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Lois Dodd "Burning House, Night, with Fireman," 2007, on view at Alexandre Gallery

Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York

Home is Where the Art Is

Three distinct shows—Charles Burchfield, Lois Dodd and James Castle—reveal that humble methods can be best

BY JOHN GOODRICH

Quite possibly, your very first effort at painting involved an image of a house, and it came out looking crudely geometric and as frontal as a face. This childhood attempt may not have been very naturalistic, but it was probably pleasingly forthright—and perhaps even a bit iconic in its simplicity.

And as every grown-up artist discovers, greater sophistication does not always guarantee a more compelling house. Happily, the artists in three solo shows currently in town are wise to this fact. Their work—all of it prominently featuring houses—shows how keen observations and intense temperaments are sometimes best expressed through humble methods. Though very different in approach and background, Charles Burchfield (1893-1967), Lois Dodd (b. 1927) and James Castle (1900-77) all fashion strange and memorable visions of buildings with elemental means.

The nearly three-dozen watercolors in DC Moore's *Charles Burchfield: 1920: The Architecture of Painting* present the artist at a pivotal point in his career. After graduating from the Cleveland School of Art, the artist produced landscapes reminiscent of Fauvism in their intense colors and brisk, reductive rendering. By the years covered in the exhibition (1918-1920), though, his work had turned somber in both color and subject matter, depicting stark rows of houses and industrial scenes in a palette dominated by silvery lights and darks. In these the quirky luminosity of his earlier work has gone underground; buildings, streets and peculiarly stunted trees now breathe with a quiet, animistic intensity. When three homes, arrayed in a row like jars on a shelf, stare back at us from "February Thaw" (1920), their vacant windows resemble deep-set eyes.

Despite their subdued hues, these are fully colorful paintings, capturing concrete sensations of light and air. In "House and the Snow" (c. 1920), the snow covering the shadowed side of a roof takes on an absorbent medium-violet hue, perfectly pitched against the expansive, yellow-tinged sky and heavily modeled snowdrifts in front. With the same vivacious restraint, Burchfield fixes upon the other strange moments: the headlight of a locomotive approaching in a distant hill's tunnel; giant kilns huddling in a factory yard like teepees; a lone cabin, tiny in the distance, bisected by a foreground branch. Again and again there appears the motif of smoke winding extravagantly above the procession of buildings.

In later years, as he secured renown as an American Scene painter, Burchfield turned to more realistically detailed scenes of industrial and rural America, and then finally to the flamboyantly stylized foliage and skies of his late period. *The Architecture of Painting*, which will travel to the Columbus Museum of Art and the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, NY, catches the artist at a telling crossroads, when somber subjects tease us with glimpses of vibrant interior lives.

Over the decades, Lois Dodd has gained much acclaim for paintings of landscapes, gardens and interiors that combine a cool technique of simplified planes with warmly offbeat observations. Her six large canvases currently on view at Alexandre Gallery reveal a startlingly different subject: a house ablaze. A statement by the artist modestly reveals that the structure was in fact deliberately burned to the ground by the fireman of Cushing, Maine to make room for a new structure. Her paintings tell their own visual story, however, fully conveying the fierceness of the event.

Ms. Dodd's probing curiosity has always manifested itself pictorially, in the observed paradoxes of nature. These paintings are no exception: one finds it in the way a forest background turns into a uniform wall of deep khaki-green, inflected by a pattern of squiggles, or the manner in which a building's angling foundation traps a triangle of ground against the canvas' corner. But above the crisp containments of hue in these paintings' lower portions—where the building is still intact—the images erupt in high-contrast, billowing notes of fire (pure oranges and yellows) and smoke (black, deep violet, greenish-blue, brown-green.) Here gesture prevails over geometry, and yellow-packed windows palpably convey a fireball contained—momentarily—by the building's thin shell. In "Burning House, Night, with Fireman" (2007), the house has been reduced almost to skeletal darks. Its backlit grid holds the center amidst oranges tumbling upward, acid-pink smoke drifting down, and the diagonal ray of water from a fireman's hose. Beyond, the forest abides as it might on any evening, as a self-contained, clumpy silhouette — a foil for a scene at once fearsome and beautiful.

James Castle's drawings have gained increasing attention over the last decade or so, and for good reason. *Vision and Touch* marks Knoedler's fourth exhibition devoted to the artist, with more than 30 small drawings—all undated and untitled, and on view for the first time—revealing his unique mixture of robustness and delicacy, awkwardness and resolve.

Born deaf, Castle never learned to speak, read, sign or write. He preoccupied himself on his family's Idaho farm by endlessly drawing views of its buildings and interiors. His unique medium consisted of stove soot mixed with his own saliva, applied with surprising refinement to scraps of paper and cardboard. Some of his drawings consist of cryptic charts of numbers or letters, which he understood to be potent symbols even though unable to read. He bound many of these images into small booklets that he stashed in various places about the farm.

While these circumstances make him the quintessential outsider artist, his drawings are far more than merely charming or quirky. They have an eloquent rigor far beyond their touching attention to perspective and proportions. Despite their blunt and smeared renderings, they show an extraordinary gift for subtleties of tone and the pictorial weighting of elements.

While some of these scenes have fantastic elements, like gargantuan trees or totemic towers, the drawings revel in real sensations of illumination. In one interior, a door—barely off-white—cracks open to reveal a nearby house, its pure paper-white exterior punctuated by the abrupt, inky dark of a window shutter; the sequence of tones wondrously sums up contrasting worlds of interior/exterior light. In another, the footboard of a bed casts the faintest shadow on a wall, while a sturdy row of coats hanging above paces out the pale, lengthening bedspread. My own favorite, produced on the notched and creased surface of an unfolded carton, depicts a room whose walls are covered floor-to-ceiling with a busy, checkered wallpaper. At the center a door has swung wide to reveal a diverse landscape of trees, fence, and pathway. As with Bonnard's drawings, the rendering seems at once idiosyncratic and supremely focused – a vibrant, knowing coalescence of a bewildering number of observations.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Castle's art is its lack of recognizable antecedents.

While Burchfield and Dodd's paintings have clear roots in modernism, Castle's work represents, in a sense, a culture of one. But the work of all three moves us, finally, for the same reason: for the chance of watching artists domesticate their environments through remarkable images.