

Essay by Deborah Weisgall | Knowing a Place: 2003
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Knowing a Place
By Deborah Weisgall

Lois Dodd begins with portable squares and rectangles of masonite or wood. She paints on them the places where she has lived—the Maine coast, western New Jersey, Manhattan. For decades, she has painted summers in Maine, winter weekends in New Jersey near the Delaware Water Gap, and New York in between. She says that all her paintings are, fundamentally, landscapes, and all of them are close to home.

"There is something about knowing a place," she says. "Over time you keep changing, you see things differently. And the various places I love to paint change as well." In all seasons she takes her panels outdoors, so most of these paintings are quick, completed in one sitting. In New Jersey, she says, she waits for windless, sunny winter days when it is possible to work for several hours; in Maine she goes with friends to old granite quarries; she sits in her neighbor's garden; she sets up at the ferry landing in Rockland; she paints barns, from the inside and the outside. In Maine she also uses the barn beside her house for a studio.

These paintings record place, but they also record the act of translating place into paint—the artist's intervention. Her distinct and fluid brush strokes seem casual at first, but they are precisely and elegantly laid down. The paintings in this exhibition, some fifty of them, collected from the last ten years, hang like windows opening onto Dodd's thinking and into her heart.

Seeing through to things has been an enduring theme in her painting: what windows frame, how they shape, limit, focus, reflect or do not reflect, depending on whether they retain their glass panes, how they reject or welcome, distort, how they imply choice—to look or not to look. These windows, then, frame Dodd's views, actual and metaphorical.

House at Orr's Island (cat. no. x), painted on the beautiful, still innocent morning of September 11, 2001, shows a house in a golden world. One of its windows looks through to another window, and then through that out to the brilliant yellow light, intensifying the light and making it more than atmosphere, deepening it into emotion, the feeling of that day before the news. In some of the most recent works, such as View Over High Street (cat. no. x), painted in 2002, the edges of the panel imply the window out of which she sees the gray, snowy street.

View from the Barn When the Window Is Out (cat. no. x) shows her house from the window square of studio. That view is of her house, an upstairs window that reflects the sun-dappled barn and a triangle of blue sky. It could be a comment on life and work. The bedroom window, the studio window: looking back and forth, reflecting.

Dodd's painting is tied to experience. Her themes, the quarries, forests, gardens, endure over the years. "I sometimes feel that I am painting the same painting over and over again," she says. She paints the features of the countryside, the changing colors and shapes of the seasons, the Maine coast, the dramatic gap in the Appalachians where the Delaware River cuts through the mountains. She does not erase the scars of human

habitation; they are her landscape, too, and she returns again and again to the gashes of quarried rock, raucously colored cars and trucks, falling down houses.

Her quick paintings result from the slow understanding of places and her own place in them. She has studied colors-spring's acid greens, autumn's oranges, the whites and blues of winter, summer's blossoming-and shapes- masses of summer leaves, webs of winter branches, oblique winter shadows. Dodd has likened painting some of these landscapes to painting still lifes, but the light that moves and alters the composition is the sun.

All her ideas emerge first on these small panels. All of them are complete as they are, but some grow. Quarry at Sunset (cat. no. x), with its complicated patterns of light, rock walls, and water converging at angular, tumbled piles of hewn granite, expanded into a larger painting. Others jump media. Tree Shadow on Snow (cat. no. x) became a monoprint; a dance of branches shadowed and real, it depended on contrast rather than color.

Some of these works resist translation. Night Sailboat (cat. no. x), sloops in the harbor in Rockland, Maine, only eleven inches square, plays with spare elements: black water and sky, white boats, lights, stars, and silvery reflections. In Trucks and Puddles (cat. no. x), Dodd uses the grain of wood left unpainted to convey the hard surface of a paved dock punctuated by reflecting water and the bright metal rhythms of a green crane and a brilliant red tractor-trailer.

Comparing Trucks and Puddles with Trucks and Puddles 2 (cat. no. x), the same wharf painted on the same day, reveals how Dodd translates place into art. Working on masonite now and on a slightly larger panel, she has shifted the scene a bit to the right. The crane is gone, and paving is now paint. Perspective is flattened; those puddles, now a blue only slighter paler than the bay beyond, meander across their own plane, held against overflowing by painted outlines. The red truck's delicate details-its radiator grille, headlights, and rear view mirrors-have melted into brush strokes, as have the truck's arching chrome exhaust pipes, which have turned a bluish white. A pallet of cargo has become a slab of pink, and a ghostly white truck is parked behind it. The composition connects mercantile clutter with nature, and Dodd has sealed the deal with a great big gull, simple as a child's drawing, who has claimed a puddle for a bathtub. She has pushed to see how much suggestion each brush stroke can carry before becoming simply a brush stroke.

This tension organizes Dodd's painting; she adheres to representation while organizing towards abstraction. She distills what she sees into pattern and mood, into the simplest and most direct strokes of her brush. With pattern, she lifts depth into surface, both aesthetically and emotionally.

As surface, the paintings become intentionally ambivalent. In Tree Shadow on Snow (cat. no. x), the trunk of the tree at the top of the painting blooms gracefully and irrationally into six luminous shadows. Those blue lines touch a fallen limb casting an impossible shadow, lit from the opposite direction, that embraces the imaginary branches."I don't know what happened there," Lois Dodd smiles. But the squadron of oaks in Brown Tree Trunks and Snow (cat. no. x) shows another side to winter, its menacing loneliness; the trees, angled like legs, seem to stalk the viewer.

Rocks can take on fecund, organic shapes, or, when defined by delicate lines, they float insubstantial as clouds. In *View from the Barn When the Window Is Out* (cat. no. x), the slice of barn reflected in the house window is spattered with sunlight filtered through leaves. But that light is daubs of paint applied in rows. The barn is dappled with paint, in the same way that puddles become bands of black-rimmed blue. A tangle of dark lines spills diagonally across *Burnt-Out House, Finntown Road* (cat. no. x). They suggest calligraphy, until the jagged rectangle in the lower right resolves into clapboard and the lines into charred joists and rafters—an angular poem of destruction.

There is something else, too, that operates as part of this process of distillation. These paintings record the landscapes of Lois Dodd's life, the places she shares with friends and with family. In a mysterious way, they record those connections and friendships, those years; the paintings shimmer with a mysterious sense of occasion and with a kind of clear-eyed tenderness. In *Hackmatack from Leslie's Garden* (cat. no. x), flowers conjured from quick flicks and dots of paint capture summer's abundance and an abundant friendship; this garden, cultivated by the garden writer Leslie Land, links Lois Dodd's house to her friend's.

Dodd often paints with friends, too; for years she and a few friends in Maine have painted from a model in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon gone on to paint one of the old quarries in the peninsulas flanking the St. George River. She recalls that the night she painted *Night Sailboat* (cat. no. x), she was with friends in Rockland, Maine. While they painted, Chubby Checker was performing at a jazz festival across the harbor. His voice and energy twisted over the water and rippled into the painting, with its exuberant reflections of the summer night.

Lois Dodd, though, is not a romantic. She measures the chaos of a second growth forest, the decaying roof of an abandoned barn, not with nostalgia or regret, but for what they are now. She paints totally in the present. She does not look for prettiness, but for the confluence of form and color. She does not catch the fleeting moment, but measures what remains still, what is essential.

Lois Dodd's paintings are, like her, straightforward and direct, unpretentious and welcoming. That is how they begin. These works are like small poems composed with deceptively simple words. They resonate long after we have absorbed their sense.