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L. Kent Wolgamott: Lois Dodd -- a serious painter gets long-overdue retrospective

By L. KENT WOLGAMOTT / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, May 19, 2012 11:10 pm



Lois Dodd's "Apple Tree and Shed" is part of the retrospective "Lois Dodd: Catching the Light" at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Mo. (Courtesy photo)

KANSAS CITY -- Alex Katz, who shared a Maine house with her for eight summers, describes Lois Dodd in just five words -- "Lois is one serious painter."

Wolf Kahn, another of her contemporaries, is more expansive:

"Lois Dodd is one of my preferred American representational painters. Her work is an example of New England simplicity -- like Shaker furniture or small-town eighteenth century churches or the flower of a daylily."

So why is Dodd only now having her first museum retrospective -- at age 85?

Perhaps it is because Dodd is a quiet person who didn't promote herself as an active careerist in the highly competitive art world. Maybe it's because she didn't settle on a single style or signature palette. It could be as simple as the fact that she is a 20th-century female artist.

Those are the speculations of curator Barbara O'Brien, who has spent much time with Dodd and organized "Lois Dodd: Catching the Light," the retrospective of her work from the 1950s to 2010 on view through Aug. 26 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

The show is made up of 51 paintings from across her career, divided into six categories within two major sections. It was not complete when I got a preview of the show -- I saw most of the paintings leaning against walls or on racks. But Dodd's work is so strong it connects without the full presentation.

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Departing from the primary painting trend of her era, Dodd never ventured into abstraction.

"In the '50s, I was known as the 'cow painter,'" she told O'Brien in an essay in the exhibition's catalog. "Everybody else was painting abstractly. I was painting cows. I was painting cows because they were pretty abstract."

Those cows turn up in "Pasture" (1955) and "Cows in Landscape" (1958), a pair of flowingly organic paintings that are in the show's "Maine" section. The other half of the exhibition is "New York City and New Jersey," a division that reflects where Dodd has spent her life and found the subject matter of her work.

She's painted the world around her home on New York City's Lower East Side, where she has lived for more than 50 years; in Maine, where she has spent summers since the 1950s; and in rural New Jersey, where she frequently spends time.

Most, if not all, of the outdoor scenes were done "plein air" -- that is, painted and largely completed outdoors -- a challenge given the constantly changing light and other natural conditions. To say Dodd handles that challenge well is an understatement.

That is true whether she is painting the angular, black-and-white, stripped-down modernist buildings in "Blaisey's Shacks" (2003) or the towering view of the "Woods" (1975), a floor-to-ceiling narrow triptych that uses thin, towering trees to frame a small house on the ground.

Many of Dodd's paintings are views through windows, some in Maine and many in New York, where she paints her rooms as well as multiple views of the nearby "Men's Shelter." Those include the striking 1968 piece that introduces the show that is filled with squares and blocks incorporating the window frame into its near geometrically abstract composition.

Working with what she sees, Dodd uses a palette that is exceptionally varied, from the black on dark brown with yellow windows of "Night House" (1975) to the bright yellow, blue/gray and tan of "Road into Long Cove Quarry" (1989). The color always sets the mood for the picture, transporting the viewer to the oft-nondescript place she makes visually captivating through her paint.

The exhibition includes some figurative works, including a pair of self-portraits in which Dodd is nearly unrecognizable. In one from 1989, she's painted herself from a 1950s photograph wearing a top hat and using broad, expressionist brushstrokes to create a dramatic visage.

In the contrasting "Shadow with Easel," (2010) Dodd hides from detailed view, painting herself at work in silhouette, her right hand putting the brush to canvas.

That self-portrait is the most recent work in the exhibition. But Dodd remains an active artist -- so much so that she had to be discouraged from driving from Maine to Kansas City for the retrospective's opening. She wanted to stop and paint along the way.

That, perhaps, says as much about her as her colleagues' praise or any critical reflection. That tireless, continually looking and interpreting spirit can be seen in her paintings as well. Dodd, indeed, is one serious painter.

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