

Lois Dodd's Flashings

by Faye Hirsch

One winter in 1990, when Lois Dodd was teaching at the Vermont Studio School, she noticed a student painting on a small aluminum panel. Inquiring about it, she was told that it was a “flashing,” a common construction material purchased at any hardware store. Flashings are used in roofing, often fitted beneath shingles to protect from leaks, in particular at the junctures of chimneys, skylights or pipes. Dodd, who had been painting *en plein air* since the mid 1960s, was always seeking ways to facilitate her habit. She immediately added the portable aluminum flashings, usually 5 x 7 in., to her narrow range of preferred painting supports: easel-sized Masonite panels cut in various dimensions or (for her larger-sized works) stretched linen with relatively little give. Ever since, for nearly 30 years, Dodd has frequently produced what she herself calls her Flashings. For daytime excursions the prepared plates can be carried in her pocket, attached to a Masonite support, and worked upon rapidly on lap or easel, always in oil, using small brushes. Speaking to the artist Mary Vernon about the Flashings, Dodd said, “Time is limited; weather and temperature are going to change. You’re impelled to keep moving by circumstance, which is better than guilt in the studio. Outside you are looking, watching. You see wonderful things and things happen. You are an observer of nature and everything else.”ⁱ More than any other of her works, the Flashings are suited to a temporal unfolding of the artist’s observations, suiting her desire to work quickly. In one of them, we see her standing in a doorway, paintbrush in hand, as if ready to do battle at the threshold of her studio. That the industrious artist is but a shadow might be read as a metaphor for the more mutable and

insubstantial circumstances that condition her work and that make the Flashings so ideal a tool in her *modus operandi*.

Whether created from life or based on drawings, the Flashings are usually produced in one sitting. For night scenes, the subject of many of them, Dodd sketches on tiny pads out of doors, going directly to her studio in the morning to make paintings based on the drawings, which might include color notations, or “even notes for how warm or cool it was.” In recent years, as she has grown less mobile, the 92-year-old Dodd finds herself working ever more frequently from drawings created earlier, sometimes long before; such is the case in a spate of recent nudes based on studies executed in a life drawing group that met for years in Maine during the summers, near her home in coastal Cushing. To prepare her panels, as she explains, “I sand them very thoroughly and clean them off with alcohol. It appears as if there is nothing on them. Then I gesso them, or sometimes I just sand them. Some of the night things I just sand to leave the silver.” Their subjects are classic Dodd: surprising phenomena in night skies; singular flowers or other botanicals isolated against colored grounds; insects; her house and barn; an occasional landscape. These are matters near at hand, yet in effect, the Flashings carry implications beyond their evidentiary function, arguing for the power of sight to reveal untold layers of feeling.

In fact, her littlest paintings are at once Dodd’s most distilled and visionary works. This may seem paradoxical, yet the sheer drama of many of them invites an outsize response. The Flashings occupy a special place in her oeuvre—at a remove from the “plain-spoken” quality that critics so often see in the larger paintings. Even more than elsewhere, in her Flashings Dodd eschews extraneous detail, focusing on shape or pattern and transforming local color into approximations that overtake mere description. In this, the term “flashing” might be taken as

more than a mere descriptor, implying a revelatory glimpse, an insight, perhaps a turning inward toward imagination and fantasy. Dodd might protest this characterization; when asked about a meaning beyond the obvious, she is likely to respond with some version of “I really saw this!” What Dodd paints is always indexed to something in the world—an actual natural event extracted from the flux of time and weather. The sometimes outlandish cloud formations in her night scenes record actual occurrences that likely dissipated within hours or minutes of being seen, as in the sweeping net of *Cloud Formation #1* or the billowing acrobats of *Route 80 at Night*. Penumbra that seem to radiate from the full moon, as recorded in two paintings made in September 2015, are constituted, after all, by ephemeral moisture or gas in the atmosphere; they will pass as the night wanes. The fringed silhouettes or linear syncopation of darkened trees offer little by way of anchoring the wild skies behind or above, instead enhancing the otherworldly quality of these, the most fantastical of Dodd’s Flashings.

Tantamount to the success of the Flashings is their efficiency. Often insisting that she is but a mediocre figure painter, Dodd shows herself to be more concerned with structure than flesh, reducing bodies to single swipes of light and shade, abstracting them into a geometry that lies flat on the picture plane. The rather bizarre scenes of a naked woman climbing in and out of a box (yes, it was really *seen*) has its strangeness mitigated by the logic of composition; the body, made of quick strokes, is at one with inanimate hard angles. The triangles of elbow, legs and shadow in *Nude Seated on Grass with Yellow Hat* echo tree branches rising in a flattening, bifurcated background; while the Marsden Hartley-esque *Nude Back with Fence* is flatly modeled in orange stripes that lock it into the verticals of the surrounding uprights.

The Flashings generally feature a singular subject conceived with little fuss: a spiderweb in the lawn created by means of an irregular shape, a few lines and dots that indicate the blades

of grass poking through, and a slightly yellower or bluer shade. The intense focus of each painting invariably involves a deconstruction and reconstruction of the organic, as living things are taken apart and reconstituted as light and color: fruiting apple tree branches are mere dots of green and white; the triangular lobes of a flying insect flicker purple against a pink ground—just paint, after all. The hallucinatory quality of some of the Flashings, however, arises not so much from this deconstructive and abbreviating tendency as from the artist's toying with color and scale. Subjects appear gigantic within the tiny confines of the plate. The most delicate dandelion seed head rises like a big magic wand in one painting, glowing purple on gray, while an apparitional *Sea Holly Blossom* forms an exuberant bluish-purple silhouette within a pink ambience. In *Smooth Hawksbeard—Sea*, a bright yellow flower stretching nearly the length of the plate dwarfs the generalized landscape beyond; the brushy execution of ground and sky seems to express a permeating floral energy. While she rarely drifts too far from the local color of the things she observes, Dodd may enhance or tweak it, and she makes clearly fanciful choices that have less to do with observation than with the expressive demands of her subject. In one recent painting of Queen Anne's Lace, for example, the stem and branches of the flower are nearly the same dun color as the ground, so that the tiny blossoms at the tips create a subtle fireworks. In another, the weed's profile view dimly lights a dark ground. There is little or no green in either picture. Elsewhere, as in two pale pink hollyhock blossoms and a hot-pink zinnia rising in a clear bottle, Dodd presumably adheres to the colors she sees, yet the flowers register as somewhat uncanny in the shock of subtle or brilliant chroma.

In general, Dodd remains immune to markers of an era; with the exception of a recent handful of Flashings that pit the Statue of Liberty against Donald Trump, it is generally impossible to assign them temporal specificity. (And perhaps it is a sign of just how unsettling

these times are that they have penetrated the work's usual imperturbability.) For the most part, Dodd eschews trends and fashion, the *now*; unlike many artists, including her ever stylish contemporary, Alex Katz, she avoids photographic and media-generated images while remaining faithful to representation. Though quick and concrete, her *Flashings* offer respite from an accelerated and increasingly ungraspable world, in which the certitude of nature feels increasingly threatened. Perhaps it is this imminent environmental loss, in part, that gives these works their aching beauty; Dodd tells me there are fewer butterflies in her yard than in the past. Still, somewhat fragile yet in complete command of her craft, the artist pursues her keen ability to connect eye to brush; the will to paint remains strong, as expressed in the shadow painting. In writing about a "late style" in music and theater, Edward Said observed, "Late style is *in*, but oddly *apart from*, the present."ⁱⁱ In their great number, the *Flashings* speak of the artist's quotidian industry and drive; laid end-to-end in this exhibition, they stand as a measure of time passing, the minute-by-minute unfolding of the world. The fact that they are so unsentimental, untouched by nostalgia or melancholy, gives them just enough distance, evidence not only of what is seen but of the intellect that shapes them. Dodd works only infrequently on large paintings. Yet together the *Flashings* speak of a monumental undertaking, an ongoing observation of the present in myriad instances, that only a practiced master can refine.

ⁱ Lois Dodd and Mary Vernon, *Conversation 5*, Pollock Gallery, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, 2007, unpaginated. Quotes about the *Flashings* are taken from this interview.

ⁱⁱ Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, New York, Pantheon Books, p. 24.