

ALEXANDRE

artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

Monday, March 28th, 2016

As Agile As Ever: Lois Dodd at Alexandre

by John Goodrich

Lois Dodd: Day and Night at Alexandre

February 25 to April 2, 2016

724 5th Avenue, 4th Floor

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Installation shot of the exhibition under review. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery

What does it mean to paint representationally? For a Photorealist, it means a point-by-point recapitulation: the fixed, dispassionate vantage point of a camera. For a more tradition-minded painter, it involves a weighting of masses and details, an eliding of some elements and emphasizing of others: in short, a process of limitless characterization. Such a painting can end up anywhere on the spectrum of complexity, from bare minimalism to baroque embellishment. But a convincing traditional representation depends most of all on making elements count – on a disposition of forms that gives weight to masses, tension to gestures, and a resolving energy to detail.

Lois Dodd, as her admirers know, is a painter who makes things count. For over six decades, she has presented unassuming subjects – typically her garden and interior scenes – in singularly taut compositions animated by circumstances of time, light, and point of view.

Her latest exhibition at Alexandre, titled “Night and Day,” reveals that at age 89 she still isn’t missing a step. Among a series of night-time urban window views, “15 Night Windows” (2016) stands out for the somber glow of its dark hues: the inky, cool mass of a building close to one side – more a looming essence than a dimensional object – and the barely lighter, warmer façade beyond, with spacious blue-violets of sky above. All these elements feel fully colorful even though occupying only a tiny range of extreme darks. Setting off their spacious depths, the crisp horizontal and vertical crosspieces of a window bisect the image. As a concept, the painting intrigues, but thanks to Dodd’s weighting with color, it takes on a sensuous mystery.

Most paintings depict daytime scenes, and in these, too, color is always a factor. “Cherry Blossoms + Gray Sky” (2015), a study of tree trunks, seems at a glance monochromatic. But one soon senses tiny shifts of color in the trunks, as they wend with occasional, slight bends from panel bottom to top. Strings of tiny white and green dots waft across the panel, poignantly measuring out the trunks’ rise.

The natural beauty of Dodd’s subjects often acquire an obtuse edge. In “Apple Tree through Barn Window, September” (2015), for example, an askew window sash angles rudely across a window view of flamboyant orange-reds and greens, as if to deny any foothold to the merely picturesque.

Occasionally – as in the large canvas “Night House with Lit Window” (2012) – colors tend to fill, rather than amplify, the dynamics of the drawing. But throughout the exhibition one repeatedly comes across odd moments made compelling: the grid of variously clouded panes in “Steamed Window” (1980) that progress around the canvas like images on

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Lois Dodd, Steamed Window, 1980. Oil on linen 36 x 28 inches.

Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery



Lois Dodd, Jerusalem Artichokes, September, 2015. Oil on Masonite, 20 x 15 7/8 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery

a photographer's contact sheet; the spindly, flowering plants, as gawky as teen-agers, crowding the center of "Jerusalem Artichokes, September" (2015); the lone flash of pink in "Pink Towel + Chicken House, June" (2015), suspended from a clothesline by two tiny corners – themselves framed, above and below, by a mounding bush and the racing outline of a shed.

In such paintings we experience not the charm of the picturesque, but the confluence of two sovereign forces: nature, and color-forms on a canvas. It's tempting to think of Dodd's as their intermediary, both mischievous match-maker and dauntless midwife. It's a tall order, when you think about it. But isn't that the lot of the artist? The possibilities for characterization are limitless.



Lois Dodd, Pink Towel + Chicken House, June, 2015. Oil on Masonite, 11 7/8 x 19 1/8 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery