

Essay by Alison Ferris | Four Seasons in Maine: Lois Dodd's Small Plein-Air Paintings:
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Four Seasons in Maine: Lois Dodd's Small Plein-Air Paintings
by Alison Ferris, Curator

Lois Dodd's small plein-air paintings read like the diary entries of an accomplished writer. Dodd's paintings are quick, expertly executed studies of the everyday that, in this particular exhibition, focus on Maine's outdoors. Paintings of dappled mid-summer light and the shadows created by an apple tree, the symphony of color in a neighbor's garden at a particular moment on a particular day, of rock formations at a nearby quarry, and of the physicality of one particular flower blossom are, in part, formal exercises in the depiction of qualities of light, color, line, and form. But these are not purely analytical investigations of composition. Her visually nuanced descriptions of the Maine outdoors instead simplify the elements of nature in an effort to translate the reality of the everyday into something akin to poetry. Dodd's "poetry" is not flowery and effusive, but rather honed and plain-spoken. Furthermore, she does not identify herself with things of nature in order to extract expressive symbols from them; instead, she identifies with the composition of the painting itself. As a result her paintings display an idiosyncratic and personal approach to nature, an approach that is as measured and observant as it is spontaneous.

Dodd regularly portrays late spring and summer garden scenes in her paintings of Maine. Dodd's depictions of gardens show her affection for flowers but she does not treat them preciously. Indeed, she chooses to paint as subjects plants that are not particularly showy, such as the Crambe, a type of broccoli. It appears that Dodd was sitting low to the ground when she painted *Under the Crambe*. Here the color of the strong stalk of the plant blends in with the greens that describe the density of the background gardens, grasses, and trees so that all aspects of the composition are declared on the surface of the picture plane. The stalk is ornamented by the small, wispy, light and lacy flower petals that appear to explode in the daylight sky like a Fourth of July firework. *Arbor and White Plants* is a bright painting suggesting a mid-summer garden, with a broad ban of white paint that implies a truss of white flowers in full bloom, their form indicated by whitish-green vertical brush strokes as well as some horizontal dashes. Though Dodd furnishes absolutely no details to suggest what kind of plants they are, her dabs somehow make them convincing. An arbor is the armature for full leafy vines with unruly tendrils that expressively writhe in the air. The skeletal structure of the arbor can be seen in some places through the dense foliage but, at the top, the same lines of the arbor intersect with the disorderly vines to create an intricate but sturdy web. In the distance, through the arched arbor, an inviting, sloping field is apparent, while the artist's house and studio are rendered on the right. The straight lines and angles of the house create the most solid form in the painting and, in fact, seem to hold the whole composition in place. Nestled into the almost wild landscape, her secure home offers order and reprieve.

While the paintings of the gardens seek to describe the overall atmosphere of a particular day, there are other paintings in which she carefully examines a specific subject. *Black Iris, 2nd Bud* is one such work. Dodd captures an iris's sensual, even carnal, form supported by its thick, pulpy stem. The base of the flower juts out to the side at an awkward angle—because it is the second bud—before the bud compensated for this angle, straightened, and bloomed. It is also clear that the iris in this painting is equal in importance to the space it creates in relation to its flat background. In *Black Hollyhock*,

another painting where Dodd focuses on one blossom, the composition is structured almost like a cubist painting. The positive and negative spaces of this painting are delineated only by different shades of green, which fill the spaces between the lines of the hollyhock stems and combine with the large blocky leaves of the plants to create a flat pattern. One open, round, purplish-black flower catches a bit of direct light, differentiation itself in color and shape from the otherwise unified pattern.

Because Dodd is in Maine from the beginning of June until the end of October, paintings from the spring and summer dominate this exhibition. However, there are a number of paintings from occasional autumn and winter visits, too. The vantage points from which Dodd paints the landscapes in the fall and winter are generally a bit more removed from the subjects than those of the summer and spring. Her interest in *September Afternoon*, *October Barn & Trees Afternoon*, and *Dusk, Winter* seems to be how the combination of color and form can express the time of day, its unique light, and even the temperature. In *October Barn & Trees Afternoon* the blinding afternoon glare of early fall has been replaced by a distilled light that suggests that the gray winter sky will soon be settling in. The barn, in shadow, is a deep, vivid blue. A grove of trees is depicted as if their tops share a head of green leaves. Puffy clouds adorn the top of the canvas like a whipped cream topping. Orange-tan colored brush strokes invade the spaces in between, suggesting bushes and trees that have already changed color. The brush strokes that make up the field look as if long browned grass has been pushed back, repeatedly blown in one direction by strong winds. In the foreground is a cluster of milkweed whose pods have opened, displaying the white silk of their seeds before they take to the air. The details of the painting culminate in the palpable impression that it is a day crisp enough to wear a heavy sweater.

Dodd cites a number of artists as influencing her work, including the twentieth-century American modernists like Marsden Hartley, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Arthur Dove. But Dodd often appears to be in a kind of conversation in her work with the enormously influential late-nineteenth-century French painter Paul Cézanne. Clive Bell predicted his impact as early as 1914 when he wrote: “Cézanne discovered methods and forms which have revealed a vista of possibilities to the end of which no man can see; on the instrument that he invented thousands of artists yet unborn may play their own tunes.” Dodd, who has worked through the last half of the twentieth century, contributes her own distinct symphonies in paint to this particular history.

In this exhibition, Dodd’s series of paintings of an old stone quarry particularly exemplify her exchange with Cézanne. Here, she strives to create a balance between the abstract pattern of pure form and the natural scenery as it appears to us optically in *Quarry*, *Green Water*. She does not endeavor to create illusionistic space but instead to develop a visual coherence within one space, out of the colors of direct summer sunlight on the solid mass of the quarry’s rocks and the reflective surface of its water. To achieve this, Dodd employs a number of Cézanne’s strategies. She begins by creating a strong horizontal line across the center of the canvas where the rocks and water meet, which give the scene breadth. A cracked boulder on the water’s edge allows Dodd to paint a short but strong vertical black void representing the boulder’s hollow, the reflection of which continues on the water. This vertical space is echoed in the outlines of the rocks that tumble down to the water’s edge. Dodd’s use of horizontal and vertical lines and gestures together achieves the sensation of depth; simultaneously, the reflection of the rocks mirrored impressionistically on the water’s surface (where Dodd sparingly employs the colors red and yellow to create a vibrating light) emphasizes and focuses our eyes on

the surface of the painting. The intersection between the tumbling rocks themselves, in which she preserves the integrated surface of the rocks' patterns without clarifying their exact spatial location, also gives a nod to Cézanne. Clement Greenberg observes that Cézanne "was one of the first to worry consciously about how to pass from the contours of an object to what lay behind or next to it without violating either the integrity of the picture surface as a flat continuum or the represented three dimensionality of the object itself..." Quarry, Green Water is one in a series of paintings that we might understand in just this context, to be paying tribute to Cézanne.

Whereas in Quarry, Green Water Dodd, using paint, explicitly describes Cézanne's theories, *Burnt-Out House, Finntown Road* is a wonderful example of Dodd's ability to riff on these same ideas. The horizontal lines of the remaining clapboard house here are depicted in the right corner of the painting and anchor the composition. A black rectangle at the bottom left corner of the composition moors the base of a dramatic black diagonal that guides our eyes from the bottom left corner of the painting to the upper right. In contrast to the orderly horizontal lines of the clapboard, the black rubble juts out in lines every which way. The empty upper left corner of the painting is a solid, white void with tremendous presence, as if it, instead of the destructive fire, caused the house to collapse. Here the occupied space is no longer clearly differentiated from the unoccupied space, hence the hierarchy between what is absent and what is present is abolished.

Nineteenth-century American and European landscape painting often expressed a utopian longing for the reconciliation of nature and humankind that manifested itself in many different styles and theories of painting. Cézanne longed for the same reconciliation, which he expressed through a subtle balance of tonality, color, volume, and mass. Implicit in his paintings was a critical response to a world he saw as fractured, broken, and scarred by modernization, detachment, and by his era's reliance on reason alone. Bridging the emotional and intellectual, the sensual and the cognitive, Cézanne's works, art historian Linda Nochlin explains, "...exist in silent opposition to a degraded political sphere."

One might glean in Dodd's painting a sympathy for Cézanne's longings to appease what he saw as the breach between nature and his contemporary society. However, Dodd, in a seasoned twentieth-century manner, approaches the question in a way that is less romantic and angst-ridden than Cézanne's, as is evident in her choice to depict modest scenes and subject matters: she eschews grand vistas such as moody oceans, majestic mountains, and mysterious forests. Dodd proves that even these small, carefully constructed, quiet poetic paintings depicting scenes of gardens, fields, trees, quarries, country roads, and the occasional parking lot have potential to comment obliquely but implicitly on our contemporary culture. Her sophisticated spontaneity and an extraordinarily refined understanding of the elements of composition invite us to enter Dodd's paintings with ease. Once there, we discover the complexity of a composition that holds our interest and, in turn, invites us to slow down as Dodd has, to observe, absorb, and contemplate the moment in our surroundings. Her paintings calmly ask what would happen to our world if all of us every day did just that.

Notes:

1. Clive Bell. "The Debt to Cézanne," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 76.
2. Clement Greenberg. "Master Léger," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 110.
3. Linda Nochlin. "The Failure and Success of Cézanne," in *Nineteenth-Century Art: A Critical History*. Edited by Stephen F. Eisenman (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 338.