

ALEXANDRE

Lois Dodd: The Angle of a Landscape

by Suzette McAvoy

The Angle of a Landscape (578)

The Angle of a Landscape –
That every time I wake –
Between my Curtain and the Wall
Upon an ample Crack –

Like a Venetian – waiting –
Accosts my open eye –
Is just a Bough of Apples –
Held slanting, in the Sky –

The Pattern of a Chimney –
The Forehead of a Hill –
Sometimes – a Vane's Forefinger –
But that's – Occasional –

The Seasons – shift – my Picture –
Upon my Emerald Bough,
I wake – to find no – Emeralds –
Then – Diamonds – which the Snow

From Polar Caskets – fetched me –
The Chimney – and the Hill –
And just the Steeple's finger –
These – never stir at all –

— Emily Dickinson

Lois Dodd paints what catches her eye, as she's famously said, "Not everybody seems to see the world that they're living in . . . and it's such a kick, really seeing things."¹ In the late 1950s, when she began painting observationally, the black-and-white pattern of Holstein cows in a field first attracted her attention. Seven decades later, her delight in the quotidian remains undiminished. A recent painting, *Sycamore Seed Head*, 2022, portrays a spiky seedpod that resembles a hairy basketball, enlarged in the artist's rendition. While her world has become more circumscribed, her point of view remains expansive. In *Mayberry and Sky*, 2022, a narrow horizontal composition of a withering but still green vine set against a blue sky tufted with white clouds—the angle of the landscape is upward, open, and ever-present.

Dodd painted her first window in 1968, a motif she has returned to consistently throughout the next fifty-plus years. *Barn Window + Apple Tree Leaves*, 2020, and *Barn Window Closed*, 2019, are recent examples, and within their modest dimensions, both are 8 x 10 inches, are a summation of the greatness of her art. The view is outward from the artist's barn studio to the apple trees that suffuse the two vertical panes with an abstraction of yellow-green leaves, recalling the luminous palm in Matisse's *Interior with Egyptian Curtain*, 1948 (Phillips Collection). As in the Matisse, the distance in both works is compressed, and the whole flattened to address the two-dimensional picture plane, a concern of Dodd's for the whole of her career. In *Barn Window + Apple Tree Leaves*, the sunlight is from the right, highlighting the nearer edge of the center mullion and throwing the far left of the window frame in stark relief. Her acuteness of perception is carried in the narrow line of white along the window's inner edge. In the earlier *Barn Window Closed*, the sun is higher in the sky, the interior is more brightly lit, and the artist's position is slightly further back. More of the window's frame is visible, heightening the trompe l'oeil frame within a frame.

Rackstraw Downes, in his enduringly informative essay, *What the Sixties Meant to Me*, quotes artist Paul Resika, who "drew a distinction for me between artists who push (which comes from Manet and Abstract Expressionism) and artists who touch (which comes from Corot and Constable)."² Lois Dodd is in the "push" camp. The surety of her brush is evident as it moves across the surface, at once defining background and foreground and describing what she is looking at. "Both things would be going on simultaneously," she says.³ A trio of single pinecone paintings, *Seed Cone*, *Coulter Pine Cone*, 2022, *White Pine Cone*, 2022, and *Pitch Pine Cone*, 2023, show her twinned aims, what Downes calls "the ever-shifting balance between schema and nature."⁴ Closely observed, each pinecone is given a format that suits its shape. Ever practical, Dodd has Masonite panels cut in various sizes at the lumberyard. "I give them a plan of how to cut them

up. You can get a least twenty, all a little different from one another, from a 4 x 8 foot sheet. It's good to have a selection because what you see is going to fit in one proportion and not in something else."

Whether created in the studio or outdoors on site, the panel paintings are completed in "one go" within a three-hour sitting, "and then they're complete." The light will have changed by then, and it is light that is Dodd's abiding subject—how it delineates or softens form, affects color, creates shadow and pattern, the interplay of shapes. In *Apple Tree in Bloom, May, 2021*, the light is dazzlingly bright, obscuring definition, the small tree an explosion of white blossoms that oscillate between positive and negative, held eternally in tension with the chartreuse ground. "I remember pulling up in Cushing in June after spending winter in the city, and wow, this little tree, it was like fireworks, what a sensation," says Dodd, echoing Cézanne, "Painting from nature is not copying the object; it is realizing one's sensations."

Now in her ninth decade, the subjects of Dodd's paintings are increasingly close at hand—a dried leaf, seed pods, a thorny branch, all reward her careful looking. "My idea of a still life," she adds. *Birch Bark, 2021*, pictures a piece of white birch bark, its edges curled and ragged, a puzzle piece against a patch of green grass. Presented monumentally, the bit of bark becomes a snowy ground populated by a forest of barren trees. It calls to mind the series of closely cropped photographs and small-scale paintings of tree bark and lichen made in the 1980s and 1990s by her friend and fellow Maine summer resident Rudy Burckhardt, about whom John Yau has written, "Whatever he looked at became a subject of intense and loving scrutiny."⁵ A statement that applies equally to Dodd.

Never one to travel widely in search of exotic motifs, Lois Dodd has found ample visual interest within the near environs of her longtime homes in coastal Maine, rural New Jersey, and her Manhattan apartment. *Chicken House +*

Outhouse + Apple Tree, 2021, is an ebullient depiction of the outbuildings in her Cushing yard, a subject she has returned to often, inspired by the geometric shape of the structures against the profusion of organic forms. As the artist has aged, so too have the buildings and surroundings, the passing of time rendering each painted version unique. A rare winter spent in Maine during the pandemic yielded the two works, *Twin Arbor Vitae in Snow*, 2021, and *Blizzard, Cushing*, 2021, scenes viewed from the warmth of the sun porch with its wrap-around windows. One can't help but think of Mondrian's early paintings of trees when looking at Dodd's spare compositions, the natural forms reduced to their most elemental, the abstract underpinning of her work laid bare. "I don't think I've changed that much in my approach," she says, "the whole process is an abstraction. You can't be thinking, 'oh, what a beautiful tree,' that won't help you. You have to be thinking abstractly."

1 Lois Dodd, video interview with Bill Maynes, New York City, January 9, 2007, 3:10-3:17.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrS1J1XOIInA>

2 Rackstraw Downes, "What the Sixties Meant to Me," *Art Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975), 130.

3 Unless otherwise noted, all artist quotations are from a phone interview with the author on November 13, 2023.

4 Downes, "What the Sixties," 129.

5 John Yau, "The Wonderful World of Rudy Burckhardt," *Hyperallergic* (December 28, 2014).