

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Lois Dodd's Paintings of the Ephemeral

by [John Yau](#) on March 8, 2015



Lois Dodd, "Ice Sheet, Blair Pond" (2015), oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches (all images courtesy Alexandre Gallery)

In recent weeks, I have written about what I have defined as a grown-up painter, as opposed to what I called "the latest manifestation of a male adolescent painter, a clichéd archetype that gained traction in the Neo-Expressionist '80s, with the rise of Julian Schnabel, and has not been thrown over because lots of people still find this sort of chest thumping entertaining."

It takes confidence and courage to go your way in a situation where there is a lot of pressure to work a certain way, and on a certain scale. Lois Dodd is a painter who seems to have possessed these strengths since she first began exhibiting in her mid-20s, and has never wavered. Despite all the changes that have swooped through the art world over the past sixty years, she has

remained committed to painting the ordinary world around her, in the Lower East Side, where she has been a longtime resident, in Blairstown, New Jersey, and in rural Maine, where she lives in modest circumstances.



Lois Dodd, "Snow, Tree, Window" (2014), oil on masonite, 15 5/8 x 11 inches

I am reminded of a statement made by the wonderful Italian artist Faustus Melotti: "Once he has found his language, the artist finds himself free of the drudgery of the avant-garde." Although Dodd was a student at Cooper Union (1945-1948) and, in 1952, one of five founders of the Tanager Gallery, an artist-run cooperative, where she exhibited until 1962, she seems to never have gotten caught up in all the hoopla surrounding the avant-garde and notions of historical determinism. There is a stubbornness to Dodd that does not announce itself in the work, a determination to see the commonplace anew, and to quietly celebrate it. Although she has worked largely unheralded in the New York art world, she has influenced numerous generations of painters, including Catherine Murphy, Sylvia Plimack-Mangold and Josephine Halvorson. Now in her late 80s, she continues to paint at a high level. Born in Montclair, New Jersey in 1927, Dodd shares the commitment to the gritty ordinariness of the everyday with another native of that much misaligned state, the poet William Carlos Williams, who was interested in "a new art form [...] rooted in locality which should give it fruit." As he wrote in his epic poem, *Paterson*: nothing but the blank faces of the houses/and cylindrical trees [...]



Lois Dodd, “Sunlight on Wall” (2014), oil on masonite, 15 x 8 inches

There are thirty-four painting in her current exhibition, [Lois Dodd: Rent Panel Paintings](#) at Alexandre Gallery (February 26–April 4, 2015), all of which are done in oil on aluminum flashing measuring 5 by 7 inches or on large panels of Masonite averaging around 16 by 12 inches. Done in all the seasons, the paintings depict views through a window; a pond partially covered with ice; flowers; and two trees in a yard. Dodd’s subjects are so nondescript one cannot imagine an amateur photographer stopping to chronicle these views, and that is their magic. Dodd doesn’t elevate the nondescript, doesn’t try to make it more than it is, because what it is happens to be is good enough for her. One senses that this is also her philosophy of life.

As with all her recent shows, a number of the paintings are standouts. In these works, the merging of paint and image is both taut and improvisational, with an unexpected delicacy embodied by the connotative dabs and lines of thinly applied, viscous paint. In “Snow, Tree, Window” (2014), the droplets of condensation on the windowpane are every bit as important as

the bare tree and a corner of a roof outside. What comes through this and other scenes glimpsed through a window is an atmosphere of solitariness, a sense of isolation gracefully accepted.

In “Sunlight on Wall” (2014) and “Reflected Light on Brick Wall” (2014), two of the highlights of this terrific show, Dodd records the light cast by a window onto an outside wall. In both paintings, the artist has pared down the composition as far as you can imagine each of them could go without becoming an abstraction. In “Sunlight on Wall,” it is as if the reality of the situation is beginning to dissolve, but the artist tenaciously hangs on to what palpable shred of evidence remains to be documented in paint; an elongated patch of reflected yellow light.



Lois Dodd, "Reflected Light on Brick Wall – December" (2014), oil on masonite, 18 x 15 3/4 inches

In "Reflected Light on Brick Wall," a milky light is cast through a window onto a brick wall, with the edges of its myriad bricks recorded in shifts from pale gray to dusty pink. Austere, almost insubstantial caresses of paint evoke the wall and the reflection, imbuing the moment with seemingly incommensurable states of fragility and sturdiness. In this and other paradoxes, Dodd is able to tease out the lyrical from the unremarkable and even dull, quietly reminding us that every moment is precious.

[Lois Dodd: Rent Panel Paintings](#) continues at the Alexandre Gallery (41 East 57th Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through April 4.



The Poetic Grit of a
Landscape Painter and an
Outspoken Critic



Like American Haikus in Paint



The Struggle for Coherence