Essay by John Yau | The Examined Life: 2003
Originally published in the Alexandre Gallery exhibition catalog, Lois Dodd: Windows and Doors The Examined Life
By John Yau

I.
It is never outrageous to state the obvious: The seventy-five year old painter Lois Dodd is an artist who hasn't received her due. While the reasons for this are far too complex to go into here, suffice to say that her work wasn't championed by critics and poet-critics who actively supported representational painting during the heyday of Pop and Minimalism. One effect of this initial oversight is that subsequent generations of critics have had little context in which to address the complexities of her paintings. This doesn't mean that Dodd is invisible. It is closer to the truth to say that she has never become as visible as some of her peers, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, and Paul Resika, all representational painters who, like Dodd, were born in 1927.
I think the reasons that Dodd is not as celebrated as her contemporaries can be found in the paintings themselves, particularly those of doorways and windows, For one thing, though we are not necessarily vocal about it, these paintings simply don't give us what we expect from a representational painter, which is warmth and comfort. If anything, like the light in many of Dodd's paintings, the comfort they offer is chilly. However, don't let that chilliness fool you. There is much more to it than you think. It is not her personality that the artist is expressing, but a deep understanding of time passing. It is this understanding which imbues her paintings with a profound strength.

Three other things must be said about Dodd's paintings from the outset.

First, their ability to implicate the viewer extends directly out of Pollock's poured paintings. Dodd's original assimilation of Pollock's paintings is easy to overlook if you assume that a representational artist cannot make use of Pollock's innovations. What I think viewers find disquieting about Dodd's paintings of doors and windows is that they are not standing outside the paintings but are a necessary part of them. For like Pollock's poured paintings, Dodd's windows and doorways exist in the same physical space as the viewer. Through her careful attention to both composition, particularly cropping, and the picture plane, she is able to shift the viewer out of the realm of passive observer to that of active participant. Dodd's paintings acknowledge the viewer's presence in ways that are well worth reflecting upon.

Second, there are never any figures present in Dodd's window and doorway paintings, no overt signs of domesticity, no sense that this is a world that is well-tended and in order. She evokes neither a social milieu nor scenes of happy home life. Thus, there is nothing in her paintings that we might aspire to. Rather, she articulates a circumscribed world that resonates with absence, as well as makes us feel that absence on a visceral level. We are physically both there, in the room, say, or before the window, and not there. There is no sign of our presence. Thus, we come face to face with the inevitability of our own unavoidable absence.
The third thing I want to call attention to is that Dodd's painterly domain is ruled by austerity and entropy. We are apt to see broken windows, others that have slipped out of their grooves. She quietly confronts the viewer with places that have been abandoned or gone to seed. And, despite all the windowpanes she depicts, the viewer sees the artist's reflection only once.

All these absences and insistent refusals seem to me born of an ethical decision: I will not paint what is expected of me, a woman artist. I would further add that Dodd's admirable resistance goes far beyond that defined by gender. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Dodd is one of the few representational artists to make us conscious of our own presumptions regarding representational painting: what do we expect an artist of this ilk to depict? In this regard, she has more in common with Catherine Murphy and Sylvia Plimack-Mangold, than with artists of her own generation.

What these three artists share is a formal acuity that makes us question the distinctions we routinely make between representational and abstract painting. But there is more to their work than their painterly intelligence, which is formidable. I can think of no other way to put it except that it is how they get the world into their paintings. It is the crisp clarity with which paint is used to reveal something about the world and thus about reality. They are not concerned with either style, which is a kind of machine, or realism. Rather, they are concerned with reality and how to use paint to reconstruct their recognition of time passing.

Dodd's paintings remind me of an observation I recently made about the abstract artist Thomas Nozkowski and his relationship to the American strain of epistemology that includes Wallace Stevens. In his Adagia, a collection of epigrammatic statements and aphorisms published in Opus Posthumous (Knopf, 1957), Stevens proposed that one should "live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it." That is exactly what comes across in Dodd's paintings. Although I have no proof this is true, I suspect that the reason critics chose to champion artists other than her, is because of her resistance to conceptions regarding representational painting. Without fanfare, for Dodd is not the kind of artist to toot her own horn, she literally stands representational painting on its head.

II.

One could pick almost any painting of a doorway or window that Dodd did between 1971 and 1997, a stretch of more than twenty-five years, and quickly discern the following; all of them establish a palpable relationship between subject matter and picture plane, In Blue Sky Window (1979), which is one of Dodd's more austere paintings, the proportions of the bare, curtainless window perfectly echo the painting's dimensions, as well as fits snugly inside its vertical format. This relationship is further underscored by the four window panes, each of which transforms the bluish-white sky into an abstract painting. Clearly, Dodd isn't content with making a witty comment on abstraction, how it can be embraced by representation. The painting has far more emotional weight to it than such witty asides would allow. For one thing, the nearness of the window to the picture plane makes one feel as if one has to decide whether or not to look out the window, to see what of course cannot be seen. In addition, all the different elements of the painting, no matter how abstract they are, are understood as being either actual things or facts.

Once the viewer is viscerally engaged, and this is something that is operative in all of Dodd's large paintings and doorways, certain details and questions quickly surface in one's consciousness. Why are there no curtains, no trace of human presence? Is it austerity or bleakness that surrounds us? And while the painting focuses all our attention on this membrane (window), we do feel surrounded. By this I mean, we don't feel as we if are looking out a window, but that we are standing in a room which hasn't quite fully revealed itself. And we know that it never will, which isn't exactly comforting.

An atmosphere of intense solitude prevails throughout every inch of Blue Sky Window. But it is not another person's solitude we are witnessing, it is our own. This is what we find so disquieting about the painting. It is easier to witness another person's solitude, than to face the inevitability of our own. This, I think, is the initial level of understanding that is central to Dodd's paintings; they open onto a fictive space where one ends up contemplating a state of solitude that is a central part of being human.

Instead of asking us to consider someone else's life, the artist asks us in a quiet, matter-of-fact way to consider our own. The question is presented with an immense amount of tact and etiquette. The paint is not thick, the surfaces are not creamy. Quiet but forceful, the reticent brushwork matches the question.

I think critics may have been put off by Dodd's unerring ability to ask deep questions. However, I also believe that there is even more formal and emotional complexity to these paintings than what I have just described. In fact, I believe the formal and emotional not only cannot be separated in Dodd's best paintings, but it is what makes these paintings resistant to assimilation. It is not that they are hard to look at, because they aren't.

Rather, once we look at them, what we find difficult to do is to accept all that they imply. In Night Sky Loft (1973), which is one of the artist's masterpieces and certainly belongs in a museum, Dodd uses an oval mirror's reflection to evoke what is directly behind the viewer. In the mirror, one sees two empty chairs facing each other, an empty table between them. This is not all the reflection shows us. Above the chair closest to us, and it is turned away, there is a clean white towel hanging neatly from a rack. The towel is where one's head might be if someone was sitting in the chair. The reflection flattens everything out, it defines a space we cannot enter.

Dodd both enlivens the mirror's flattened space, as well as comments on it, by using warm yellow and yellowish-orange to define much of the mirror and a narrow band extending directly above it. These warm colors are held in place by the gray-pale green walls, gray shadows, gray mirror frame, and largely black shadows and forms seen through the window that extends in from the painting's top and left side. We can look through the window, into the night, but we cannot enter the mirror, its warm glow. This tension suggests that we are always leaving one world behind, as we make our way toward another.

Except for the viewer, the solitary individual, the room feels empty, though not as bereft as the one we imagine is behind us in Blue Sky Window. This feeling of being bodiless, of being a ghost, is also a central feature of View through Eliot's Shack, Looking South (1971), another masterful painting. The tight placement of the window, its four dark panes, within the painting's format, as well as the bright window on the other side of the building's dark interior, pull us toward the picture plane. By pulling us forward, making us aware of our bodies, Dodd reminds us that we are always in motion, and that we are also bounded. We cannot go wherever we want to go, that there are limits.

Formally, the scale of View through Eliot's Shack, Looking South, is related to our body. This scale relationship is subtly reinforced by the composition, which consists of vertical rectangles within vertical rectangles, with the smallest one being a view through the window on the other side of the shack, its dark interior. We are looking through to a bright world we cannot enter, and the passage to that place is both dark and blocked. The temptation to read this painting as a religious or spiritual allegory is strong, and yet there

is nothing in the painting to suggest that this is the artist's intention. In fact the painting is about as down to earth as you can get.

By transforming the viewer into both a ghostly presence and a solitary consciousness, Dodd proves to be in these paintings at least the true heir of the great American painter, Edward Hopper. She is Hopper's heir because she enlarges and redefines his unsparing insight into the truth of commonplace scenes. His figures are disconnected, each sunk into his or her bottomless well of loneliness. His empty spaces reflect the emotional emptiness of his figures. Looking at them sitting by the window or standing in the lobby of a movie theater, we see ourselves. Like them, we are voyeurs isolated from the world and those around us.

In Dodd's paintings, we become the very figures Hopper depicted. We are no longer looking at them, but at ourselves. We are standing outside a house at night. Is it ours or someone else's? We are looking at the window of a deserted house, its worn shutters and drawn shade. We will never know who lived there or what happened to them. Dodd is never nostalgic about this. She doesn't bemoan something that is an inherent fact, our mortality. She knows the doors and windows will continue their existence after she stops looking. They have no need for her or for us. That's what is so powerful about her paintings; they show us that the room remains long after we have left it forever. And yet, there is nothing plaintive about these paintings. Heartbreaking in their solidity and directness, they possess a moral dignity that is both bracing and refreshing.