The New Criterion

Dodd's discoveries

by Karen Wilkin

Is it a stretch to call Lois Dodd the Emily Dickinson of painting? I don't mean in terms of her biography, of course. Far from being a recluse, Dodd has long been an actively engaged member of artist circles, somewhat sidelined at times but described by her admiring colleagues as a "painter's painter." Born in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1927, she studied at Cooper Union in the 1940s, attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture's prestigious summer program, and in 1952 was a founder of the artist-run cooperative Tanager Gallery—an important alternative to the staid uptown institutions of the time. The mother of a son whom she largely raised alone after her then-husband, the sculptor Bill King, left his young family, Dodd taught at Brooklyn College and Skowhegan, always continuing to paint. Now, at ninety-eight, with an admirable, growing list of exhibitions, publications, and museums that own her work, Dodd is having a retrospective at the Kunstmuseum in The Hague, Netherlands, titled "Lois Dodd: Framing the Ephemeral."["Lois Dodd: Framing the Ephemeral" opened at the Kunstmuseum, The Hague, on August

30, 2025, and remains on view through January 4, 2026." rel="footnote">1 Since I had the pleasure of contributing to the show's catalogue, what follows is not a review but an introduction to the work and methods of this singular artist, based on my years of looking at and thinking about her paintings.

Like Dickinson, Dodd deals only with essentials and has consistently defied conventional expectations. She came of age as an artist at a time when serious painting in New York was equated exclusively with abstraction, especially with the contingency and dragged layering of gestural Abstract Expressionism, seasoned with an ample supply of anxiety. From the start, Dodd rejected this approach, preferring to work from the motif, albeit freely. It was during a stay in Maine in the 1950s, with King as well as Alex Katz and his then-wife (their classmates from Cooper Union), that she found her distinctive language and way of working. Fascinated by spotted cows moving through the landscape in the clear, coastal light, she began to draw them and use the drawings as the basis for paintings done in the studio. "They wouldn't stand still long enough for me to paint them," Dodd said later. But, she recalled, "Alex Katz was painting outside, so I thought I would, too." (Katz was beginning to work from perception in the manner that has defined his career.)

Dodd has, essentially, worked directly from the motif ever since that formative early stay in Maine, usually en plein air, scrutinizing the environs of her homes in Cushing, Maine, and Blairstown, New Jersey, near the Delaware Water Gap, painting in her yard or trekking to nearby woods and ponds, studying neighbors' houses; occasionally there are disquisitions on the interiors of her Cushing and Blairstown houses. Working out of doors, Dodd has taken as starting points the intense light of high summer, snow-covered fields and frozen lakes, and even moonlit nights, painted in the dark. (There have been occasional departures, such as a series of nude women out in the sun; far from being indolent Arcadian nymphs, they are athletic and active, sawing wood or carrying and stacking logs.) There's a famous photograph of the intrepid artist, folding French easel in hand, canvas stool slung around her, prepared for the vagaries of weather in a broad-brimmed hat and a rain poncho. Back in New York, she punctuated her plein air paintings with directly observed interiors of her downtown Manhattan loft or views from its windows. Night scenes of the floating rectangles of the lit windows of a men's shelter across the way recur from time to time, as do daytime views of the geometric façade. These days, however, during her Maine sojourns, Dodd works from the sunroom of the Cushing house, responding to the shifts wrought in her well-known surroundings by changing seasons, weather, and time of day. Back in New Jersey for the winter, in her light-filled Blairstown house, she makes portraits of fragments of the natural world brought inside. She disarms us with the apparent straightforwardness of her un-picturesque landscapes, her descriptions of vernacular buildings, and her evocations of modest rooms and stairways. Just as Dickinson's poems seem to be simple and plainspoken at first encounter, Dodd's images also appear to be simple and plainspoken, but, like the poems, they reveal complexities and subtleties of meaning, evidence of an unfailing ability to discover nuance and the unexpected in the everyday and familiar—all the truth told slant.

Lois Dodd, Large Morning Woods, *1978, Oil on canvas, Alexandre Gallery, New York.*

Just as Dickinson's lean, pared-down poems can appear, in a superficial reading, to be faithful responses to actual experience, Dodd's economical images of clapboard houses, weathered barns, and laundry lines, of windows, Northeastern landscapes, and unfussy interiors, convince us, at first viewing, of the accuracy of her perceptions. Her orchestrations of tone and hue conjure up particular seasons, times of day, and weather, triggering countless associations. And while anyone who knows New England will immediately sense the specificity of her paintings of rural Maine, where she has spent summers since the 1960s, just as her fellow New Yorkers will recognize the urban streetscape outside her Lower East Side loft, Dodd's paintings transcend the characteristics of place at the same time that they celebrate it. Spend enough time with her work and you begin to recognize houses and sheds, the configuration of a yard, the location of a clothesline or a flowering shrub, the shape of a window, an oval mirror. She concentrates on motifs she knows well, subjects that she has studied over a long time, but she is able to find fresh ways of thinking about them, even of seeing them, possibly because of the sheer intensity of her scrutiny. One series of recent paintings studied a larch outside her home in Maine as it changed over the year, while a group of small paintings of an amaryllis forced to bloom indoors recorded it not only in gorgeous full flower, but also as a shriveled, withered relic of its former self. The skies in her paintings seem mutable. The moon in a night scene will vanish behind a cloud, the laundry on the clothesline will flap in the wind, irrevocably altering the composition. Especially in the small, directly painted works done on aluminum flashing, often at night, we sense the speed and urgency with which the artist worked, as she rapidly responded to unpredictable conditions and, often, a lack of light. We could argue that such subject matter introduces the element of time into the paintings and speculate on just what that means in the work of a painter who has lived for nearly a century, but that element of transformation informs not just her recent efforts, but in fact all of Dodd's work. "When I first came to Maine," she has said, "I thought I'd stay here a while, until I'd exhausted what there was to paint, and then I'd have to move on. But things change all the time. Trees grow or they fall down. It's never the same."

Dodd insists, a little disingenuously, that she simply paints what she sees, and convinces us of the truthfulness of her apparently straightforward paintings, yet we simultaneously acknowledge the presence of the artist and the action of her hand because of their broad paint-handling and restrained surfaces, even as we capitulate to their potent suggestions of things we know. But just as we become involved in her work's powerful sense of the recognizable, Dodd disarms us by asking simultaneously that we recognize the Platonic order that disciplines all her compositions. "If I don't have the geometry," she has said, "I can't go on." That order is found, not imposed. It's as if she were following Paul Cézanne's advice "to seek the cone, the cylinder, and the sphere," finding them beneath the irregularities of the world around us and reminding us, quietly, of the archetypical forms that underlie our ordinary surroundings, making us reconsider actuality.

Lois Dodd, Springtime Studio Interior, *1972, Oil on canvas, Alexandre Gallery, New York.*

"I'm not interested in still lifes," Dodd has said, "because I don't like the idea of arranging things. I like to discover what's already there." What's already there can include her own shadow on bright grass, as in a well-known self-portrait, or imperfect reflections on dirty glass. It can include, as well, the rectangles of windows, the horizontals of clapboard, the foursquare shapes of laundry, and the pragmatic forms of New England architecture or Lower Manhattan buildings, along with the verticals and clean lines of tree trunks and branches, or even leaves and flower petals seen up close. The tension between the apparent casualness of her subject matter and the firm geometric underpinning that subtly supports it, like the continuo in a Baroque composition, invigorates Dodd's images, even the most seemingly modest. It is conceivable that The Hague's Kunstmuseum decided to mount Dodd's first European retrospective in part because of this fusion of the quotidian and geometric structure—the characteristics of the best Dutch seventeenth-century interiors, here translated into a modern-day, vernacular American idiom. Her admiration for Piet Mondrian surely factored in as well.

Dodd may, in fact, paint what she sees, as she claims, but she is preternaturally attuned to things the rest of us might miss—reflections, conflations of near and far, glimpses in and through. She destabilizes us by itemizing the layered, defined spaces of a sequence of rooms or by allowing us the guilty pleasure of peering into illuminated windows, further keeping us off-balance with her not-quite-"real," slightly intensified or modulated color. Her repeated window motifs can tantalize us. She teases us by making the sash more or less congruent with the boundaries of the canvas, causing us to wonder whether we are inside or out—without resorting to a conventional trompe l'oeil device. Sometimes a narrow indication of exterior clapboard allows us to orient ourselves, but the rectangular panes are so confrontational that we often remain uncertain of where we are located. Dodd has said that she enjoys the way the panes of a typical double-hung, six-over-six window organize things, but she also evidently enjoys playing with ambiguity. In one extraordinary work, a pale window frame coincides with the edge of the canvas, turning all internal incidents into a painting within a painting. A bright rectangle of sunlit tree trunks interrupts the pattern of dark woods contained by the mullions. At first, we are engaged by the play of touches and the range of murky greens spread across the foursquare window, but we are disoriented, not entirely sure of what we are dealing with, until we concentrate on the broadly painted shadows on the window frame. Then we realize that we are outside, that the expanse of treetops is a reflection of woods behind us, and that we are seeing through a dark interior and out another window opposite. It's a little dizzying. We return to savoring the play of soft-edged and crisp shapes, the range of subdued colors, and the pulsing space suggested by the complicated view. Dodd's assured paint-handling grounds and anchors us, as does the economy and forthright quality of her representations, but she plainly revels in discomfiting her viewers. A disquieting interior makes us begin to doubt our perceptions; we are faced with a leafy landscape, seen through a window framed with yellow curtains, in a wall painted to look like a forest. It takes a while to figure out what is a depiction of a depiction, what a shorthand representation of the exterior world.

Reflections and ephemeral effects of light prove to be significant motifs in Dodd's lexicon—more of Dickinson's truth told slant. In a bold interior, the dislocated inside space reflected in an oval mirror

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd & 3rd Floors, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com
ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

standing on the floor competes with the urban night view through a nearby window. Or are some of those illuminated rectangles also reflections? In another painting, the oval mirror and the image within it are joined by a smaller, rectangular mirror at a different angle, offering a different point of view. A setting sun becomes an explosion of white on white, surrounded by rhythmic scribbles, reflected in an icy pond. A house is devoured by flames—a training exercise for local volunteer firemen, Dodd assures us—with emphasis on the contrast between the sharp edges of roof and wall, and the unstable explosions of luminous oranges and yellows above. Once again, Dodd's forthright, no-nonsense paint handling, along with a color palette that seems almost naturalistic but remains surprising, and a spatially elusive image compete for dominance, making us slow down and concentrate in an effort to grasp exactly what is happening—an effort that also makes us more aware of the sturdy abstract architecture of the painting.

Lois Dodd, **Burning House, Lavender,** ***2007, Oil on linen, Alexandre Gallery, New York.***

The clarity and the powerful evocation of place, time, and season may be what first attract us to Dodd's work, but we are soon engaged by the unexpected complexities of her deceptively simplified images. We may find her subject matter familiar; if we know New England or the Delaware Water Gap or Lower Manhattan, her images may trigger specific associations; but Dodd is neither a literal nor an anecdotal painter, and no special experience is required to find her paintings compelling. She is definitely not a storyteller. Her images never suggest even oblique narratives but seem, instead, to be pure manifestations of the act of seeing—declarations of her having been at a certain place at a certain time and having transubstantiated that fact into an image. Dodd bears witness to her chosen subject matter but translates it into her own pictorial language, unconstrained, for example, by conventional viewpoints, preferring to turn a selected motif into a near-abstraction, without losing its intrinsic character, by playing with scale and with the beholder's relationship to the image. Nor does she apparently feel obligated to be faithful to local color—the naturalistic hues of a specific subject—but instead somehow manages to evoke, say, a midsummer landscape in Maine's bright coastal light by means of hues that we cannot name, without resorting to arbitrarily intensified chroma. Just as she clarifies and simplifies her imagery, Dodd subdues some colors, shifts others, and heats up still others, for the abstract—for lack of a better word—benefit of the painting, reminding us subtly of the artifice of picture-making and of the presence of the artist, while still convincing us of the accuracy of her observations.

If we spend more time with Dodd's deceptively matter-of-fact paintings, we acknowledge that they are about what has been seen, but we also begin to make associations with artists that she perhaps admires or wishes to challenge. We begin to think about an eclectic list ranging from Joseph Mallord William Turner and Charles Willson Peale, to Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Piet Mondrian—and more. Dodd claims our attention by appealing to our perception of the world around us and then seduces us with solid pictorial invention, liberally laced with wit. Later in the poem that begins "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," Dickinson cautions that "The Truth must dazzle gradually." That's good advice for approaching Lois Dodd's paintings. They are immediately captivating, but they yield their full richness and complexity

when we pay them close attention over time. Anyone going to The Hague before January 4, 2026, will have ample opportunity to do so.

---

1. "Lois Dodd: Framing the Ephemeral" opened at the Kunstmuseum, The Hague, on August 30, 2025, and remains on view through January 4, 2026. ↩

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd & 3rd Floors, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996