Art

Lois Dodd in Portland

by Karen Wilkin

"Lois Dodd: Catching the Light," on view at the Portland Museum of Art, Maine, is a disarming show.[1] The seemingly modest, straightforward paintings in this thoughtful survey (organized by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri and largely chosen by the artist herself) draw us to them initially because of their comforting sense of familiarity. Dodd, like a musician with perfect pitch, never gets a tone wrong. Apparently without effort, she builds her pictures out of hues and values that conjure up particular seasons, times of day, and vagaries of weather. We recognize the mood and temperature of a crisp winter day, a voluptuous summer night, an equivocal morning in early spring, a sun-drenched autumn afternoon. If we know New England, Dodd's austere clapboard houses and weathered barns (buildings in rural Maine, where she has spent summers for decades) have special resonance, but like her seemingly dispassionate accounts of northeastern landscapes, backyards, laundry lines, flowering trees, and garden close-ups, her Down East images also read as classic Americana that transcends geography. In the same way, while Dodd's paintings of the interiors of her Lower East Side studio and the urban views from its windows may trigger instant recognition from her fellow New Yorkers, they require no particular knowledge of her sources to demand and hold our attention.

Such specificity—of place, of quality of light, of temporal details—is a major part of what Dodd's paintings are about. She has long been dedicated to working from direct perception. Often this translates into classic *plein air* practice: a trek to the motif with a folding French easel and paint box, a struggle with wind and weather, and all the rest of it, including fastening canvases to trees and covering them with plastic between campaigns. (A delightful photograph in the exhibition catalogue shows the intrepid artist, folded easel in hand and a canvas stool slung over her shoulder, ready for all contingencies in a broad brimmed hat and a rain poncho.) In discussing particular paintings, Dodd will pragmatically note that the location was convenient to where she lives or reminisce gratefully about a day when the temperature was right and annoying insects were absent: Asked about the history of a luminous snow-filled landscape with dramatic shadows, she says, "It was very sunny and I was standing against the wall of a building, warm from the sun, so the paint wasn't affected by the cold. Winter's great—no bugs." The selection of works in "Catching the Light" is notably wide-ranging—one or two pictures of a particular motif can stand for whole families of images—but we soon realize that the territory Dodd explores is circumscribed. If we spend enough time with her work, we begin to recognize a lexicon of places: her Lower East Side loft and its environs, her Cushing,

1 "Lois Dodd: Catching the Light" opened at the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine on January 17 and remains on view through April 7, 2013.

Maine, house and yard, her own outbuildings or those on the adjoining property, a house down the road, a close friend and neighbor's garden, woods and fields a short walk away, the hilly landscape of New Jersey, near the Delaware Water Gap. Most intimate, perhaps, are the interiors and the views out (or into) the window. Dodd seems to know her chosen scenes thoroughly, to have studied them all over a long time and to have found new ways of thinking about them or even of seeing them, in part because of long scrutiny. Each painting, however easily we recognize its starting point or whatever clues Dodd provides in her titles, seems freshly conceived. "When I first came to Maine," she says, "I thought I'd stay here a while, until I'd exhausted what there was to paint, and then I'd have to move on. But things change all the time. Trees grow or they fall down. It's never the same."

Whatever their nominal subjects or their place of origin, all of the works in "Catching the Light" have their basis in a direct confrontation with the motif, *in situ*. Even the largest, done of necessity indoors, begin with more modestly sized versions made on the spot; what's impressive is that the larger canvases somehow magically preserve the immediacy of the first, smaller works done entirely *en plein air*. It's a time-honored way of working, dating back at least until the late-eighteenth century, even though it took more than fifty years, until the mid-nineteenth century, for directly observed paintings to be seen as complete works of art in their own right, not merely as helpful studies for more ambitious efforts. (See Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, the Barbizon School, and the Impressionists.) But also since the mid-nineteenth century, the tacit, "stop time" message of works of this type—"this is what this place looked like, at this moment, under these conditions"—has been increasingly associated with photography, despite the obvious fact that photographs are not necessarily truthful. The message of Dodd's paintings is more personal. She bears witness but in wholly pictorial terms: "I was there, at that moment, under those conditions, and this is how I responded to that very specific experience in the language of paint."

Dodd has been working this way since she first started going to Maine, in the early 1950s, as an eager young painter—she will be eighty-six this year—with a group of her New York artist friends and colleagues. "Alex Katz was painting outside," she recalls, "so I thought I would, too." Before that, she would draw from the subject and use the drawing as the basis of a studio painting. Of the works included in "Catching the Light," Dodd says, only the very earliest—a few loose-limbed landscapes, including one with cows and one with clam diggers, made between 1955 and 1961—could be described this way. "But," she points out, "I worked on them much longer than the paintings done outdoors." The fluent, cursive drawing that threads though these early paintings, loosely defining soft-edged shapes and establishing sinuous rhythms, reflects her awareness of Abstract Expressionism, particularly the paintings of Willem de Kooning, whom Dodd knew and whose work set a standard for much of her generation. But conspicuously absent from her early paintings is the sense of contingency and mutability, typically embodied by wet-into-wet, dragged paint handling, that was both characteristic of de Kooning's work and a hallmark of the aspiring younger New York painters in the 1950s who admired him. That approach was so common that Clement Greenberg coined a dismissive term for it: "the Tenth Street touch." Dodd's early work, by contrast, is clearheaded and firm, predicting, it seems, the lucidity and directness, the sense of a particular moment, and, above all, the Yankee plain-spokenness that would characterize her mature paintings (and the artist herself).

Clarity, a sense of specificity, and a powerful evocation of place, time, and season are what first attract us to Dodd's work, but she is anything but a literal or anecdotal painter. Her paint handling is broad and assured, her imagery economically simplified, her approach to scale often uninhibited, her palette always inventive. She evokes the hues of, say, a spring landscape under particular conditions of light, but she plainly doesn't feel constrained by "local color"—the naturalistic hues "given" by

any selected subject—nor does she resort to seemingly irrational, arbitrarily "different" chroma in order to escape from local color. Dodd transubstantiates her perceptions into paint very freely, intensifying some colors, reinventing others, and subtly shifting still others into new territory by heating them up or cooling them down. Yet while deploying this inventive palette, she manages to remain completely faithful to the spirit and feeling of her chosen subject, so much so that we are completely convinced by the apparent accuracy of her observations.

We're convinced, too, by the compelling quality of immediacy and the deceptive casualness of Dodd's paintings, which we interpret as by-products of their being provoked by what she sees. We feel, not without reason, that we're being made privy to something she has just noticed, something ordinary, made significant by her awareness: her shadow on the grass, a shaft of light creating a clear reflection, a newly opened wealth of blossoms. "I'm not interested in still lifes," Dodd says, "because I don't like the idea of arranging things. I like to discover what's already there." Part of what she discovers is the inherent geometry of her surroundings; she seems to follow, without insisting on it too much, Paul Cézanne's recommendation "to seek the cone, the cylinder, and the sphere," ideal forms that underlie irregularities and imperfections. Unremarkable elements somehow reveal their perfect Platonic underpinnings, without losing their everyday functions: the rectangles of windows, the horizontals of clapboard, the right-angle oppositions of mullions, the unembellished shapes of New England architecture. In paintings of the natural world, tree trunks and branches, along with flower stalks and the shapes of petals and leaves, seen close up, function as less rigid versions of the "purer" man-made shapes that populate Dodd's "architectural" paintings. In works of both types, a potent sense of logic derives from the trued-and-faired relationship of the elements of "discovered" subject matter to the shape and proportion of the support. At the same time, this subtle evidence of discipline creates energizing tension with the unstudied, unlooked-for quality of her choice of motifs.

"If I don't have the geometry," Dodd says, "I can't go on." Some of the most arresting paintings in "Catching the Light" seem to have been pared down to their geometric bones, although the geometry does not always seem Euclidian. A small 1983 painting floats a pair of stiff, angular, orange-red curtains on a clothesline against an expanse of snow, with the dark, flat rectangle of a building filling one corner. There's a lot of white, but the building, its door, its shadow, and a bit of sky together present a range of murky mauve-browns, lavenders, and off-blacks. We briefly wonder if the brittle shapes of the flying curtains mean that they are frozen—all that snow, after all—but the thought doesn't preoccupy us long. However truthfully Dodd responded to the generating event—and however much we recognize that starting point—the potency of the little painting, like that of many other, equally stripped-down works in the show, depends not on the accuracy of the artist's observation, but on its abstract structure—the structure "discovered" by Dodd's probing eye. Yet what she discovers can often be visually extraordinarily complex, as if she were fascinated by the multivalence of perception itself. A noteworthy number of works in "Catching the Light" deal with windows. Dodd is evidently fond of how they "select" and isolate a motif and how they offer passage into another space, but she seems even fonder of their power to reflect, both perfectly and imperfectly, disrupting spatial coherence and justifying a wide variety of touches and hues to evoke those reflections. She also occasionally includes mirrors in her interiors, playing fictive images against "real" views. In *Self-Portrait in Green Window* (1971, Portland Museum of Art), for example, we slowly decipher a minimally indicated allusion to the slender artist, wearing a striped shirt and big hat. The figure is dematerialized by strong sunshine, nearly conflated with the window mullion, and almost subsumed by reflected trees; a stalk of goldenrod, as narrow as Dodd herself, indicated both outside the window and reflected, further intensifies way space lurches and scales shift in this complicated image. Everything is held in check by the reiterated horizontals and verticals of the

window frame and sill, the mullions, and the clapboard siding, which create a discontinuous grid controlling the uneasily related visual phenomena in the reflection; in counterpoint, Dodd's palette—a range of greens from acidic to murky, with notes of lavender, plus yellows from lemon to ochre—sets up new activity that further enlivens the symmetrical composition.

Other paintings explore the destabilizing effect of seeing into the layered, defined spaces of a sequence of rooms or allow us the guilty pleasure of peering into illuminated windows. In *View Through Elliot's Shack Looking South* (1971, the artist and Alexandre Gallery, New York), the pale window frame is made congruent with the edge of the canvas, so that the events contained by the depicted panes start to read as a painting within a painting. At first, the loose suggestion of foliage and the triangle of a rooftop on the expanse of glass reads as a comprehensible reflection of a house among tall Maine evergreens, but that interpretation is stopped by a floating rectangle of brightly illuminated, crisply indicated tree trunks and sky. We are momentarily unable to decide what is where, and settle for enjoying the contrast of pictorial languages and touches, and the orchestration of heightened and softened colors, trapped by the rectangle of the window. Then, with concentration, attention to the broadly indicated shadows on the window surround, and a little help from the title, we work out that we are *outside* a building, looking through its dark interior to the sun-lit world beyond, visible through a window on the opposite site. Once we've cracked the code, we return to enjoying the sturdy geometric scaffolding of the composition and the free-wheeling paint handling within that framework. And then Dodd's spatial conceit reasserts itself.

A couple of New York city interiors, day and night, investigate similar clashes of logic, pitting the view from Dodd's loft against disjunctive, fragmented images captured by mirrors propped against the furniture. "What I was really interested in," she says, "was the big oval and the rectangle against the shape of the window." Important as their clear geometry is to the pictures, it's the irrational relationship of what the mirrors capture, the interrupted view of the studio, and the exterior view that holds our attention; the geometry serves as a stabilizing influence, something to hold on to and orient us, as we navigate the abrupt shifts of the paintings. In Portland, the most eye-testing of these paintings is a Maine interior, *The Painted Room* (1982, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME). An open window, with yellow curtains framing a leafy view, seems to hang, Magritte-like, against a broadly suggested forest of slim tree trunks that spring from a rosy ground plane. Then we notice a narrow suggestion of ceiling at the top of the picture and a light bulb that projects to create a fictional space in front of the window. Suddenly everything makes sense. The window takes its place in a wall on which a forest landscape is painted. The vertical folds of the curtain enter into a conversation with the repeated verticals of the trunks, and the staccato horizontals of the branches start a dialogue with the window frame and sill; the yellow of the curtains, a little warmer than lemon, challenges the dull rose, Pompeian red, and dusty neutrals of the eponymous "painted room." Once again, Dodd claims our attention by appealing to perception and then seduces us with solid pictorial invention, laced with a liberal shot of wit.

If this sounds as if Dodd's paintings of this type are elaborate visual games designed to perplex the unwary viewer, think again. For all their spatial pulse, her paintings of windows, reflections, and what we might call "multiple spaces" are as uncompromising and clean as her most elemental landscapes or views of bare-bones Maine buildings. She notices and points out to us things we might miss on our own, underscoring the likeness and unlikeness among disparate elements to create a "continuo" of geometric order that supports her painterly inventions. In *Red Vine and Blanket* (1979, Private Collection), Dodd rhymes the neat, repeated squares of a coverlet—that backyard clothesline, again—with the blocky, undisciplined patches of a scarlet autumnal vine, enriching the confrontation by twinning a multi-paned window and a checked shirt hung nearby, then contradict-

ing these crisp grids by swelling the laundry with a stiff wind.

Just when we think we have Dodd figured out, however, she surprises us. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. She may be a painter who works from the motif and strives to be faithful to perception, but echoes of her knowledge of the history of art resonate in even the most apparently straightforward of her pictures. J. M. W. Turner's views of the blazing Houses of Parliament haunt a lively painting of a burning building near her Maine house—a training exercise for the local volunteer firemen, Dodd reassures us. A confrontational view of a pale lavender staircase through an open door hints at Charles Willson Peale's full-length portrait of his sons on a similar stair. A series of exuberant female nudes in sunny gardens seems to pay homage to Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and perhaps Pablo Picasso, with economically modeled forms, fluid proportions, and expressive silhouettes but, unlike her distinguished male ancestors, Dodd is not reimagining Arcadia. Her unclothed women are not languorous nymphs waiting for shepherds to offer love poetry. They are active, self-sufficient, and purposeful. In *Four Nudes and Woodpile* (2001–02, Coldbeck Gallery, Maine), they saw, carry, and stack wood in brilliant sunlight. Dodd's forthright garden paintings similarly challenge tradition, in part through their scale. "I didn't want to be another woman painting flowers," she says, "so I made them big." And instead of treating flowers as still life components, decorously arranged in a vase, Dodd "discovers" her botanical subjects where they grow and presents them with large sweeps of her brush, uncut, alive and kicking, as vigorous specimens with generous leaves, large, distinctively shaped petals, and sturdy stalks.

Note to visitors of "Catching the Light": The Portland installation adds a group of Dodd's most direct, intimate studies, done on small aluminum panels between 2009 and 2012. Together, they offer a highly distilled crash course in Lois Dodd in miniature—everything from cloud patterns and night scenes to cast shadows, blooming trees, and a bonfire, evoked with stunning economy and specificity. Hung in a narrow space near the exit, they could be overlooked. Don't miss them.