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Old School Master: Joseph Nicoletti

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In Plain Sight: Lois Dodd

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In Plain Sight: The Art of Lois Dodd

by Theodore Prescott

Every work of art contains a critical stance toward other art. This stance is often latent, and not necessarily a result of an artist's conscious reflections. Criticality is an inevitable byproduct of an artist's interests, choices and acts. Perhaps its perception is especially present today, given that the concept of "art" signifies so many disparate and cacophonous things. A day of gallery hopping provides ample evidence of tension, abrasion and contradiction between ideas about what is significant, or how one should craft a work of art. So the road not taken hovers around our perception of someone's work, out of sight, but not necessarily out of mind.

I was reminded of this by a recent discussion with the painter Lois Dodd, a long-time participant in and observer of the arts in New York. She graduated from Cooper Union in 1948, where she had studied textile design. However, Dodd had painted throughout her time at school and never found a reason to stop. Within a few years of graduating, painting had crowded out her ambitions in textile design.

Night House, 1975

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Dodd and her former husband, the sculptor William King, were part of the then-small community of downtown artists that centered around Tenth Street. Today, "Tenth Street" has a mythic quality, because it represents the area where the extraordinary dynamism of post-war American art first coalesced and became visible. The era, places and characters associated with Tenth Street have been extensively covered in historical and critical literature, such as Irving Sandler's *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties.*

Dodd and King, along with three other artists, started the Tanager Gallery in 1952. It was the second artists' co-op in New York and the first on Tenth Street. Their gallery was quickly followed by others. The new cooperatives eliminated the filtering effect of the uptown galleries, which strained out work that didn't fit their categories of acceptable—and commercially viable—art. The cooperative galleries were hardly commercial enterprises, and their goal was to provide a venue for work that couldn't be seen elsewhere. Dodd recalls that, at the time, there were only two kinds of art being shown: realism and, to a lesser degree, abstraction. Some of the first-generation Abstract Expressionists, like de Kooning and Pollock, had been exhibiting for a few years, but there weren't many opportunities for younger artists—especially if they weren't satisfied with the simple polarities Dodd describes. For Dodd and many of her contemporaries, like Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein and Jane Freilicher, the roads *not* taken were ones that led toward an either/or purity, with an allegiance to either abstraction or representation.

The work Dodd exhibited in the 1950s shows the influences of the period's gestural abstraction, with areas of loose, brushy color filling the spaces between recognizable subjects, like the cows she initially exhibited. She never abandoned the wide, fluid strokes of those early paintings, but they now serve or exist within a representational framework, as opposed to the early alternation between areas of abstraction and representation. One sees this clearly in the landscape *Riverview* (1994), where a few energetic and synoptic strokes variously fill or describe the interior qualities of dark tree shapes and darker shadows. The entire vocabulary of her paintings is dependent on the modernist penchant for flat shapes, limited spatial cues and use of color that is independently active as well as descriptive. She is also a modernist in her preference for landscapes and views that lack the grandeur preferred by classicists or the great nineteenth-century American landscape painters.

Much of what Dodd chooses for subjects are right in plain sight, drawn from her immediate environs in the city, or around the Delaware Water Gap area where she lives on weekends, as well as what is found around her summer studio in Maine. Often her subjects are domestic, such as views through windows or laundry on clotheslines. The houses and outbuildings she paints are characterized by the plainspoken vernacular of American architecture, which reinforces the poet John Yau's argument, in a catalogue essay, that she is an heir to Edward Hopper. One can easily see some affinity to Hopper in a

Double Window and Curtain, 2009
©LOIS DODD, COURTESY ALEXANDRE GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

painting like *Night House* (1975), where an undercurrent of mystery and nostalgia is established with great economy. In addition, she is like Hopper—in fact, she surpasses him on this count—in the lack of people included in her work. Human effects abound, but the humans themselves are most often absent.

It is not that Dodd is a stranger to the figure. She was part of a weekly drawing group started by Mercedes Matter in the early 1960s. Matter, who founded the New York Studio School to restore "that painfully slow education of the senses" in the development of young artists, insisted that observation was foundational to the development of art—any art. While the original group lasted only a few years, a polyglot group of artists continued to gather and work from the model on a weekly basis into the 1970s. Dodd attended regularly.

Recently, Dodd has included the figure or figures in a series of paintings made during the summers in Maine, working from models posed in the landscape. The paintings are improbable Yankee pastorals, where blocky Cézanne-like figures are set and sometimes work in nature, but never have the sensuous ease with nature's voluptitude that is characteristic of their European antecedents. *Digging Up Red Flowers* (2004) has a buxom model seen from behind. She has one foot on a spade which is planted into the edge of a lush bank of waist-high flowers.

There is a plainness and directness about all of Dodd's work that the painter and critic Robert Berlind likened to the Shaker love of simplicity. This is true,

Winter Window, 2009
©LOIS DODD, COURTESY ALEXANDRE GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

but much as I admire Shaker objects, I am never engaged by them in the way I am by Dodd's paintings. There is an essentialization of form in Shaker things that is worlds apart from the "this place, this moment, now" sensibility of most of Dodd's work. As she describes it, she often chooses her subjects when she is arrested by something she hadn't noticed, or seen in quite that way before. To me, her work has a spirit of fact rooted in observation. Notwithstanding all of her inventions and editing, there is a sometimes amazed or delighted quality of "I witnessed this" that locates her work within a type of realism.

Oddly, this spirit of fact is disclosed by her paintings which repeat a subject often enough to form a series. A group of paintings with a common subject suggests serialization, but a shared subject is not the condition that makes a group serial in nature. In Dodd's work, each painting is a discrete event; one does not lead to the next, and the whole group is not a visual essay about a concept. They do not add up the way Monet's *Haystacks* do. The *Haystacks* are driven by the overarching idea of painting the same subject in different conditions of light and atmosphere. Dodd has no such programmatic ambitions. For example, though they are both window paintings, and clearly related by snow and trees, there is no common organizing principle found in *Winter Window* and *Double Window and Curtain* (both 2009). One reason for this is that Dodd sometimes uses idiosyncratic shapes. *Winter Window*'s masonite panel measures 20-by-7 inches, and the tall narrow composition creates a slightly gothic sense for the conifer framed in the window. But I believe the main reason is that Dodd keeps returning to certain subjects for visual reasons, and responds by painting, rather than because she is pursuing an end that exists before and apart from

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the painting. Dodd has said on many occasions that she is not interested in narrative or social commentary.

The question of whether the visual in itself can constitute a form of realism has dogged debates for at least a couple of centuries. Kandinsky's first steps toward abstraction were quickened by encountering one of Monet's *Haystacks*, where he was not initially able to identify what it represented. Monet's late work is typically cited as one of the doors opening into abstraction, and he was nothing if not relentlessly visual in his late work. It is also worth remembering that many abstract artists, including Kandinsky, have claimed that their work is true to a reality that lies behind appearances.

In the opening pages of Linda Nochlin's seminal book *Realism* (1971), she describes the long philosophical debate in Western culture over whether we can truly know reality through the appearances and sense data of our experiences, or only discern it via some kind of universalized essences that lie beyond the realm of immediate perception. The artists that Nochlin writes about, like Courbet and Manet, still shape many artists' ideas about the real today. Those nineteenth-century artists were committed to depicting subjects available to concrete sense experience, which were located in the here and now, and were often particular, common and easily overlooked. By this light, Dodd is a realist. But nineteenth-century realists were also passionate about the social or political content of their work. By this count, Dodd is not a realist. She might be abstract, but even there only formally, if one means abstract in the sense of someone like Kandinsky. Dodd has never claimed that her work reveals a hidden order behind what she paints.

To call an artist a "formalist" today is usually a way of dismissing her or suggesting that he has no serious purpose. This is one unfortunate legacy of Clement Greenberg's criticism. But surely the reality of any art is more complex than such a flip categorization suggests? Isn't a significant part of the way we discern art through its forms? When looking at a study by, say, Raphael, a viewer typically makes mental and perceptual shifts back and forth between savoring the deft skill with which the artist rendered a complicated passage across a twisting torso, and assessing its place in and contribution to the finished work. Why should we separate those mingled, mutually dependent perceptions by elevating one and denigrating the other?

One of the pleasures of Dodd's work, and of several of her compatriots who have also fused elements of modernist abstraction with representation, is this back and forth play of alternating perceptions. We see the appropriation of abstracted forms, and the ways they can exist as self-sufficient images, but then they fold into an ensemble that is representational.

In the arts as a whole, we find something similar. Supporters of the arts often argue that art is good in its own right. In this view, art does not ultimately succeed by the virtue of the ideas or politics it conveys, or because of the story it tells, even though these may figure prominently as motives for a

work's creation. This explains why even though we cannot separate Courbet's politics and philosophy from his art, they are not the reason he continues to be important. It is the quality of his made things—his art in its own right—that accounts for Courbet's continuing presence in our museums and histories.

It is Dodd's *forms* that create the spirit of fact in her paintings. "Fact" may carry the wrong associations here, if it connotes the careful, dry transcription of a place detail by detail, which is obviously far from Dodd's methods. The poet Gwendolyn Brooks describes poetry as a process of distillation, which fits well with the spare images Dodd has extracted from her visual experiences. Both John Yau and Hilton Kramer have commented on the poetic nature of Dodd's work, and Yau has linked it to the imagistic credo "no ideas except in things," made famous by the poet William Carlos Williams.

At this point, we encounter a stubborn prejudice of modern thought, which is still alive and well—the opposition of the poetic to the factual. In this popular and unfortunately large universe, art is about feelings, and facts are found in quantification. So to argue that Dodd's work has a spirit of fact is to link it to an older understanding of art, even while her formal armature is modernist. The poetic sensibility that Dodd's paintings evoke reaches back past expressive ideas of poetry to a time when poetry was a way to know the world. It is in this way that Dodd is a realist. She distills visual experiences into paintings that often convey the conviction of a true presence.

Presence is a word that can have subtle religious overtones, as in the Eucharistic "real presence." Given Dodd's ability to convey presence, it is not surprising that some people associate transcendence with her work. John Yau rather gingerly suggests, in an interview with her, that there is something spiritual about her work "in an earthly way." She laughs and says, "as long as it's earthly." Elsewhere in the interview, Dodd tells of her affection for nineteenth-century American artists who are categorized as transcendental, like Church and Bierstadt, even though she has no desire to imitate them. Critic and curator David Cohen begins an essay on her work by stating that she "represents the transcendental through plainness." While Dodd's ambitions do not run in this direction, she can be seen as a contemporary embodiment of the way an American devotion to direct experience can create a sense that extends beyond "mere" representation, and suggests that there is something immanent in a deep perception of the ordinary.

Dodd has had a long career as an educator and mentor, and her work has inspired many stylistically diverse younger artists, including my wife, Catherine, a portrait painter. This past summer Dodd was part of a group exhibition, "Mentors," at the Firehouse Center in Daramiscotta, Maine. The exhibition paired younger artists with their mentors. In the catalogue accompanying the show, Dodd's former student Jeff Epstein remembers her characterizing his life drawings as "glib." After he looked up the word in the hope it wasn't as critical as it sounded, he asked for an explanation. She responded by

noting that, sooner or later, he would be doing what he did—whether or not the model was present. There is no more fitting way to describe Dodd's attitude toward art than with this anecdote. It illustrates her desire to avoid falling into routines of representation, where an artist may confuse what he knows how to do with knowing what he sees. The road Dodd has taken led to work that is plain in subject, but fresh in sight.

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