

Lois Dodd Interview: January 2006
With Ellen Robinson at the artist's studio in New York

Ellen Robinson: When we were talking the other day, you mentioned a sort of awkwardness or a deliberate flat-footedness in relation to the rhubarb leaves painting [illustrated]. Can you talk about that?

Lois Dodd: With the rhubarb it was a matter of the sun shining on it, and it was so striking, really. I just thought, I'll sit here and paint this thing. It was very clear, having strange, distinct shapes. So that seemed like a good reason to work with it. And it was rhubarb, but un-rhubarb like in the end. It's a guess as to what it really is.

ER: What do you mean by clear shapes?

LD: Well for me, when I'm looking for something to paint I look and look until something seems clear or composed in a certain way. It strikes me that there's the thing I am going to use. Sometimes I see things like that, and then go back, but because the light has changed it's literally gone. It depends on the light and a lot of wandering around.

ER: Blair Pond is a subject you've come back to quite a bit.

LD: Yes, recently I walked over to see what the pond was doing and sure enough it's doing something a little different than what it's done before. And, it looks kind of interesting. I started late in the morning and just stayed all day and it changed, so that meant more than one painting. I did two, and as the sun moved around things changed with that chunk of ice. It had shadows and things, and at a point the sun was right there and the water was kind of blinding—the reflection. So you could spend forever just in one place, watching things change and working as fast as you can to get it down.

ER: So when you start painting you don't go back into it later, you lay down marks and keep going? Is that an evolved way of working?

LD: Yeah, that's pretty much it. Way back in the 50s I worked from my drawings done out of doors, and then made paintings from those drawings in the studio. I wasn't painting directly from what was in front of me. Later I started working directly. The only time now that I've gone back to working from drawings is with the nudes. I might put together figures in different poses from more than one drawing, and then invent some kind of background, which can be from other paintings or imagination. Occasionally I've done watercolors directly from the model, and there might be something useful there.

ER: Is that because the model is doing short poses?

LD: She's doing short poses, and she's in a surrounding of some kind, which I want to include. That's as interesting to me as the figure.

LD: So you wanted to know about mark making and quickness? I don't know what to say about that except that's the way my hand moves. What else were you thinking?

ER: I was interested in how you can do things quickly—spontaneously. Has this developed over time?

LD: It's intuitive, really, the way my hand moves. I'm drawing with the brush when I start. I paint thinly. The brush marks aren't particularly covered up—it's not smoothed out.

ER: And what about the different surfaces that you work on—masonite, plywood, and linen?

LD: I like masonite, and I like linen, but I don't use cotton canvas. Cotton has give to it, and it feels like it's giving way. I want something that's rigid, which the boards are. I like them to be right there, not stretching away as you make a mark. The linen has this quality too. It feels much more solid. It's crisper—it's not as stretchy. And the plywood comes into play when the masonite is not available.

ER: In a practical way?

LD: Yes, it's all practical. Sometimes you go into the lumberyard, and you find the masonite is warped. So, you then go and look at the plywood, and if that's better, I get plywood. The thing about the plywood is sometimes if they don't have a very sharp saw the edges cut rough. I like to take a lot of boards of different proportions out with me so when I'm looking at something I have what I need. That's one of the first big choices, what does it really fit on. I don't like to work all on the same size.

ER: And the linen ones you do in the studio? Are they related to the smaller ones?

LD: Generally. The only time it wasn't so was when I was working in the woods. I couldn't do little ones there. I was standing in my subject matter surrounded by it—couldn't back away from it and needed a canvas of a size that I felt I could walk into. But that's the only time I ever did that. Otherwise, they are from smaller paintings.

ER: And what about the places you paint – Blairstown, New York, Maine?

LD: I was only in Maine a few times in the winter, so basically they're all summer paintings, fall and summer. And Blairstown is usually just winter. Lots of the Water Gap, but I haven't been there in a while. I've kind of used it up. I think I've run out of steam on the Water Gap. But Blair Pond is still interesting. I see certain things in the summer and other things in the winter. Some of the ice paintings I did out at the Delaware seemed to be related to the quarry paintings that I did in Maine. There were these great big chunks, and I began to realize that I'm looking at the same kind of forms. It's someplace else, and it's made out of something else but it's these big chunks.

ER: Chunks?

LD: Well, the ice that got busted up and thrown to the side of the river was in big turquoise chunks. Gorgeous, but everything else was a white or dark brown. In the summer at the quarry, there were big chunks of granite that stonecutters had cut, piled-up and just left.

ER: Which river was it—the Gihon?

LD: It was the Delaware, at the Water Gap.

ER: I was reading the John Yau essay about your work. He talks about aspects of the windows and doors in a metaphysical way. Also, with the nudes, people read content into them, like nudism, which obviously isn't true. But, what about the more conceptual parts of your work?

LD: The metaphysical things about the window never occurred to me. I'm just looking at them and thinking—what a terrific formal composition. It's already composed, and all you have to do is decide exactly where it's going to be situated on the canvas. Then, just go ahead. So, as with a lot of my work, these paintings started small. Then I began to think about the size of the real window, and maybe I should make it like a real window. First, it was an attractive subject, and so I started. Then more things came into it, but not all the things that people have written about.

ER: What do you think about these interpretations? Do you disagree?

LD: No, it's wonderful really. I suppose if I thought about all that before I started, I wouldn't ever start.

ER: What about the houses and the buildings? They seem to reference an absence of people.

LD: Not to me. They were just either interestingly shaped houses, interesting colors—a couple were intense greens. I was amazed to see anyone paint their house that kind of a green. It demands that you pay some attention to it because of its color. So it wasn't really about nobody being there. In fact there probably were people there. With the windows, it came to be a kind of a fixation.

ER: What about the night paintings?

LD: Yeah right, that was another thing that happened. It's beautiful at night. Some nights the moon is so bright you're seeing things clearly. I wondered if I could paint outside at night. The first time I went out in the road, and it was so bright that you really could, you know. I continued all that summer. Sometimes I would take the work in to see it and then take it back out. Or, I would have a light in the window so I could see it. It was a matter of balancing the light so that you can see the panel without losing the darkness. Some I did in the woods.

ER: It's so dark in the woods.

LD: It was dark and just plain creepy—creepy! I had been painting in there during the day, so I knew the woods. It shouldn't have felt creepy, but it did. I don't mind standing in an open space at night, but not in the woods. So I was painting as fast as I could. It was like finger painting almost, because I couldn't really see anything I was doing. I would feel my way with the paint. But I always like those finger paintings of the woods.

ER: Can you tell me more about your practice? In some ways it's very seasonal.

LD: It's pretty good in Maine because there's not as much going on. So I get a little more painting done there because I'm pretty sporadic. But, Blairstown is good in the winter. One winter, I thought I would work from some of the Maine figure drawings here in the

city. I started, but it just didn't work. It didn't mean a damn thing. I got halfway through, I finished, but it just wasn't fun. It just wasn't exciting at all. It's so strange, painting what you paint and where you paint it.

ER: What gets you excited?

LD: It's not like I rush out there excited. I just go out to paint. Then in the middle of the process, if all goes well, it becomes exciting.