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Why American painter Lois Dodd is finally getting her dues at 98

The artist's close studies of her life in Maine and New York are the perfect antidote to a screen-scrambled age



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The town of Cushing, in Midcoast Maine, sits along the banks of the St George River estuary, a few hundred dwellings and a general store spread out between water and wood. Outsiders might know it for the sombre farmhouse in Andrew Wyeth's famous painting "Christina's World" (1948). But down the road is another building long immortalised in paint.

The artist Lois Dodd has spent her summers here since 1963. Characteristic of the area, the house has a steeply pitched roof and shingle cladding weathered dark by the cheerless Maine winters. An adjacent barn served until recently as her studio. When I visited, the woodlands and grasses sang summer green.

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If you know Dodd's work, the house and its surroundings feel immediately familiar. The barn windows, laundry drying on a line, the woods, clusters of orange day lilies: she has painted these elements again and again, not from habit or sentimentality, but as part of a life-long practice of looking.



'Snow Patterns' (1985) © Lois Dodd

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'The Painted Room' (1982) © Lois Dodd

“It turns out that the stuff that you see on a daily basis, right around you, is the best stuff to work with,” Dodd tells me, characteristically matter-of-fact, over turkey sandwiches. We sit in the sun room that her son Eli, an architect, added to the house in 1990. Now 98, she mostly paints the world from its expansive windows, at a close but comfortable distance.

Her subjects are insistently everyday — doorways, trees, flowers, windows, shadows, mostly in and around her homes-cum-studios in Cushing, on Manhattan’s 2nd Street and in Blairstown, New Jersey. But to describe them as “modest” misses their quiet confidence. There is no element of a Lois Dodd painting that is extraneous or ornamental. She is immune to the easy charms of the picturesque. “When people say they know a wonderful view,” she once told an interviewer, “it’s not for me.”

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Later this month, the Kunstmuseum den Haag will open Dodd's first European retrospective, bringing together 100 paintings made between 1958 and 2025. By any measure, it's a belated introduction. But her work has always been, in a sense, peripheral: not quite regionalist, not quite modernist; never abstract enough to be fashionable, never figurative enough to have a social message. To the show's curator, Louise Bjeldbak Henriksen, it is newly relevant in our screen-scrambled age. "One of the key roles of museums at this time is getting us to slow down and really look at what's there," she notes. "Lois highlights qualities that we are increasingly looking for."



Dodd's house in Cushing has conceded little ground to the technological incursions of the past three quarters of a century. There is no television, no WiFi and only a landline phone. The kitchen is dominated by a wood-fired range and 1950s refrigerator; heating comes from a cast-iron stove in the living room. It's furnished simply. For years, Dodd slept on the floor. (Now, sensibly, she uses a bed.) Painting, not comfort, has always come first.

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Until recently, Dodd's *modus operandi* was to work *en plein air*, carrying a folding French easel and Masonite panels into the surrounding woods and fields. "I'm not going to stretch little canvases," she says. "Too much work." She paints quickly — wet-on-wet, mostly in a single sitting — using thinned oils and a light touch. The panels, when finished, rarely exceed 50cm in any dimension.

Dodd has a gimlet eye for seeing the strange in the ordinary: the abstract geometry of bedsheets drying on a line; the perspectival play of tree trunks; the ghost forms of shadow; the gridded drama of windows, layering space and surface. In an astonishing series from 2007, lily-orange flames engulf a clapboard house. The fire was real — a training exercise by the local fire department — but the image is potently symbolic. Another artist might have invented it.



'Three Yellow Curtains Blowing' (1980) © Lois Dodd/Alexandre Gallery

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“I’m not imaginative enough to make a painting without observation,” Dodd tells me. “I really need to have the thing in front of me to be inspired.” Yet the more you look at things, the less stable they become — like words repeated to the point of meaninglessness.

For the gallerist Phil Alexandre, who has represented Dodd since 2001, her work sits in the early American modernist tradition of Charles Burchfield, Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley — artists who filtered landscape through abstraction and idiosyncratic personal vision. The Kunstmuseum den Haag show traces this lineage further, including works by Piet Mondrian from its extensive collection. Dodd has often cited the Dutch artist as an influence, particularly his paintings of trees, which gradually dissolve into line and ellipse. “Everything you want to know about painting is in Mondrian,” she tells me.

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'Burning House, Lavender' (2007) © Lois Dodd



'Springtime Studio Interior' (1972) © Lois Dodd

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Dodd's formal education was in textile design at Cooper Union, in the 1940s. The school was tuition-free and highly competitive, a New York institution that shaped generations of artists and architects. She brushed against abstract expressionism, untouched by its influence. In 1952, she co-founded the Tanager Gallery, one of several artist-run co-operatives on 10th Street. The galleries were an important alternative to the commercial dealers uptown. The first work Jasper Johns ever exhibited was in a Tanager Christmas show; Andy Warhol's line drawings of men kissing were repeatedly turned down. Dodd's then-husband, the sculptor Bill King, was among the founding members and Eli was born that same year. King left not long after.

Did being a single mother affect her career? "Not really."

Because there are rarely people in her work, it's easy to imagine Dodd as a solitary figure. But she's always been in artist circles. She first visited Maine with King and their Cooper classmates Alex Katz and his first wife Jean Cohen. Before buying the place in Cushing, she co-owned a house in nearby Lincolnville with Katz and Cohen. He and his second wife Ada still summer there. This is the famous yellow house in Katz's painting *Lawn Party* (1965), where Dodd numbers among a gathering of artist friends.

She likes to paint with other people and, until recently, was part of a group in Maine that worked from nude models outdoors. For years she resisted the seductions of flowers, determined not to be a "lady flower painter". Painting her friend Nancy Wissemann-Widrig painting flowers gave her permission by proxy. She taught for 20 years at Brooklyn College and is still close to former students. Her work is in the MoMA collection thanks to the gift of the artist Robert Gober.

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'Sun in Hallway' (1978) © Lois Dodd/Alexandre Gallery

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Alexandre recalls visiting Dodd's New York studio in 2002 and being astonished by the consistency and quality of the paintings. "She had been entirely overlooked," he says. Dodd was already in her seventies. Her first exhibition outside the US, at Modern Art in London in 2019, came when she was 92.

That's starting to change. An important work, "Attic Staircase with Sunlight" (1987-88), entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum this year. Last October, at Christie's, a 1971 window painting sold for \$387,000, more than three times its high estimate.

Why has attention been so long in coming? Partly, as Henriksen notes, because she did not fit into a movement. Partly because she is a woman. Partly because the market, for decades, has rewarded loudness over looking. Her refusal to theorise her work may also have cost her critical currency. Dodd has always preferred to show than tell.



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“Lois didn’t follow fashion in painting,” Katz told me over email. “She represents something that is admirable and genuine. She found herself, and she didn’t shift with the winds.”

Now, at last, the winds seem to be blowing in Dodd’s favour.

‘Lois Dodd: Framing the Ephemeral’ is at Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands, from August 30 to January 4 2026