

# The New York Times

## Her Views From Close Up Are on Everyone's Radar

Lois Dodd, at 95, is finally getting her largest museum show yet at the newly expanded Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn.



By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

March 31, 2023

For more than seven decades, Lois Dodd has been creating acutely observed and quietly influential paintings, finding her subjects close to home.

“At first I used to drive around, scouting for the motif, and then I realized the motif is right here — just open the door or look out the window,” said the painter. “It comes to you.”

In her fresh, quickly painted canvases, Dodd distills the atmospherics and underlying geometries of whatever catches her eye — the way the light hits a radiator, say, or transforms a landscape outside her doors in Cushing, Maine, or Blairstown, N.J., or the urban scene around her loft in New York's East Village.

The 95-year-old artist recently welcomed a visitor to that third-story walk-up on East Second Street, where she moved in 1960 as a single mother with her young son. Modestly furnished with a bohemian patina, the space is



“Window, Cityscape, Oval Mirror,” 1973, at the Bruce Museum. The radiator beneath Dodd’s window in her New York City loft stars in a trio of still lifes that incorporate an oval mirror to contain shifting vantage points. Lois Dodd, via Alexandre Gallery, New York

like a time capsule, defined by the organized clutter of her painter's tools and finished canvases spanning the years. (Since Covid, with stairs harder for her to manage, Dodd has lived predominantly in Blairstown in colder months and Maine during the summer.)

The lack of separation between living and painting “for me was a good arrangement,” Dodd said, seated at a linoleum dining table arrayed with snacks and framed by the view of a cemetery and a men's shelter outside her window — an urban scene she has painted in all types of weather and times of year. Petite, unfussy and good humored, the artist tuned in to her visitor's questions with the focused attentiveness that she brings to painting, and recalled names, dates and events from her life with remarkable clarity.

Since graduating from Cooper Union in 1948 and becoming the only female founding member of the artists-run Tanager Gallery in 1952 — giving an early platform to Rudy Burckhardt, Al Held and Tom Wesselmann — Dodd has been a continuous presence in the New York art world, admired by her peers as well as her students at Brooklyn College, where she taught for two decades.

Yet her steadfast commitment to observational painting and her indifference to the trends of the market, which early on favored abstraction and largely ignored women of her generation, have left her under the radar of a broader audience.

Museums have not generally helped. In 2018, the much-celebrated sculptor Robert Gober bought “View Through Elliott's Shack Looking South,” a 1971 painting, from the Alexandre Gallery, which has represented Dodd since 2001, and donated it to the Museum of Modern Art after realizing that no major museum in New York City owned a painting by her. “I thought it was pathetic if not borderline repulsive,” Gober said of this omission.





Lois Dodd in her East Village apartment with her painting "Eli In Apple Tree" (1965) above the table. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Now, the Bruce Museum, in Greenwich, Conn., is remedying this oversight with “Lois Dodd: Natural Order” — her first museum survey ever in the New York metropolitan area. It opens April 2, along with the museum’s new \$67 million wing, and runs through May 28. “It was important to us to highlight the fact that she’s a trailblazing woman artist and to have this long overdue exhibition when we open,” said the museum’s curator of art, Margarita Karasoulas.

The show originated last year at the Hall Art Foundation in Vermont, which has the largest collection of Dodd’s work, and is now expanded with more than 30 new loans. The 77 paintings at the Bruce are grouped thematically, with works as recent as 2021. It includes scenes painted inside the dense woods across the road from Dodd’s Maine home, with fallen trees and their fractured geometries; winter views executed outside amid swirling snow; and magnified close-ups of unusual flowers.

“I gave myself permission and really loved it,” she said about turning to the garden as subject, after avoiding it early in her career for fear of being “labeled as a lady flower painter.”

For a group of abstract nocturnal landscapes painted from the ’70s through the ’90s, Dodd recalls how she worked by touch with a limited palette illuminated only by moonlight. “You couldn’t tell the difference between blue and brown so you had to memorize where you put them,” she said of painting in the dark. The exposed radiator beneath Dodd’s window on East Second Street stars in a trio of still lifes that incorporate an oval mirror to contain shifting vantage points. The show culminates with her paintings of windows from vernacular rural architecture, some with broken panes, capturing reflections of nature and pushing her play of transparency and opacity.

“Thinking about the window paintings and the way in which she’s merging these multiple realms together, there’s always this tension between representation and figuration and abstraction in her work,” Karasoulas said. “What are you really looking at?”

While only passing acquaintances, Gober took an interest in Dodd’s work while he lived on East 10th Street near the former Tanager Gallery.

“Knowing that during the ’50s she did this very forthright and gutsy thing of forming a gallery to show her and her peers’ work, I was impressed,” he said in an interview.

Ann Temkin, chief curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, said she hoped to show Gober’s gift soon, with more frequent rotations of the collection galleries. “When you look out or into a window, you are focused in a way that is distinct from the ordinary kind of seeing,” said Temkin. “The stillness of Dodd’s paintings honors that form of looking.”

Museum interest is now starting to come in more broadly, said Phil Alexandre, Dodd’s dealer, who’s seen an uptick in her market over the last five years as part of a larger reassessment by institutions of overlooked women artists. He said that few women artists of her generation have had as sustained and productive careers, with many getting discouraged and stopping. “Lois took herself very seriously from the beginning,” he pointed out.

Raised in Montclair, N.J., Dodd had lost both parents by age 14 — her mother to cancer, her father, a sea captain, in World War II. Living with her older sister, Dodd commuted to Cooper Union, in the East Village, where she found her community. “It was just instant recognition — this is my world here,” said Dodd, who was a student there with the sculptor William King, who became her husband for five years, as well as the painters Alex Katz and his first wife, Jean Cohen.

It was Katz, on Dodd's first trip to Maine with King in 1951, who showed her how to paint en plein air, after which she abandoned working from drawings. The lifelong friends shared a house in Lincolnville, Maine, for a decade, which Katz still owns near the home in Cushing that Dodd then bought in 1963.

"Lois is the epitome of style and integrity," said Katz, whose foundation has bought a painting from every Dodd show at the Alexandre Gallery and donated them to Maine museums including at Colby and Bowdoin colleges, the Portland Museum of Art and the Farnsworth Art Museum.

In 1952, Dodd and King, with the artists Charles Cajori, Angelo Ippolito and Fred Mitchell, rented a former barbershop on East Fourth Street that they named Tanager after a pane of orange glass in the window. "We needed a gallery," Dodd said. "None of us had any place to show our work." They soon moved to a larger space on East 10th, precipitating a wave of cooperative galleries on the street and a lively art scene that grew throughout the decade.

"We were going to people's lofts to decide who we wanted to show, so that was an education in art right there," Dodd said. "We weren't an art movement of any kind. We were trying just to show work that we thought was good."

The figurative painter Philip Pearlstein, who died in December, had his first solo show in 1955 at Tanager. In a remembrance in the 2012 exhibition catalog for Dodd's retrospective at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Pearlstein credited the conviction with which Dodd explored representational elements in her work as influential in his "return to the realist mode I had grown up in, which I had abandoned after the war in my sincere attempt to be a 'modern painter.'"



Shara Hughes, a painter less than half Dodd's age working in the landscape genre, described the older artist's work as a slow burn. "I learned a lot from her about stepping back and zooming into certain areas of the landscape and having it fall apart into abstraction," said Hughes, who was paired with Dodd in a two-person 2020 show at the former Parts & Labor in Beacon, N.Y.

Dodd still paints most every day. "I don't have a real schedule," she said. "It doesn't work that way for me but I seem to get enough painting done." She has a studio in one of the rooms of her two-family Blirstown home, where her son, Eli King, an architect, lives in the other apartment. He designed and built a sun room onto her Maine home so she can paint looking through the panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows at nature without wading into its hazards.

"My studio is always right there," she said. "That's where I want to be." Dodd typically finishes a work in a couple of hours, to get down the quality of light before it changes. "I've always known when to stop," she said. "Less is more."

Asked if she was frustrated that a New York museum had yet to give her a show, she replied with equanimity, "I never expected it so it's not frustrating."

"That may be one of the advantages of being somewhat ignored — you get to do what you want to do," she added. "You're not suddenly picked up and frozen" working in a certain marketable mode.

Yet with a retrospective in the works for next year at the Kunstmuseum in The Hague, and seeing the breadth of her life's work so resplendently presented at the Bruce, Dodd is pleased.

"It's very nice to be paid attention to in this way," she said. "Things add up after a while."