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‘Lois Dodd: Natural Order’ Review: Playfully Painted Realism

The nonagenarian artist exemplifies a strand of modern art that remained representational even as it was influenced by Abstract Expressionism; her development is on spectacular display in a retrospective at Connecticut’s Bruce Museum.

By Willard Spiegelman

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Greenwich, Conn.

Wallace Stevens said, “We keep coming back and coming back / to the real.” Some artists have no need to come back. They stare reality in the face; then they improve upon it.

Nonagenarian Lois Dodd (born 1927) is one of these. She has never left the real. She has always embraced it. “Lois Dodd: Natural Order,” a retrospective of this great painter at the

Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn. (through May 28), reminds us of that strand of modern art that seemed to ignore, but also managed to absorb, some of the major trends of the postwar years—Abstract Expressionism, above all. Her work is hardly “realistic” in any conventional sense, although it is, always, resolutely representational. For example, Ms. Dodd refers to “Green Towel” (1980), a rectangle within a rectangle, as “a perfect abstraction in a way.” The scene—a towel on a line in front of a green background—is like nothing seen in nature.

Alex Katz, Ms. Dodd's contemporary, had his own spectacular show at the Guggenheim, which closed in February. Now, her time has come, at last. She is a master who has painted *en plein air*, has worked in the country and the city, has painted nudes and flowers, doorways and windows, cows and chickens, laundry lines and forests. She has painted on canvas, linen, Masonite, aluminum and wood. Her palette embraces a range of colors from almost-pastel-pale to the most somber black (with green—the color of spring, and of nature in New England—as an enduring leitmotif), and her brushwork extends from loose, broad strokes to thin, delicate, filamented ones. Her pictures, often executed quickly, are full but uncrowded.

Seventy-seven works from more than six decades of her career suggest that Ms. Dodd has developed organically but not radically. She keeps returning to favorite locales and tropes with renewed, sometimes quirky energy, working through variations on favorite themes and motifs. A keen observer both up close and at a distance, she is adept equally at capturing minute details (of flowers, for instance, a subject she shied away from for years, not wanting to be thought of as yet another female floral painter) and deep, dark, wintry forest scenes.

And although one sees resemblances to, and lessons learned from, predecessors and contemporaries (Cézanne, Arthur Dove, Edward Hopper, Neil Welliver, Joan Mitchell, Richard Diebenkorn), Ms. Dodd remains singularly herself throughout a long life of artistic experimentation.

A painter both serious and playful, she never shies away from an eccentric angle of vision that can, for example, make barnyard animals look like swatches of pure color (see the 1958 “Yellow Cow”); who can paint herself into a picture of an artist at work while never portraying her features realistically (“Shadow With Easel,” 2010); who paints female nudes not languorously lounging, but at work in the fields; and who hangs a bright red towel in the middle of a clothesline, in order to offer dramatic contrast with the surrounding soft greens of nature (“Laundry Line, Red, White, Black, Pitchfork,” 1979).

She handles geometric maneuvers with daring and grace. The large, early, semi-abstract “Pond” (1962) is an arabesque of disjointed lines that spiritedly suggest the subject in front of her. Architectural renderings of doors and windows, rooms and buildings, are crisper, like the starkly black “View of Barn at Night” (1976), or “Attic Staircase and Sunlight” (1987-88), whose elegant rectilinearity is also a study in gray, white, yellow and robin’s egg blue, framed by a bold, burnt-orange border.

Ms. Dodd’s best work combines order and disorder with complex charm. The title of her show comes from a 1978 oil on linen depicting tree trunks and limbs, some broken, others fallen, in a forest near her home in Maine. You get a sense of mangled verticality. Shadows penetrate the woods. Distant light breaks in from the rear, and a background of green complements a foreground of shades of brown. One thinks: Here is Cézanne, reborn, and repurposed, for New England. Stillness pervades a landscape.

A sunnier version of the same silent stillness appears often in Ms. Dodd’s urban pictures. The 1968 “Men’s Shelter, March #2” comes from a series she did looking out from her Lower East Side studio. The windowless men’s shelter is on the right. In the middle—you wouldn’t know this unless you had read the exhibition catalog—is what used to be an old cemetery. Strong forms are handled in delicate colors. The most touching detail is a thin, leafless tree in front, almost like a screen through which the viewer peers. Nature makes its appearance even in the city.

In the leafier locale of Greenwich, Robert Moffat Bruce (1822-1909), a local textile merchant, bequeathed his home to the town in 1908. An exhibition of local artists opened the museum in 1912. The Dodd show is one of several appearing now at the “New Bruce.” On April 2, the museum unveiled a three-story, 44,000-square-foot wing designed by the EskewDumezRipple architectural firm. The construction is handsome and chaste. A striated stone-and-glass façade overlooks a renovated Bruce Park designed by Reed Hilderbrand. On a brisk spring day, daffodils in bloom but deciduous trees still bare, “natural order” pervaded the scene. One could be put in mind of a Lois Dodd picture.

—*Mr. Spiegelman, who writes about art and literature for the Journal, is the author, most recently, of “Nothing Stays Put: The Life and Poetry of Amy Clampitt” (Knopf).*

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