

ALEXANDRE

artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

Saturday, April 25th, 2015

Two Visions of Realist Painting: Lois Dodd and Brett Bigbee

by Peter Malone

Brett Bigbee and Lois Dodd at Alexandre Gallery

February 26 through April 4, 2015

41 East 57th Street 13th Floor (between Madison and Park avenues)

New York, 212 755 2828



Installation view of "Brett Bigbee and Lois Dodd," 2015, at Alexandre Gallery. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery.

57th Street has seen its share of contemporary art galleries shrink to a mere handful in recent years. Significant among the still-flourishing few is the modestly sized Alexandre Gallery, tucked away on the 13th floor of the Fuller Building. This month Alexandre offers a roomful of small panels demonstrating Lois Dodd's gift for visual epiphany and, in the small anteroom near the entrance, a pair of portraits facing each other on opposite walls by Maine artist Brett Bigbee. Though clearly distinct from one another, these two painters demonstrate the range and the vitality of perceptual painting, a branch of the artform imprudently sidelined by our major museums these days in favor of a tiresome abstraction. If you find yourself seeking relief from MoMA's trend-groping "Forever Now," this exhibition should be your first stop.



Lois Dodd, *Reflected Light on Brick Wall, December, 2014*. Oil on masonite, 18 x 15 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexandre Gallery.

Dodd has been at her peak for so long now that her reputation is all but settled, waiting only for transfer from an oral history among fellow artists to a more secure documentation in New York's art institutions of record. This current grouping includes variations on themes she has improvised on for decades: landscapes, windows, sunsets, moonrises and iconoclastic flower studies. Of particular interest is *Reflected Light on Brick Wall, December* (2014), consisting of a window's sunlit outline projected on white brick, including the silhouette of a house plant apparently sitting on the window's sill. What's unusual here is a carefully penciled grid, revealing in uncharacteristically dense detail the outline of each brick — hundreds of them. This elaborate drawing is then set back by means of deftly painted transparent layers of subtle color contrasts, ultimately reducing the effect of the drawing to a minor yet essential role. A risky move in consideration of the minimal painterly style she is known for, it recalls Mondrian's late but youthful experiments with colored masking tape. Perhaps self-challenge, not posturing is the better route to continued relevance.

In paint handling Bigbee could not be more different. One may be tempted to assert that his work follows in the tradition of Grant Wood, but there are so many other traditions that could be mentioned — French Neoclassicism, Late Gothic — almost any style that keeps a hard edge running along meticulously modelled shapes may be said to share an affinity with these two paintings. The presence of this distinct sensibility in any era — examples seem to crop up in most periods — calls for recognition that Bigbee, like his precursors, is his own man and that his work ought to be assessed on its own terms. For what distinguishes a Wood from an Ingres, or an Ingres from a Van Eyck, aside from obvious historical dissociation, is the sensibility that surfaces through each practitioner's devotion to their shared sense of heightened illusion. Left, then, to compare the two paintings to each other, it should be noted that Bigbee completes a very small number of canvases each year. Each of his paintings is in some measure a world unto itself.

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Brett Bigbee, *Josie Over Time*, 2011-15. Oil on linen, 13 3/8 x 9 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexandre Gallery.

Of the two canvases in this exhibition, *Josie Over Time* (2011-15) and *Maxine* (2012-13), I found the latter more compelling, largely because it seems unfinished, or perhaps spontaneously aborted. By this I mean that in its current state, which may indeed be complete (one assumes so, as it represents exactly half the exhibition) it appears as if the artist saw something worth preserving and decided to leave it as is, a move that raises intriguing questions about spontaneity that would otherwise seem counterintuitive considering the fastidious labor this painting style requires.

The glow that emanates from the skin of the sitters in both pictures (as opposed to a glow projected on the skin, like most pictures) is a product of delicate construction, but in *Maxine* it seems to have been halted before the cool underpainting could be brought to a fuller and warmer tone. Unlike the finish of its counterpart, which includes a fully realized landscape, *Maxine's* flat and darkened background only emphasizes the ephemeral fog of her presence. Her eyes outlined in a pronounced scarlet, as if painted in preparation for the warmer flesh tones to follow, appear in their current state slightly separate from her graying cheeks and forehead, as if some inner discomfort has freed itself from her body. This ghostly pallor is further heightened by the bright red garment strap that ends in a casual tie over her right shoulder, supporting the attitude implied in her ambiguous, if not slightly resentful, stare.

The preeminent aspect of this style of painting is evident in how each artist's methods dissolve into their pictures' carefully overlaid membranes, obliterating brush marks, erasing any traces of labor and refining color to flawless modulations that in a superficial reading end up creating either a mesmerizing realism or an unearthly hyperrealism. And yet a careful study of Bigbee's work in this exhibition suggests that the range of emotion separating these two paintings, especially if compared with the variety of human representation by painters of similar sensibility over the centuries, indicate that there is more to it than categorical realism. These two pictures ought to encourage us to reassess our use of the word "expression" as synonymous with sweeping, slashing brushwork.

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