

A Visit with Lois Dodd

— by Georgeanne Davis

An hour before visiting Lois Dodd at her summer home in Cushing, I call a friend in Tenants Harbor who, for more than 20 summers, modeled for a figure drawing group comprised of Dodd and fellow artists Charles Duback, Nancy Wissemann-Widrig and John Wissemann. "Quick," I said, "I'm about to meet Lois Dodd. What should I know about her?" My friend didn't hesitate. "She's just an amazing person. Painting is her life."

Dodd has no quarrel with this assessment by her longtime friend. "I'm prolific," she acknowledges, and, at age 81, with a career that spans more than 60 years, she has a huge body of work to draw from.

LOIS DODD continues on page 31



Lois Dodd

LOIS DODD continued from page 1



"Echinacea and Dragonfly," by Lois Dodd

Currently two Dodd shows are on exhibit in the area: "Lois Dodd: Directly Considered," at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, contains over 40 small works on a range of subject matter including nudes to night scenes, windows to woods. "Other Places," Dodd's current show at the Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, shows small works painted in Cushing, at her home in Blirstown, New Jersey, the Delaware Water Gap, and in Vermont. In addition, "Lois Dodd: Landscapes and Structures" just closed on May 30 at the Alexandre Gallery in New York.

Dodd was born in Montclair, New Jersey. "You hear about people age five who decide what to do with their life," she says, but she says, she wasn't one of those people. She describes herself as a quiet child who never wanted to call attention to herself, "not offering any information," and art classes were always her favorite part of school. Orphaned at an early age, when it came time for her to go on to college and she thought of art school,

"There was no one saying, 'Don't do it.'" There were good art classes in Montclair and when one of the teachers mentioned that Cooper Union in New York City was free, Dodd and another friend applied and both got in. There, she fell in with other students who would go on to found the Tanager Gallery, New York's first artist-run cooperative gallery, and also met her husband, sculptor Bill King. Together, the pair went to Italy, where King studied under the G.I. bill; when they returned to New York in 1950, Dodd says, "We were thinking, 'Now we're serious painters!'"

Sitting at the table in the sunroom of her tiny 1840s farmhouse, Dodd reminisces over tea. "If you can believe it, there were about three galleries in New York at the time. You could see works by Kline and deKooning, but they were in their 40s and 50s. We thought, 'Look how long it takes.'" So, along with King and several others, she was part of the Tanager Gallery, which opened on Fourth Street and lasted 10 years.

summers in Maine. King knew Bill Cummings, co-founder of the Skowhegan School, from a residency he'd attended there, so at first they rented cottages Cummings owned in Skowhegan. Dodd later shared a summer place with her fellow Cooper Union student and Tanager Gallery alum Alex Katz and his family. "I thought, 'Things are cheap in Maine, compared to Provincetown or Long Island,'" Dodd says, so she found a realtor who handled inexpensive properties and she bought the tiny Cushing farmhouse as a summer retreat. In 1969 the New York landlord from whom she'd rented for 10 years came to her to say he was selling the building. Dodd, who couldn't face moving, got together with two friends to buy the building — "the smartest thing I ever did," Dodd says. In addition to New York and Maine, she also has a getaway in Blirstown, New Jersey.

If there is one thing that categorizes Dodd's painting, it's the inability of critics to categorize her. Her work has been described as modernist, yet representational, and, as Dodd says, "I was always painting what I was looking at." Her first two painting teachers at Cooper Union were representational, and she thinks that perhaps the way an artist first learns to paint always remains with them. But her work is obviously influenced by what was going on around her during those early years. "I love Cubism, I must say," Dodd remarks, "I love all that painting at the beginning of the [20th] century — breaking rules, discovering new things. The fifties weren't as revolutionary."

Dodd sees herself as not fitting in, not part of a school. "In the end it's an advantage," she says, "if someone is putting together a show and you don't fit." Her shows are always made up of paintings from different periods.



Lois Dodd's painted room

"I'll never have a show that's red-hot off the press," Dodd says. "The notion of doing a painting to put in a show... I've never had to do that. I can't paint under pressure, so my shows have to come from what I've got... It's fun to see what goes with what."

Like another well-known painter associated with Maine, Neil Welliver, Dodd was able to sustain her artwork by teaching. "With

a teaching job there was no pressure to make art to sell," Dodd says. This doesn't mean that teaching was easy. Dodd experienced many years of insecurity as she taught basic design and basic painting at City and Queens Colleges as an adjunct professor, one who could never be certain she'd be hired back the next year. She still shows distress when she remembers how she was given a bad faculty review so that the college could justify letting her go. Eventually, she was hired as a tenure-track professor at Brooklyn College, retiring from there in 1992 after putting time in running the program for a year or two.

The day of our visit was cold and foggy and Dodd had no plans to work outside or in her studio in the barn just steps from her house. Since her return just days ago she'd been painting, as she has previously, the black iris that blooms in her yard. "The black iris is so brief and amazing-looking you have to pay it a little homage." Dodd doesn't have regular hours every day, neither in Maine nor in the city. Occasionally, she says, "if I get on a roll, for example, painting in the woods or windows and doors, it's very exciting and I'm driven by a goal." For the past three summers Dodd went into the woods across the road

from her house to paint. "Every time I'd see something else." Then, suddenly, it stopped. "I'd walk over. Nothing presented itself to me." But she always finds fresh inspiration around her. At times she's thought, "I'll have to sell this place. I've used up all the motifs." But she soon finds, "Nothing's ever the same.... The light's different, there are so many variations on a theme; there's no end to it." She says her painting of the scenes around her are "like reporting on events." While Dodd has traveled and painted, she says, "I do better work with things that I know. On trips, the works don't have the same impact."

Dodd has had more than 50 solo shows over the years, but in the early years, Dodd says, critics thought, "A woman with a kid? Go away. Stop bothering people. But you reach middle age and they realize you're not going away." Eventually, she says, "If you hang on long enough, they begin to look at it."

On Tuesday, June 24, Suzette McAvoy, former chief curator at the Farnsworth Museum, will present a lecture in conjunction with the Dodd exhibition at 7 p.m. at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art. The exhibit will remain on view through July 19.