

# ALEXANDRE

## Patricia Treib and Lois Dodd

Stephen Westfall

A painter's small works may be preparatory for larger work, but in the right hands they have a concentrated life of their own: a peculiar combination of compression and spontaneity. Both Lois Dodd and Patricia Treib have established such a studio practice that audiences familiar with their painting anticipate their small work with an appropriately mobile set of criteria: treasuring the unstructured vs. the structured, the *al la prima* as an alternative to the practiced, a somewhat more tentative animation of the mark akin to the first shoots of Spring feeling their way into a gradually warming air. Bringing the two artists together is a propitious leap. They are generations apart. Dodd can be held to be a painter from observation while Treib appears uphold abstraction. Already, though, compatible ambiguities seep into comparisons.

For Dodd, the observational is a starting point to construct fresh pictorial architectures reinforced by her keen sense of what to leave out in pursuit of a geometric clarity that amplifies a painter's order imposed upon the chaos of plants and quotidian architecture, and this intensification through editing is the very spirit of "abstracting." Treib's paintings, on the other hand, are already so much more abstract, leaving her sources of observed forms and fragments of images borrowed from Piero and dress patterns further behind as her extruded calligraphic alphabet takes on an idiographic life of its own. In the larger paintings her ideograms engage the scale of life-sized figures, while in the pocket scale of the work on paper presented here they serve as *initiums*, the decorated first letter of an illuminated manuscript that are also signs with meaning and portent woven into them.

Treib's painterly calligraphy is as abstract as "asemic writing" (writing-like marks with no understandable semantic meaning), yet it is sourced in the very life-world that Dodd is isolating and refining. Where Dodd is looking at landscapes, barns and clapboard houses, and plants, Treib is looking at objects on a table, also including plants, but most everything is indoors. I'm reminded that apart from some early landscapes, the topographies of Cubism also unfold in interiors. In fact, the interiority of the apartment and studio informs much of the European modernity, including Miro's calligraphy, that Treib brings into the present. She follows the dictum "make it new" through a kind of brightness, achieved by an off-white background that suffuses and spills around her brushwork, absorbing it into light, the way big windows can sun-drench a room for periods of the day. In her bigger paintings this light is not so much a ground color underneath her more declarative brushwork as it is a transparent emulsion, the residue of many wipe-downs of the canvas that is almost seamlessly connected to her cursive "figures." On her small, Treib's asemantic calligraphy is clearly on top of the off-white page, which nevertheless slightly absorbs the marks and tints them through the paint's intermittent translucency.

Dodd's group of small paintings collected here is mostly comprised of single flowers and stems slicing into a space that is represented as a chromatic atmosphere and therefore a

keying color: a sap green, light blue, a teal, a near black umber earth color. These colors are not monochromes, their first-take brushwork is translucent to the lighter priming coat underneath so the foregrounded flowers seem to swim in light. And then there is her sure command of the brush, an astonishment for a painter in her mid-90s: limning a highlight into a curving stem, dappling the shadow of a darker green into a sunlit lighter yellow-green tree-wall seen through a barn window. Both Dodd and Treib are masters of secondary and tertiary colors: what temperature of pink to set against or adjacent to a particular green, for instance; how pink throws a violet shadow, how an earth green subtends a chartreuse. These are the colors of Spring, when clothes and the encasing stalks of flowers combine to reintroduce suppleness and color into a stiff world. Dodd's and Treib's small works will limber us up.

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