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Lois Dodd, Self-Portrait in Green Window, 1971. Oil on linen, 53 ½ x 36 inches

Lois Dodd, Maine Woman Pioneer

By Ed Beem

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Lois Dodd, one of America's finest painters, is having her first museum career retrospective at 85. A case could be made that she has been the victim of discrimination in the sexist art world, but Dodd would never make that argument. She has been content to go her own way for the better part of six decades. So I will make the case for her.

Lois Dodd: Catching the Light at the Portland Museum of Art (through April 7) is an exhibition of close to 65 paintings created between the 1950s and now. The exhibition originated at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and the Portland museum has added 15 recent little oil paintings on roof flashing to the 50 or so that constituted the original show.

As Lois Dodd has been coming to Maine since 1951, part of a New York cohort group that includes Alex Katz, Neil Welliver and Yvonne Jacquette, it is fitting and proper that one pole of the exhibition should be in the Pine Tree State, but this exhibition should have originated in New York City, not Kansas City.

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Dodd's New York street credentials are well established. She was born in Montclair NJ, just west of the city, in 1927. She graduated from Cooper Union in 1948, was a founding member of the cooperative Tanager Gallery, taught at both Brooklyn College and Queens College for many years, lives in New York (and Cushing, Maine) and has shown there her entire career.

I suppose the fact that Dodd mostly paints interiors, landscapes, gardens, flowers and female nudes in a very matter-of-fact modernist style of realism might explain why New York area museums – in love as they are with flash and fads – have failed her.

In his essay for the *Lois Dodd: Catching the Light* catalogue, critic John Yau allies Dodd with artists Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Catherine Murphy and Josephine Halvorson as “observational painters.”

“These artists, all of whom are women, constitute a loosely allied tradition that is distinct from mainstream art, which is dominated by men.”

There is, of course, a persistent gender bias in the art world.

Back in 1985, a group of anonymous art activists calling themselves the Guerrilla Girls began calling the art world's attention to the institutionalized exclusion of women artists by pointing out that only 13 of the 169 artists featured in a major international survey exhibition of contemporary painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art were women.

When you look at the rosters of leading art galleries in New York, you see that the proportion of women ranges roughly from 10% (Sperone Westwater) to 25% (David Zwirner). Alexandre Gallery, which represents Dodd, does better at 31%.

Artists who have experience in both New York and Maine will tell you that Maine is much friendlier to women artists. Indeed, Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, Dodd's Maine gallery, can boast of gender equity with 51% of the artists it represents being women.

As it happens, Lois Dodd is also featured at the moment in an exhibition at the University of New England Art Gallery in Portland that is part of series designed to redress the grievances of the past and to celebrate the accomplishments of women in contemporary art. *Maine Women Pioneers III-Homage* (through March 3) is one of four all-women exhibitions this year at UNE, *Homage* being devoted to work by veteran artists Dodd, Maggie Foskett, Susan Groce,

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Beverly Hallam, Alison Hildreth, Frances Hodsdon, Lissa Hunter, Dahlov Ipcar, Yvonne Jacquette, Frances Kornbluth, Rose Marasco, Marylin Quint-Rose and Katarina Weslien.

Maine Women Pioneers III, organized by UNE gallery director Anne Zill, curator Gael Mae McKibben and Portland gallerist Andres Verzosa, is the long overdue post-World War II installment of the *Maine Women Pioneers* series that began with an exhibition of 19th century artists in 1981 and pre-World War II artists in 1985. (Dahlov Ipcar is the only artist included in both the 1985 and the 2013 show.)

As I contributed an essay to the *Maine Women Pioneers III* catalogue, I will not promote the exhibition other than to note that women artists are still under-represented in most art gallery rosters and museum collections. This bias is nowhere more apparent than in New York City. Thus it falls to the more enlightened institutions and audiences of Maine to hold up a great artist such as Lois Dodd for celebration and veneration. She is not flashy or trendy; she's better than that.

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