

Wednesday, August 24th, 2011

Interesting for No Good Reason: Lois Dodd in Maine

by Franklin Einspruch

Lois Dodd: Naked Ladies, Natural Disasters, and Puzzling Events, Both Real and Imagined at Caldbeck Gallery

July 20 – August 13, 2011

12 Elm Street

Rockland, Maine, 207-594-5935



Lois Dodd, *Liberty Painting in N.Y. Harbor*, 2002. Oil on panel, 16-3/4 x 12-7/8 inches.

Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

The name of Lois Dodd has come up a few times in recent conversations with artists I respect. I finally got to see some of her work in person at a solo exhibition at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, Maine. I was expecting the sort of painter's-painter painting in which the very brushstrokes inspire admiration. Instead I found a picture of the Statue of Liberty working at an easel *plein-aire*.

Liberty Painting in N.Y. Harbor (2002) is no technical marvel. The easel is bent so as not to go off the edge of the panel and it appears to be resting on the outline of Liberty Island. Lady Liberty has no mouth for some reason. One can make no sense of the hand that holds the palette. Yet there is something undeniably charming about it. Note the Twin Towers in the background, then note the date. This little painting is a terse summary of artistic defiance in the face of disaster. We are going to go on creating, it says. We can put the towers back as easily as daubing four gray lines.

Critics often lament that visual artists have not responded adequately to 9/11. Upon seeing this painting, I think Dodd delivered the appropriate message in full. Anything further would be unnecessary elaboration. The mauve shadow on the underside of the easel and the panoply of olive greens that make up Lady Liberty show that she has plenty of skill to get the job done. But there's a more urgent matter at work. She has something on her mind that needs expression, and she isn't going to let a couple of technical hiccups get in the way. That accomplished, she moves on to find the next subject. The quirkiness is the incidental product of a person being herself.

Consequently, her oddities are usually persuasive. The artist participates in a drawing group in Maine in which the owner of the property models outside, among the woodpile and gardening tools. Later Dodd paints from her drawings, creating works such as *Nude and Bridge* (2010). The figure is a violet silhouette modeled, slightly, with flesh tones. The face consists solely of a nose. She is posing with, of all things, a bicycle. The background is made of improbable greens. But it all works in its way. Dodd evokes Bay Area Figuration in miniature, with the human form reduced to bold sweeps of the brush and other playful re-imaginings of things seen.



Lois Dodd, *Nude & Bridge*, 2010. Oil on panel, 11-1/4 x 10-1/2 inches. Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

The selection on view at Caldbeck dates to 1968 at the earliest, with a wide sampling of years between then and 2010. You can see her spending decades asking herself what around her is interesting, and answering differently each time. One day in 1993, it was *Elliott's Place*, a tiny white house perched on the side of a hill. As architecture it is unremarkable, but Dodd found art there. The hillside curves downward just as the power line curves upward. Elms pick up the light gleaming off the facade, tapping out a rhythm of pale gray verticals across the rectangle. Greenish umber fills the foreground and the sky, unifying the scene with a forest shadow. On another day in 1976, it was two squirt guns and a swimming mask, arranged into a striking composition of blue and orange. Once in 1985, it was downed autumn foliage on a bright October afternoon.

One common thread is the paint handling, thin and brushy with a minimum of modification. Over the decades, her subject has varied from still lifes to burning houses to whimsical scenarios involving nudes, but her method operates within narrow confines. She'll impose strong designs, but abstraction for its own sake is out. She'll paint the figure, but she's not interested in the traditional realism that figure painting entails. She'll paint flowers, but she avoids botanical exactitude. She'll invent scenes, but there will be no illustration.

Furthermore, the subject has to be interesting for no good reason. If there's a reason, she questions whether it's a good subject. The paint has to do nothing except exist as paint. If it becomes polished or fussy, she questions whether she's on the right track. There is nothing wrong with the concerns that she has excluded, except that they impinge upon a simple problem of determining what is presenting itself to her attention and then painting it. Dodd's take on the one-shot style proceeds from a position of purity – a temperamental purity, not an ideological one. Although they didn't say it in so many words, this is the reason good artists had me seek her out.

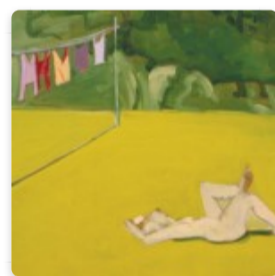


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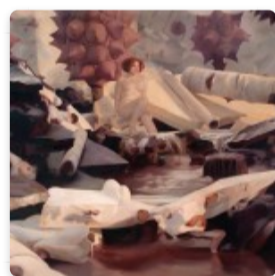
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Michelle · 6 years ago

Wonderfully written and great insights into Dodd's work. Thanks!

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Elaine Mari · 6 years ago

Thank you for this great review. It makes me happy to read about this art and this painter. This part is especially good to read "the subject has to be interesting for no good reason. If there's a reason, she questions whether it's a good subject." And this part, "This little painting is a terse summary of artistic defiance in the face of disaster. We are going to go on creating, it says. We can put the towers back as easily as daubing four gray lines."

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Cynthia D Hyde · 6 years ago

Thank you, Franklin, for such a beautiful review! It's been a very long time since I've read a review of Lois's work, written by someone who is not already very familiar with and also devoted to her and her work - what an extraordinary treat! You've put into words what I just have never quite been able to explain to myself or to someone else. I'll share this with our gallery friends and collectors - they will love it too. All the best, Cynthia Hyde, Caldbeck Gallery

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