

Night watching

In the seventh of his 'longer looks' at individual artworks, Justin Paton peers into an everyday scene made strange and compelling by night.

Light is love, grace, joy, truth, benevolence, blessing, a necessity. Daylight gets us up and running each day, thanks to our hardwired diurnal habits. Sunlight feeds our bodies and souls – who would say a word against it? No wonder the Impressionists – lightmeisters, sun-mongers – remain the most popular painters. Nothing surpasses a Monet sunrise if your museum wants to sell tickets.

Yet if you ask me about my inner museum and the paintings I'd hang there, I'll say straight away – nothing against Monet – that I'd rather seize the night than the day. From Whistler's suave and fluent nocturnes to Magritte's eerie lamplit streets, and from the Belgian Léon Spilliaert's dreamdark beaches to Colin McCahon's Muriwai nightscapes, the greatest night paintings combine the strange and the soothing into something almost intoxicating. And *Night House with Lit Window*, by the American painter Lois Dodd, delivers a wonderfully strong dose of it.

I knew almost nothing of Dodd, who is 92 and paints in Maine and New York City, until her recent show at Modern Art in London. But her paintings made me feel, as certain people do on first meeting, as if I'd known her for longer. It has something to do with the plain-spoken sureness Dodd brings to the act of painting, the sense she's building her no-frills scenes with sincerity and minimum fuss. Look at the scrubby, unbothered way she blocks in the colours of her nocturne: dark-green trees with darker green foliage and a scraggy stand of shadows behind them. Or the lovely confidence with which she constructs her night house and its wooden façade, using swift thin strokes of white grey and black to enumerate its 36 clapboards.

What you see is what you see. But there's also something stilled and uncanny, a muted magic, that rises from this

painting. For New Zealand eyes, it derives in part from the exoticism of the American everyday. Peering at this house, we sense straight away that we're in the United States rather than somewhere local, and that the darkness all around is the American night that we know not from experience but from movies. And Dodd, though she's a realist of sorts, keeps things poetically open – withholding specifics (who lives here? who's looking?) in a way that leaves space for us.

What I think of first, looking at the work, are night-time drives through rural Otago to my grandparents' farmhouse when I was a child, and how fearfully lonely the lights of other farmhouses looked in the rushing dark. I had to work hard, when we'd arrived and gone to bed, not to think about all that darkness. I'm reminded too of the slightly voyeuristic pleasures of late-night suburban walking: the views in, the small signs of life, the security lights plinking on as you pass. Above all, the sense of the daytime world made both intimate and alien by darkness.

Perhaps this is why night attracts certain painters as a subject – because it performs a kind of estrangement of the world that we also find in the best realist painting. If a painter can harness that estrangement in their art, then their work will be doubly effective, shaking us awake to the simple yet weirdly stirring fact that the world continues through the night without us.

Dodd makes us quiet witnesses to just such a moment of estrangement. We stand on the edge of the yard, though not so close that the vantage seems creepy. The colours of the trees swarm indistinctly, as colours do when we lack light to see them. And the more we look at the forms of the house, the more they swell with odd pressures and secrecies.

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Lois Dodd, *Night House with Lit Window*, 2012, oil on linen, 1219 x 1829mm.
Photo: Ben Westoby, courtesy of Modern Art, London, and Alexandre Gallery, New York

There's the wall with its night light, just hidden from view, where we imagine a door might be. There's the way the roof disappears behind the gable – as if the whole building's as thin as a billboard. And there are the two blind 'eyes' of the dark upper windows – apertures that do seem to look, to absorb our gaze, though we know such projections are childish. Of course, Dodd doesn't force this suggestion: the windows don't form an obvious 'face'. But that doesn't quell the sense I have that Dodd has painted this house as a self or a being – a structure that attracts us because it has, like a person, a hum, an inner presence.

This gently animated quality – a pulse of poetry within the prose of the world – is one of the rewards of Dodd's honestly observed art, and it reminds me of a great remark by the painter-critic Fairfield Porter, another poetic realist who found all the mystery he needed in the world before his eyes. "The presence in a painting", he said, "is like the presence a child feels and recognises in things and the way they relate, like a doorknob, the slant of a roof or its flatness, or the personality of a tool. Art does not succeed by compelling you to like it, but by making you

feel this presence in it. Is someone there? This someone can be impersonal."

The prime sign of this presence in Dodd's painting, of course, is the glowing lower window – a modest light show staged unknowingly for those walking by. What a pleasure it must have been, amidst dark greys and greens, for Dodd to block in those two bright squares of yellow. Even while they announce *I'm painted*, we yield happily to the illusion created, of curtains veiling a warm interior: a space in and through the painting. In a moment, I find myself thinking, we'll see that light turn off and another go on upstairs, as whoever's inside heads to bed. But since this is a painting, a stopping of time, that modest inner glow is unceasing.

All this makes me think in turn of nights and lateness and creation, and whether Lois Dodd, who was 85 when she painted her *Night House*, was thinking of what it means to be a 'late' painter. Is it too much to see in this painting a modest celebration of persistence? An oblique portrait of an artist staying up late and quietly keeping on with her craft? Whatever the answer, one thing is clear. In this work, somebody's home.