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## HiLo Art: Lois Dodd; “Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine”: Melanie Essex; “Above us only sky”: Sam Cady; “Here and There” at Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland



by Alan Crichton

Thursday, July 18, 2019 6:57 AM

Beneath every word written is the truth that art does not need writing, but writing does need art. With both, discovery comes through looking and doing, and there is no other way.

Art is sensual and intellectual, not made in any vacuum; histories and traditions are part of its humanity. But there is its spirit that simply exists where no words can touch. That may be what every viewer feels in passing by with even the shortest look.

That spirit is what I hope to be true to in writing about art.

I sat recently and looked at the paintings of Lois Dodd, Melanie Essex, and Sam Cady. The 32 paintings in Dodd’s exhibit, “Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine,” span the years 1966–2014, nearly 50 enormously productive years, still in progress, that reveal a consistent, deep integrity of vision and an inspiring well of freshness in their making.

Dodd has taught for many years, and each painting could be seen as a lesson of independence. Whether teacher, mentor, or friend, her persistent vision is a great lesson to be who you are, and do what only you can do.

Dodd has long been acknowledged as one of America’s finest painters. Fortunately for Mainer, her home here and the landscapes nearby are among her most consistent motifs and variations. Her vision, unfailingly spontaneous and direct, informs us all, not only about the way life should be, but about the way life is here.

What makes her work so distinct? Her painting is unfailingly optimistic. Both confident and subversively modest, she seems to approach every day’s work as a new day of discovery. She has an uncanny ability to know when to start and when to stop.

Describing each work seems unnecessary. A few pointers as the interested viewer walks through are all



“Trees, Rock Garden 2011,” by Lois Dodd, oil on panel



*Alan Crichton, a cofounder of Waterfall Arts, is an artist from Liberty. His column will run every other week in The Free Press through the summer.*





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that is needed. Though a painting may have been made years ago, look for the freshness in every brushstroke, because each is about right now. Look for the intimacy, love of place, touch, color, the practical joy of painting. Look for translucent strokes on bright grounds, loose accuracy, the depths and highlights seen and put directly down, no going back, abstract but rooted. Look for the pleasant paradoxes where humor takes center stage with two frozen shirts upside down on a winter clothesline, or where a spatial confusion becomes a resolution and then happily hangs between both.

One great lesson that Lois Dodd teaches is to let the landscape make the painting. Trust, vision, confidence, presence = done! Let it be. Do another. The surest path to mastery.

Melanie Essex focuses our attention on the vast sky above an extremely low horizon that anchors her images to the earth. We are so accustomed to the horizon at eye level, halving our visual world and focusing our attentions downward to the road, the desk, the hellish device, that we very often do not notice the beautiful world of space above us.

Essex makes sure we do look up. With horizons weighted to the painting's base, either a fine, clean line of sharply contrasting color, or the unloading of a wide brush in one careful stroke turning from flat to edge, reveals the final flash of the dying sun or a clean waterline below the undulating flow of trees along a ridge. Masterful making, painting to painting.

Essex may like Mark Rothko, whose color fields with no objective focus evoked spiritual and emotional states beyond words. Her glowing "Late Light" with its many interpenetrating adjacent reds, almost wholly abstract, brings the Rothko experience to bear. Her work does, however, describe very possible skies.

These are paintings of extreme moments — turbulent dawns, dusks, sunsets, and the quiet blue-greys just after. Beautiful loose and brushy strokes over deeply imagined rich colors build back and forth from foreground to distance. Like Dodd's, they cut their own clear path between abstraction and representation.

The paintings expand upon the John Lennon song "Imagine" — no heaven or hell, above us only sky. There is just us here, humans as we are, our essential quality being our togetherness. Essex invites us to consider the sky as a metaphor for that togetherness. If we look, we might see a common reality pushed to its extremes, linking past, present and, most importantly, future. What if these skies were more ominous than beautiful? Somehow these paintings call us from a deep sleep to awakening and action.

Sam Cady's amazingly constructed and realized works are half painting, half sculpture, each a positive image on the "ground" of a blank gallery wall. Beautifully drawn, sculpted, and stretched, the trompe l'oeil forms are then painted just as beautifully with landscapes, bridges, coal trains, a sailboat keeled in the wind and approaching shore. In this show, he brings together scenes edited from his recent travels and his love of Maine with carefully made smaller conventionally shaped rectangular works showing landscapes across the Americas and even a mountain gorilla.

Walk through these exhibits, sit down with them, and look.

*The show runs through July 27 at Caldbeck Gallery, 12 Elm Street, Rockland.*



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