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'Lois Dodd: Natural Order' Review:

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

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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

Nonagenarian Lois Dodd (born 1927)

is one of these. She has never left the

retrospective of this great painter at

Conn. (through May 28), reminds us

seemed to ignore, but also managed

to absorb, some of the major trends

real. She has always embraced it.

the Bruce Museum in Greenwich,

of that strand of modern art that

"Lois Dodd: Natural Order," a

face; then they improve upon it.

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Playfully Painted Realism

retrospective at Connecticut's Bruce Museum.

'Men's Shelter, March #2' (detail), 1968 Photo: Alexandre Gallery, New York

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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.

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By Willard Spiegelman

April 19, 2023 at 5:31 pm ET

Greenwich, Conn.

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Lois Dodd: Natural Order

The Bruce Museum, through May 28

'Pond' (1962) Photo: Alexandre Gallery, New York

quickly, are full but uncrowded.

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

England—as an enduring leitmotif), and her brushwork extends from loose,

broad strokes to thin, delicate, filamented ones. Her pictures, often executed

Seventy-seven works from more than six decades of her career suggest that Ms.

locales and tropes with renewed, sometimes quirky energy, working through

distance, she is adept equally at capturing minute details (of flowers, for

yet another female floral painter) and deep, dark, wintry forest scenes.

'8 Nudes in the Garden' (2009-10) Photo: Alexandre Gallery, New York

("Laundry Line, Red, White, Black, Pitchfork," 1979).

'Winter Sunset, Blair Pond' (2008) Photo: Alexandre Gallery, New York

burnt-orange border.

Stillness pervades a landscape.

'Natural Order' (1978) Photo: Alexandre Gallery, New York

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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

Lower East Side studio. The

touching detail is a thin, leafless tree in front, almost like a screen through which

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

overlooks a renovated Bruce Park designed by Reed Hilderbrand. On a brisk

spring day, daffodils in bloom but deciduous trees still bare, "natural order"

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-Mr. Spiegelman, who writes about art and literature for the Journal, is the

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Why Richard Avedon Is More Relevant

author, most recently, of "Nothing Stays Put: The Life and Poetry of Amy

Appeared in the April 20, 2023, print edition as 'Lois Dodd's Playful Realism'.

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construction is handsome and chaste. A striated stone-and-glass façade

pervaded the scene. One could be put in mind of a Lois Dodd picture.

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In the leafier locale of Greenwich, Robert Moffat Bruce (1822-1909), a local

the viewer peers. Nature makes its appearance even in the city.

series she did looking out from her

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

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,

is also a study in gray, white, yellow and robin's egg blue, framed by a bold,

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

brown. One thinks: Here is Cézanne, reborn, and repurposed, for New England.

the rear, and a background of green complements a foreground of shades of

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

a long life of artistic experimentation.

Dodd has developed organically but not radically. She keeps returning to favorite

variations on favorite themes and motifs. A keen observer both up close and at a

instance, a subject she shied away from for years, not wanting to be thought of as

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 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

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

artist at work while never portraying her features realistically ("Shadow With

Easel," 2010); who paints female nudes not languorously lounging, but at work in

most somber black (with green—the color of spring, and of nature in New

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