road; their long, spindly trunks were ideal subjects for her reductive vision. It was during that time that she improved the front room downstairs. Patch-plastering the walls, she took her cue from its raw state, surrounding the patches with blue to create a sky studded with clouds. Later, when the paper on the opposite wall peeled off, she added a forest mural, its reddish hues typical of her contemporary woodland scenes. In 1982, in a meta moment, she created a work titled *The Painted Room*, a large oil-on-linen trompe-l’oeil of the mural and its window, complete with lemon-yellow curtains. At first it is difficult to read the painting, since the ‘real’ view confuses inside and outside – until you notice a bare bulb near the top of the composition. Elsewhere, a more modest effort resulted in a faux window with a view to the outside, another device that fools the eye. She laughs when she talks about that little addition; annoyed by the darkness of her vestibule and wishing it had a window, she painted one. To Dodd, who has in many ways made art and life inseparable, it was a level-headed solution, one that amuses her to this day ■

*A Lois Dodd exhibition will run at Alexandre Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10019 (001 212 755 2828; alexandregallery.com), in spring 2021. For further information about the artist, contact the gallery, or Modern Art London (020 7299 7950; modernart.net)*



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Opposite: Dodd in the doorway of her studio. This page: the space was once a working barn. When she bought the property, there was a large platform in the rafters filled with hay. Her son dismantled it and built the storage racks. Eventually the soaring ceiling was restored and salvaged windows were fitted

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