

LOIS DODD: An American Abstract Realist Reconsidered by Mona Hadler

* This essay was originally published on the occasion of *Lois Dodd: 25*

Years, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME, May 19 - July 7, 1996.

Lois Dodd came of age aesthetically in the 1950s during the heyday of second generation Abstract Expressionism. It is a testament to her artistic honesty and originality that she resisted the impact of this style and, as Hilton Kramer wrote, "had the temerity to paint landscapes with cows in them!"¹ Dodd did not begin as an Abstract Expressionist and change directions, as some did, but from the first - the early fifties - she held to the visual motif. Yet her realism, which predated that of many of the artists loosely linked in the sixties and seventies under such rubrics as "Contemporary" or "New Realism," was always marked by formal modernist concerns. Admiring Mondrian and Trecento Italian art, she favored scenes that could be rendered parallel to the picture plane. Indeed, it was her "ambiguous" straddling of abstraction and realism that intrigued provocative critics such as Fairfield Porter at the time.²

Dodd's art, in its engagement with the question of realism, fits into larger debates about the privileging of abstraction and its viability for a world in conflict. Dodd and her then-husband the sculptor William King joined the many American artists who were drawn to Italy in the immediate postwar period.³ King had a one-year Fulbright to Italy in 1949. Dodd accompanied him and returned there on an Italian Government Study Grant with her young son a decade later. During the first trip, she remembers the prominence of the Realist painter Renato Guttuso and the rise of the neorealist cinema. She saw Roberto Rossellini's *Open City*, which was first made in 1945. King even had a bit part in a movie filmed in Bologna, called *Theresa*, about the American army in Italy during the Second World War. Dodd did not, however, embrace the emerging tradition of the expressionist figure, which played such a large role among European artists at the time. She would not have agreed with Nathan Rappaport, the creator of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument in 1947, when asked, "Could I have made a stone with a hole in it and said, 'Voilà, the heroism of the Jews?'"⁴ Indeed, Dodd wanted to avoid narrative content, which she associated with superficial aspects of American Social Realism in the thirties. She viewed the fifties more optimistically as a time of economic recovery and wanted to confront the visual scene honestly. This position of modernist realism constitutes one alternative to the polarized camps advocating abstraction or realism in the fifties.⁵

In her confrontation with nature, Dodd came to see herself as part of an American tradition. In Italy she was struck not only by its ruins (ancient and modern), but by its cultivated vistas. In contrast, America - particularly Maine - appeared wild. Like the nineteenth-century artist Worthington Whittredge, she too was moved by the "primitive" American woods. Dodd's favorite book on American landscape painting, Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture*, quotes these words by Whittredge upon returning to America from Italy:

I hid myself for months in the recesses of the Catskills. But how different was the scene before me from anything I had been looking at for many years! The forest was a mass of decaying logs and tangled brush wood, ... nowell-ordered forests, nothing but the primitive woods with their solemn silence reigning everywhere.⁶

When Dodd returned to America she began to summer in Lincolnville, Maine, sharing property in 1954 with Alex Katz and Jean Cohen, friends from Cooper Union where she had studied. Later she moved to Cushing, Maine, which is still her residence for part of the year. In Maine, however, she rendered not the transcendental landscape of an earlier century, but farm animals - cows, sheep, chickens - which she placed close to the picture plane. It is in these works that her ambiguous stance between abstraction and realism first becomes apparent. In one example, *Sheep* of 1958, Dodd boldly assembles the forms on the surface. This work, 35" x 56", is not a tentative early canvas, but is characteristically large and confident and anticipates the bold style of her later oeuvre. At this time Dodd worked from drawings, but she was soon to move her easel into the woods.

In New York in the fifties Dodd was among those who participated in establishing Tenth Street as a vital part of the developing art movements of that historic decade. She was one of the founding members of the Tanager Gallery in 1951, along with Charles Cajori, Angelo Ippolito, William King, and Fred Mitchell. This gallery, known for its role in establishing the importance of cooperative galleries in New York, heralded in the bustling 10th Street "scene" which Dodd and others remember fondly.⁷ Dodd recalls the gallery's catholic taste for including members who painted in either an abstract or a realistic style. Among the prominent artists shown at Tanager were Willem de Kooning (whom she particularly admired) and Franz Kline. Dodd's reputation grew with the gallery's success and from its tireless efforts locating and viewing the work of emerging artists. Her dedication to young artists surfaced yet again when she ran the M.E.A. program at Brooklyn College from 1990-92. She had worked there with extraordinary commitment, teaching students at all levels, from 1971 until she retired in 1992.

While Dodd was no stranger to the intellectual and vocal gatherings of the Abstract Expressionists in the fifties and the Figurative Alliance in the late sixties, her art exhibits a more pictorial than analytic quality. Among her most haunting paintings are her many close-ups of doors, stairways and windows. Lacking in anecdote, sophisticated in color and composition, often imposing in scale, they succeed in their directness and deceptive simplicity. Their control is made believable as directness. They never appear labored, although some paintings took several days of work; others, which focus on the light, were done in a sitting.

In a work such as *Stairwell, Cushing* of 1972 the gorgeous cadmium yellows and ochres startle, while the rigorous geometry provides an aura of gravity. Her admiration for Mondrian and Precisionists such as Charles Sheeler is clear. In *Door, Staircase* of 1981, a canvas surprising in its lavender coloring, Dodd fixed the forms using a straight edge and underdrawing, but did not use preliminary drawings. The work is simultaneously fresh and remote, pulled to the picture plane, but selected. Lacking in fine detail, it is broadly painted and clearly delineated without painterly brush strokes. She attributes this to having studied at Cooper Union Art School rather than with Hans Hofmann. Dodd aims for the look of the natural, but the aura of arresting stillness in these paintings, and in her night scenes, establishes their mood and belies her love of early Mondrian as well.

Dodd is attracted to scenes which are framed: the window becomes an armature for much of her work. Like other modernist artists, she enjoys formal ambiguity. In *Stairwell, Cushing*, she perched on the upstairs landing and rendered the downward slope of the staircase. The adjoining walls and rising door assert the verticality of the picture plane, thus leaving the entrance foyer an ambiguously placed rectangle. In *View Through Elliott's Shack Looking South* of 1971, she focused on the complexity of reflection and trans-parency visible in the glass panes. Dodd spends time finding her motif and will only allow herself to remove forms or objects when necessary. Ordering what is there, clearly or ambiguously, is her goal. In this regard, photographs, which aid other realists, are useless to her.

Over the years windows have taken on varying significance for Dodd. On the one hand, they have become a vehicle for expressing her environmental concerns. She notes, for example, the difference

between the beauty of abandoned homes in Maine which she considers "natural American ruins," and houses in New Jersey, which have windows that have been destroyed by vandalism, as in *Broken Window, New Jersey* of 1975. On the other hand, windows, with their combination of interior and reflected forms, intrigue her formally and yield a sense of mystery. Although Dodd often explores the visual complexities of reflection, she refrains from including her own image in the paintings and thus avoids the twin issues of narcissism and voyeurism. She prefers the formal to the psychological or theoretical.

Formal too were her concerns with laundry. In 1979 she did a group of paintings that include *Red Vine and Blanket* and *Red Laundry in Woods* in which bold shapes of red or a gridded blanket flap in the wind. It was not, in fact, actual laundry that she painted but her subject was a guise to incorporate brightly colored shapes into the landscape and pull them close to the picture plane. She searched for these articles among her possessions indoors. The laundry paintings, however, raise feminist questions regarding women and work. Typical of many women whose roots predate the activism of the sixties and seventies, she describes the paintings solely in the formalist language of her generation - the fifties. Her primary concern was to react against the narrative and trivial. She really feared a comparison of her work with laundry paintings by artists of the American Scene. Dodd also feared the appellation "woman painter" and avoided decorative forms as well as still life or children as subject matter.

Although Dodd did not experience prejudice against her as a woman at Cooper Union or at the Tanager Gallery, where she was the only woman among the founding members, she does consider realism a more hospitable arena than Abstract Expressionism for women artists. She compares her comfort in attending meetings of the Figurative Alliance versus the difficulty she witnessed for an unescorted woman attending the Club.

. . . the thing about the Artist Club that was intriguing was if you went there, I think it was rare that women went there on their own. Maybe a few women did, but I know I didn't go banging on the door. I didn't go there too often, anyway, but it was exciting, and you went with other people or somebody else and it was usually a man. There were very few women who were on panels as well. Really the abstract expressionists were a macho group when it gets right down to it. Macho altogether. The figurative artists, when they started up it was already a different era and it wasn't like that.⁸

Indeed Realism has traditionally been a place of inclusion for the woman artist, even if it often places her on the side of "nature" to a male "culture." Dodd appreciates as well the expanded opportunities women have been offered and attributes her teaching position to the effects of the Women's Movement. And in her dedicated role as organizer, professional artist, and teacher - from the fifties to the present- she has been an inspiring role model for women artists, just as she describes her own mother as her model of the independent woman.

Lois Dodd, always an individualist, has remained a unique and independent member of the art world for over forty years. Most comfortable in the realist and figurative circles of the sixties and seventies, she has not swerved from her vision but, like Mondrian, her art has developed within its own language towards a greater complexity. Her oeuvre combines the directness of American primitives with the avant-garde sophistication of an abstract realism born in the discourse of the fifties.

1. Hilton Kramer, "Remember the Tanager on 10th St.?" *New York Times*. March 1, 1969, p. 27. See also, Pat Mainardi, "Windowed Reflections," *Art News* 74 (Feb. 1975): 74. In January 1995, the author conducted a series of interviews with Lois Dodd. Unless otherwise indicated, primary information comes from these discussions.
2. Fairfield Porter, "Lois Dodd," *Art News* 56 (March 1957): 11.
3. Germano Celant, *Roma-New York, 1948-1964* (New York: Murray and Isabella Rayburn Foundation, 1993).
4. Nathan Rappaport, interview with James E. Young, February 22, 1986, cited in James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 168.
5. Mona Hadler, "Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America, 1945-59," *Art Journal* 53 (Winter 1994): 17.
6. Worthington Whittredge, *The Autobiography of Worthington Whittredge, 1820-1910*, edited by John I. H. Baur, *Brooklyn Museum Journal* (1942), p. 42, cited in Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture, American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 225.
- 7 Joellen Bard, "Tenth Street Days: An Interview with Charles Cajori and Lois Dodd," *Arts Magazine* 52 (Dec. 1977): 98-103.
- 8 Barbara Shiklar, interview with Lois Dodd, New York, October 10, 1988, p. 70, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.