Art

Lois Dodd's Life in Nature

From the mid-1960s, when Dodd first took her Masonite panels outdoors to paint, her production has been shaped by observation.

Faye Hirsch 13 hours ago

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Lois Dodd, "Shadow with Easel" (2010), oil on linen, 48 x 54 inches (all images courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York)

GREENWICH, Conn. — Passing between the two exhibitions inaugurating the Bruce Museum's new addition, I was struck by a congruence in the artists' focus on near-at-hand worlds. At first glance, Lois Dodd's luminous landscapes and James Castle's tiny, smudgy drawings could not look more different. Yet both artists worked with what was accessible: Castle at his home and studio in Idaho, and Dodd, over seven decades, in hers, in Maine, New Jersey, and on the Lower East Side of New York City, where she rotates seasonally. Castle was comparatively isolated, deaf and remote, while Dodd, though she was long under-recognized by the establishment, has pursued her métier in a community of artists. Unlike Castle, she came to know the art world. Yet a persistent quietness, a discreetness, permeates her work. The gridded windows that she paints across the cemetery behind her Second Street studio indicate the occupancy of a men's shelter at night, but we never glimpse its inhabitants. She always seems to be alone. Moreover, she has intentionally resisted fashion. Her vision was spurred amid the ferment of New York Abstract Expressionism, which she admired, and whose influence is evident in the earliest works on view. But, from the mid-1960s, when she first took her Masonite panels outdoors to paint, her production has been shaped by observation: she often remarks, "I really saw that!"

Lois Dodd: Natural Order is a sizable representation of 77 paintings. It is a reiteration, in part, of a lovely show last summer at the Hall Art Foundation in Vermont, which owns many pieces on view, with the addition of some 30 loans, all organized by subject: woodland scenes, nocturnal landscapes and interiors, windows, flowers, laundry lines, city views. A few chunky nudes in the landscape are on exhibit, and just three of her "Flashings" — paintings quickly executed on small, eminently portable aluminum roofing panels, which she has produced by the dozens. Missing are some favorite subjects of the past, such as tunnel entrances built into hillsides along New Jersey roads, and a Maine quarry where steep, geometrical walls dappled with light provided an ideal structure for her efficient brush. That she loves the brush and all its associated activity can be seen in "Self-Portrait with Easel" (2010), where she depicts herself and her tools as a silhouette cast onto the lawn, shaggy with blades of grass. Her gesture is exuberant.

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Lois Dodd, “Self-Portrait in Green Window” (1971), oil on linen, 53 1/2 x 36 inches

Like this rare self-representation, most of the paintings here were produced *en plein air*, a way of working inspired by her friend Alex Katz, who would go out on painting forays during the decade Dodd co-owned a house with him and his then-wife, the artist Jean Cohen, in Maine. Dodd has always referred to nature in her works, even in those completed early on, based on drawings. Once she stepped outside to paint, however, she never turned back. No longer, as she maintains, did she have to strain for a subject; no matter how complex the scene, she found the point of view that allowed her to summarize and abstract the essentials. And so it has gone, to the point of such remarkable consistency that it is a challenge to consider her art in a strictly chronological order — although she has tended toward increasing distillation, the elimination of all unnecessary details, as she ages. The show’s most recent work, the small “Tree in Snowstorm” (2021), its dun palette as unassuming as its subject, is a single bare tree accumulating the flakes that fly all around, expressing solitude and simple, mute eloquence in equal measure.

Dodd prefers surfaces with little give — for some of the large works, it is linen stretched taut. Smaller works on Masonite were completed in one shot, before light and atmospheric conditions could change too much, but some of the larger works, as in a series done in the woods, were painted over days, compelling her to strap her canvas to a tree, cover it, and return repeatedly until it was done. Among the most striking series are her windows, which she began painting in Maine in 1968 and proved enduring as a subject. Struck by what she terms our “American ruins,” exemplified by abandoned farmhouses and outbuildings, she found herself fascinated by the combination of gridded structure and reflective happenstance in their broken windows. In “View Through Elliot’s Shack Looking North”(1971), we see simultaneously what is behind us, on the surface, and within or beyond, glimpsed through a broken window on the opposite side of the shack. It all gets flattened in the picture plane. Especially noteworthy here are “Barn Window and White Square”(1981), with its rhythmic geometry, and “Self Portrait in Green House Window”(1971), on loan from the Portland Museum of Art. In this, one of her very few self-portraits, she depicts herself in communion with a cheerful goldenrod. She must have been reflected often in the windows, but she studiously excludes herself most of the time; she paints what she sees, but selectively, after all.

Lois Dodd, "Green Towel" (1980), oil on linen, 36 x 34 inches (all images courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York)

Many such handsome, monumental works are in the exhibition, but my own favorites are the winter and night landscapes, in which what Dodd sees becomes nearly visionary, in the manner of, say, Arthur Dove or Charles Burchfield. In the nocturnal heavens, the moon is circled by a huge, delicate ring, an evanescent atmospheric effect ("Moon Ring," 1982). In early spring ponds, melting ice creates shapes within which reflections present alternate worlds ("Opening in Ice and Light on Path," 2002). Shadows and silhouettes of all kinds come alive at night or on winter days, when they might, in odd or spooky shapes, populate headlight-dazzled roads or turn blue and spindly in the whiteness, as in the exquisite "Tree Shadow on Snow" (1995), portraying a snowbank at the Delaware Water Gap. Equally gripping are her summer landscapes, predominated by green. Arriving in Maine one spring when the trees were still in bloom, she created her monumental "Apple Tree and Shed" (2007), contrasting white, globular treetops with the funky rectilinearity of a small outbuilding.

Hung near that impressive work is the modest "Green Towel" (1980), essentially a green monochrome. Its clothesline-hung subject casts onto the flattened lawn a shadow — a bowed and fractured parallelogram — that conveys the certainty of a towel flapping in the breeze. The painting is simple, sure, and quick. Such works, borne both of Dodd's intimate love of nature and her sharp, analytical eye, permit us to contemplate shifting effects of light and weather, and with them a world that too often slips beneath our own solicitude.

Lois Dodd, "Tree in Snowstorm" (2021), oil on Masonite, 19 1/2 x 12 1/8 inches

Lois Dodd, “Apple Trees & Shed” (2007), oil on linen, 42 x 84 3/8 inches

Lois Dodd, “View Through Elliott’s Shack Looking North” (1971), oil on linen, 48 x 33 inches

Lois Dodd, “Tree Shadow on Snow” (1995), oil on Masonite, 13 x 17 inches

Lois Dodd, “Moon Ring” (1982), oil on linen, 60 x 40 inches

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