

LOIS DODD WINDOWS AND REFLECTIONS

List Gallery Swarthmore College





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November 3—December 15, 2016



FRAMING SPACE FOR REFLECTION: THE ART OF LOIS DODD

Andrea Packard
List Gallery Director

It has been a pleasure to curate *Lois Dodd: Windows and Reflections*, an exhibition that focuses on a subject that has fascinated Dodd for nearly fifty years. Her images of windows (as well as natural apertures such as ponds and intersecting tree limbs) call attention to the way we variously frame and focus our attention. For centuries, artists have constructed gridded windows as a method for understanding perspective and portrayed them in ways that enhance the pictorial illusion of light and space. As motifs, windows insert pictures within pictures, providing contrasting evidence for viewers to analyze and reconcile. Serious students of art quickly become familiar with iconic paintings such as Johannes Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* and Matisse's many views of his studio windows. Undaunted by potential comparison with such masterworks or the ubiquity of the window as a motif, Dodd has composed more than 35 large-scale paintings in which a window image plays a central role. In addition, she has painted numerous smaller works such as *Upstairs Window* (1968), one of her first attempts to portray a window so that the image aligns approximately with the perimeter of her panel. Although such paintings and others featured at Swarthmore College represent just a fraction of Dodd's output, they demonstrate her experimental approach. Whereas the interplay of black and white rectangles in *Barn Window with White Square* (1991) refer wittily to Mondrian's abstract grids, other paintings, such as *Window, Deserted House, Blairstown* (1979), prompt somber inquiry. Still other compositions, such as *Apple Trees and Shed* (2007), zoom out, offering broader views and expressing an exuberant delight in nature's beauty. After viewing the range and power of such paintings, it becomes impossible to think about windows, be they actual or metaphysical, without considering the mastery of Lois Dodd.

Dodd's nearly 70-year career as an artist has been distinguished by the excellence and authenticity of her vision, her refusal to pander to art trends, her generosity as a colleague and teacher, and her gift for distilling the world's cacophony of color, texture, and detail into theorems for which she provides elegant visual proofs. Considered a "painter's painter," she elaborates the storied traditions of observational painting fostered by masters such as Camille Corot, reinvented by Paul Cezanne, and infused with a new sense of place and pragmatism by American figurative painters such as Edward Hopper and Rackstraw Downes. Like Downes, Dodd interprets cityscapes, interiors, and rural landscapes with particular empathy for run-down and marginalized spaces. Most often, Dodd paints views from the window of her apartment on East 2nd street in lower Manhattan, landscapes surrounding her weekend home at the Delaware Water Gap, and the gardens and woods surrounding her summer home on the St. George River in Maine. Her subjects seem simple at first: a shed surrounded by flowering trees, a pine forest tangled with broken limbs, or a falling window sash with trees

OPPOSITE

Night Sky Loft
1973
Oil on linen
66 x 54 inches

reflected in its skewed panes of glass. But upon closer study, we become aware of how Dodd arranges shapes in space with a pitch-perfect sense of harmony. Eliminating extraneous colors and details, Dodd enhances our perception of objects as geometric elements or essences. Though her works are often unpopulated, her images of gardens, barns, and interiors reveal human presence, desire, and toil. She revels in and pays homage to the passage of time. Whether she portrays a ladder leaning against a house in disrepair or the shape of a window obscured by a sheet blowing on a clothesline, Dodd captures ephemeral moments as enduring archetypes.



Natural Order
1978
Oil on linen
50 x 38 inches

OPPOSITE

Blue Sky Window
1979
Oil on linen
56 x 36 inches

Seeing a window or a doorway usually prompts curiosity. We imagine that by approaching and looking closely we will be rewarded, perhaps by a pleasing vista, but as often as not, Dodd's paintings of windows attract and then redirect our attention, often defying expectations. In *Blue Sky Window* (1979), a life-sized window fills the picture frame. We look out and upward, but instead of clouds, planes, treetops, or soaring birds, we encounter only the indefinite blue of atmosphere. Instead of narrative detail, Dodd emphasizes the alluring ambiguity of light and space. The thin blue washes representing each pane of glass suggest the tabula rasa each lightly toned canvas offers to a painter's imagination. Returning from reverie to the closely observed details of the window, one newly appreciates the rhythmic play of light and shadow upon the mullion bars, the composition's elegant geometric structure, and the shallow interior space defined by the window frame. Because Dodd does not depict floor space within the illusion of the picture, we realize that the space where we stand is not described so much as implied. Our viewpoint is established by Dodd's use of perspective, but we cannot enter the narrow confines of the composition. As a result, Dodd encourages us not only to question our perspective but to consider experience through multiple modes of perception—to gaze outward but also observe closely and reflect inwardly.

Similarly, many of Dodd's landscapes explore natural forms that provide unexpected apertures and disrupt habitual ways of seeing. Works such as *Winter Sunset*, *Blair Pond* (2008) and *Ice Sheet*, *Blair Pond* (2005) encourage us to consider how water can be reflective, transparent, or opaque. In many of Dodd's landscapes, irregularly shaped bodies of water or the openings formed by intersecting tree limbs provide natural frames that focus our gaze and recall the forms of our built environment. For example, the intersecting tree limbs in *Natural Order* (1978) recall Dodd's ongoing fascination with the openings between ladder rungs and the geometric forms suggested by mullions, fallen sashes, and skewed panes of glass. In contrast to the clarity and symmetry of many of her window paintings, the visual cacophony of this forest scene suggests entropy more than order. Nevertheless, one feels the organizing spirit of the painter as she analyzes and relates each part to the whole and highlights patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Portraying both windows and nature without hyperbole or sentimentality, Dodd provides refreshing frankness and insight.

Andrea Packard has directed the List Gallery at Swarthmore College, since 1995. She has curated more than 120 exhibitions featuring nationally known and emerging artists and published more than thirty essays about diverse artists including Alison Saar, Buzz Spector, José Bedia, William Daley, and Rackstraw Downes. *The Fabric of Nature*, a survey exhibition and catalog of her mixed-media works, will be presented by Walton Arts Center, Fayetteville Arkansas in early 2017.



LOIS DODD: PAINTING

It's becoming more and more obvious: Lois Dodd is one of the best painters of past half-century or so. That it's taken so long for many of us to notice this has something to do with one of her work's great virtues: its apparent ordinariness. These are paintings that do not impress by means of heroic or spectacular scale, eye-catching stylistic idiosyncrasy, urgent or topical subject matter, or radical avant-garde gestures. She seems never to have felt the need to ride the wave of the future or to claim any earth-shaking importance for what she does. There's not much to talk about in these quiet studies of unremarkable places and things. If someone asks what's so special about them, it might be hard to say more than simply, "Just look and see."

What the paintings are asking me to look at are things that constantly change and things that change very slowly, so slowly we only notice in retrospect. As artifacts, paintings tend to change slowly enough to give the illusion of permanence, and for most of its history, Western painting's task was to convey enduring truths, but by the time Impressionism came along a century and a half ago, painters had become interested in how their art could record aspects of reality that are always in flux: light and atmosphere. In the early twentieth century, many painters lost interest in this art of attention to what's mutable. Henri Matisse, for instance, considered that an Impressionist painting of a landscape "represents only one moment of its existence" while his goal was "to obtain a greater stability."¹

Dodd, it seems to me, wants to see—and wants the viewers of her paintings to see—both the evanescent and the relatively stable aspects of things at the same time. Dodd has spoken about how, like many artists of her generation (she was born in 1927) she was influenced by the previous generation of Abstract Expressionists, such as Willem de Kooning—by the freedom with which they handled paint, the spontaneity of their mark-making; but then the Pop artists of her own generation, whose images were rendered with such crispness and clarity, gave her second thoughts, made her say to herself, "Clean up your act a little bit."²

This is another aspect of the dialectic between the transitory and the stable in art—not at the level of subject matter, but of style: A painterly style like that of Abstract Expressionism evokes the energy of movement and transition, while a linear style such as the Pop artists cultivated can make a kind of insistent emblem or persistent icon of what it presents. Dodd typically situates her own style at the point where painterliness and linearity, change and stillness, find a kind of equilibrium—most obviously, perhaps, where this equipoise is underlined by compositional stability and symmetry, as in *Blue Sky Window* or *Window, Deserted House, Blairstown*, both from 1979. But if you think about it for a minute, you'll realize there's a funny paradox in that: equilibrium *is* a form of stability, so Dodd's equilibrium between change and stillness really comes down on the side of stillness after all. But it's a stillness that has a lot of hidden movement packed within it.



Winter Sunset, Blair Pond
2008
Oil on linen
48 x 52 inches

Maybe stubbornness would be a better word for it. It's a word, come to think of it, that's often been associated with Dodd's work, and that she herself has taken to heart: "Be stubborn and follow your own voice," she once advised the photographer Ellen Wallenstein.³ The surfaces of her paintings may seem plain, even stolid, but all the intensity of life is there in Dodd's undemonstrative yet always active brushwork. They are slow images made quickly—reticent images with a lot to say to those who give time to them. Dodd will often organize the surface with a very evident geometrical structure—the grid of muntin bars of a window, for instance—but it never seems to impose a constraint. There are boundaries between things, but the boundaries are elastic.

"Dodd doesn't elevate the nondescript, doesn't try to make it more than it is," writes my friend the poet and art critic John Yau.⁴ He's right, at least most of the time. There are exceptions to this stubborn factuality in Dodd's oeuvre—the ravishing reflection of sunlight in the water in *Winter Sunset, Blair Pond*, 2008, its blazing intensity evoking the nature mysticism of Charles Burchfield—but they are rare. Perhaps these one-offs just testify to something that Yau doesn't quite emphasize sufficiently: how nearly impossible it is to make the nondescript stay that way when you turn it into art. Art conspires to locate in everything it touches just the tiniest spark, at least, of the transcendent. We should be more conscious that Dodd's ability to stick with the ordinariness of ordinary things so stubbornly is almost miraculous. And yes, I've chosen that last word with intent—wanting you to notice that I've allowed for a little paradox, the strange fact that denying the transcendent in painting can be something like a transcendent achievement.

OPPOSITE

Night Window—Red Curtain
1972
Oil on linen
66 x 36 inches

Since style and subject are at one in Dodd's art—that equilibrium or stubbornness I was talking about—her seemingly straightforward paintings, which may appear to be of things that mean nothing in particular, to be what the old academies called “paintings without a subject,” are in fact disquisitions on their own aesthetic. When they ask us—or to be perfectly honest, they tell us, and in no uncertain terms—to “just look and see,” that means that we are supposed to see the painting, and to see it as a made thing that has much in common with a number of other kinds of made things in the world, some of which may be displayed in the painting. But we should also see that the painting is different, because it was made through a highly self-conscious process of twofold perception: looking at the thing that's being painted and looking at the painting, looking again at the thing being painted and then looking again at the painting, and so on. The painting tells us that when we look at it, what we should see is first of all a painting, and not a window, or a tree, or a stairway, or whatever—that we should look as attentively at the painting as she once looked at the window or the tree or the stairway, and that if we look, we will eventually see. It goes on to imply that doing this will teach us how to look more attentively and more appreciatively at windows and trees and stairways and all the other simple and unremarkable things that surround us all the time—we can learn to see them. I suspect that's one reason why Dodd is particularly drawn to painting windows—because she has to sum up this doubleness peculiar to representational painting by painting at one and the same time the view through the window and the material fact of the window as a pane of glass that is transparent but also reflective. This is a different sense of how a painting is like a window than the one often attributed to the painters of the Renaissance (when windows were less commonly glazed in any case) since in Dodd's case the window is not only something we are supposed to see through.⁵ Commenting on a seemingly unrelated issue, her use of thin paint, Dodd once told an interviewer, “Putting on a second coat on my painting would ruin it. It would shut out the light.”⁶ That's yet another way a painting is like a window. There is something to be seen through the painting, and it's not just the window motif or a landscape refracted by panes of glass. Dodd's paintings focus our attention on the source of all visibility: light itself. But of course by painting the material facts before her eyes, and doing so in a way that allows light to emerge as a fact in its own right, she is really just painting the painting. Look and see.

Barry Schwabsky is art critic for *The Nation* and co-editor of international reviews for *Artforum* and currently Visiting Professor of Art and Art History at Hunter College, The City University of New York. His most recent books are *The Perpetual Guest: Art in the Unfinished Present* (Verso, 2016) and a collection of poetry, *Trembling Hand Equilibrium* (Black Square Editions, 2015).

Footnotes

1. Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter,” *Matisse on Art*, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 39.
2. Jennifer Samet, “Beer with a Painter: Lois Dodd,” *Hyperallergic* (March 28, 2015), <http://hyperallergic.com/194330/beer-with-a-painter-lois-dodd/>.
3. Ellen Wallenstein, “Respecting My Elders,” *aCurator Magazine*, <http://acurator.com/blog/2013/11/ellen-wallenstein-respecting-my-elders.html>.
4. John Yau, “Lois Dodd's Paintings of the Ephemeral,” *Hyperallergic* (March 8, 2015), <http://hyperallergic.com/188416/lois-dodds-paintings-of-the-ephemeral/>.
5. For more on Leon Battista Alberti and the metaphor of the window, see Joseph Masheck, “‘Alberti's “Window”: Art-Historiographic Notes on an Anti-Modernist Misprision,” *Modernities: Art-Matters in the Present* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1993), pp. 15-32.
6. Larry Groff, “Conversation with Lois Dodd,” *Painting Perceptions* (March 5, 2015), <http://paintingperceptions.com/conversation-with-lois-dodd/>.









Door Staircase, 1981, oil on linen, 60 x 40 inches





Falling Window Sash, 1992, oil on linen, 60 x 38 inches



Natural Order, 1978, oil on linen, 50 x 38 inches











BIOGRAPHY

Lois Dodd was born in 1927 and raised in Montclair, New Jersey. After three years of study at Cooper Union, she became part of a circle of artists that continued to champion the practice of painting from observation during the heyday of abstract expressionism. In 1952, she was one of the five founding artists of Tanager Gallery, one of the first artist cooperative galleries in New York City. By 1953, she began regularly summering in Maine, which also attracted a number of distinguished painters that included Rackstraw Downes, Yvonne Jacquette, Alex Katz, and Neil Welliver. Dodd bought her own property in Cushing, Maine in 1963 and she has continued to find endless sources of inspiration in the house, garden, surrounding woods, and nearby rock quarries.

Dodd's art has been the subject of more than 50 one-person exhibitions, including a retrospective exhibition organized in 2012 by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City. The exhibition travelled to the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Maine, in 2013. Other distinguished institutions have exhibited her work, including The Hudson River Museum, the Noyes Museum of Art, the University of Maine Museum of Art, Tucson Museum of Art, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Albright Knox Art Gallery, Queens Museum of Art, and more. Dodd has taught extensively over the years, including at the Vermont Studio Center, Brooklyn College (1971–1992), and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

An elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Academy of Design, her many awards include the Benjamin West Clinedinst Medal and Artists' Fellowship from the National Academy, the Augustus St. Gaudens Distinguished Alumni Award from Cooper Union, an honorary degree from Old Lyme Academy, the Speicher, Betts and Symons Purchase Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Longview Foundation Purchase Award, and grants from the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the Italian government. Her work is held in major museum and corporate collections, including Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Dartmouth College Art Museum, Farnsworth Art Museum, National Academy of Design, Wadsworth Atheneum, Whitney Museum Print Collection, Chase Manhattan Bank of North America, Metropolitan Life Insurance, and R.J. Reynolds Industries. She is represented by Alexandre Gallery, New York City.

OPPOSITE

Lois Dodd, Cushing, Maine, 2015
Photo courtesy of
Alexandre Gallery, New York

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Cover
Barn Window with White Square,
1991, oil on linen, 38 x 38 inches

Inside cover
Steamed Window (detail), 1980,
oil on linen, 36 x 28 inches

Back cover
VT Barn, 1990, oil on panel,
12 x 14 inches

All images ©Lois Dodd, courtesy of
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Since 1991, The List Gallery,
Swarthmore College has mounted
exhibitions of both established artists
and emerging talents. For more
information, please visit:
swarthmore.edu/list-gallery.

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