



Lois Dodd: Green Door and Bed, 1994, oil on linen, 44 by 50 inches. All photos this article courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York.

# Editing Nature

*In her paintings of the New England landscape, on view in a current traveling retrospective, Lois Dodd meticulously pares the seen world down to its underlying geometries.*

**BY STEPHEN WESTFALL**

Lois Dodd's generation of American modernist painters, those who came of age in the early 1950s, are historically a quiet bunch. Including both the so-called second-generation Abstract Expressionists and pre-Pop representational painters like Dodd, they have tended to fall between the cracks of avant-garde postwar American art movements. Unvisited by stardom and the attendant financial rewards, many of these artists teach or have taught. (Dodd recently retired from Brooklyn College after anchoring its art department for two decades and developing its graduate program in painting.) The work of these painters is often highly regarded by their peers, and to come upon their work in a gallery setting is to be reminded that painting, for most of us, is a more individuated encounter with the self, the observed world and one's *métier* than can adequately be accounted for by a vanguardist or successivist historical model. The current traveling exhibition "Lois Dodd: 25 Years of Painting," which has landed at the Trenton City Museum in New Jersey [to Jan. 5], makes a convincing case for the overall excellence of an artist who has built her oeuvre on historical continuity rather than rupture.

Over the years, Dodd's paintings have sorted themselves into several categories of subject matter: windows, doorways and stairwells of houses and barns; river scenes, quarries and woods. This is a New England landscape that, as Dodd presents it, haunts the psychological borderline between nature and culture. Her take on the world that surrounds her is austere poetry; realist reportage yields to the clarifications of an emergent geometry. You can observe pencil-line grids underlying thin washes of



Delaware in Flood, 1983, oil on linen, 56 by 78 inches.

paint in a number of her canvases. In paintings such as *Maine Woods (Back of Canvas)*, 1976, and *Woods with Falling Tree*, 1977, the knotted clutter of the forest, under her careful editorship, disentangles itself into rhythmic structures. She matches the crystalline, simplifying tendencies of her composition with a refreshingly direct touch with paint. Each dab and wash seems directed toward comprising a shape; every color is chosen to establish a relational, tonal light with its neighbor. The gestural flourish is muted in favor of overall design.

Dodd's exclusion of the human figure from her paintings (in this she resembles her near-contemporary Jane Freilicher) feels less like a limitation than an ironic discipline. In fact, of course, the human presence is everywhere in her work. The architectural apertures she paints are both settings and surrogates for an immanent body. Paintings such as *Stairwell*, *Cushing* (1972) and *Green Door and Bed* (1994) not only frame possible dramas of figural interaction but also propose the house itself as a kind of body, a physical envelope for ventricles and chambers that hold deposits of memory and undergo decay and forgetfulness. Where the stairs are drawn so tightly toward the picture plane that they barely allow passage for one figure or article of furniture, as in *Door, Staircase* (1981), I imagine the space as a throat that passes each form along as a single word or name. Dodd doesn't anthropomorphize the house in the manner of Burchfield or even Hopper. She doesn't have to. The anthropomorphism latent in the subject *house* simply expands to fill the void left in the absence of the depicted human figure.

Traces of human intervention permeate Dodd's outdoor settings as well, from laundry on the line to the eponymous set of stretcher bars perched on the horizon's sloping crest in *Maine Woods (Back of Canvas)*. And, where there is no residual human artifact in the scene, her own pictorial abstraction tends to cultivate and prune the landscape the way a bonsai gardener might, decreeing intervals of emptiness and event. A painting such as *Delaware in Flood* (1983) suggests something Burchfield might have painted after practicing Zen for a long time. The vibratory calligraphy denoting ripples and highlights in the water is interspersed with still spaces, where the light umber flatness of the muddy water quietly infuses the picture plane with the river's hidden power.

One of the major pleasures of looking at Dodd's paintings is the satisfaction of viewing this well-traveled corner of the world through contemporary eyes. If applied to urban scenes, the optical clarity of her compositions and the freshness of her light might seem hopelessly utopian. But in the countryside Dodd's style reinvigorates whatever she shows us. Hopper had already given us rural shadows (the better to ground his monumentalism), and Avery had pushed past any kind of naturalism to a dancing, abstract style that brought Matisse, Picasso and Klee fully into an American idiom. Dodd has from the outset sought to reconcile the abstracting tendencies of modernist geometries with a pragmatic distrust of expressive distortion. Her effort to "get things right" involves balancing her subject's compositional and color claims; she attends equally to the arrangement of her forms and the transparency of her rendering process.

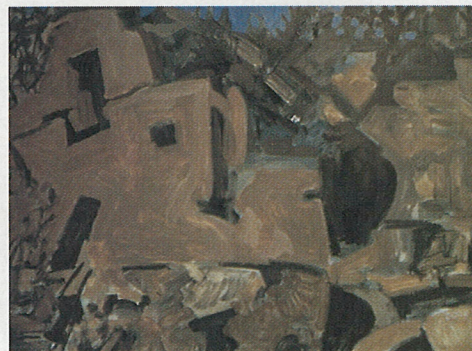
**Dodd's exclusion of the human figure from her paintings feels less like a limitation than an ironic discipline.**

I suppose most figurative painters find this balance themselves, often on their way to overt literary or symbolic content. I find Dodd's reticence in these subsequent matters delightful. "Reticence" doesn't mean suppression. It just means that Dodd leaves her semantic territory more open than most painters, so that viewers may find their own metaphors. Many of the paintings she exhibited at Fischbach Gallery last spring (a show timed to coincide with her retrospective's stop at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey) were night scenes, and their divergence from Dodd's previous work was striking. Hung as a group were the four largest canvases in the show: three paintings of a road wrapping around a dark blue dome of a hill, shown washed in the scallop of a car's headlights; and a painting of a moonlit buttermilk sky seen above and behind stylized pine silhouettes. The playfulness of these paintings suggests a more grounded Avery, and their air of enchantment was, at Fischbach, a presentiment of summer.

The small paintings of a quarry at night, which were shown in the gallery's other room, are much more somber, though not without their own magic. The exposed rock and rubble are the least ingratiating surfaces Dodd has chosen to paint, and their nocturnal illumination—from yard lights and the night sky itself, imparts an otherworldly cast. Of



**Woods with Falling Tree, 1977, oil on linen, 60 by 46 inches.**



**Night Quarry, 1994, oil on linen, 15 by 20 inches.**

**Quarry at Night, 1994, oil on board, 10 by 11 inches.**



**Quarry at Night, 1994, oil on board, 15 by 15 1/2 inches.**

course, they are simply quarries, but they beckon like the threshold of the underworld. Walking through the Cézanne retrospective in Philadelphia, I was struck by *Bibémus Quarry* (1895), one of several paintings he made at the title site, and I thought how suited the quarry was to Cézanne's mineral patience as a painter. A quarry is a fine subject for the observer who wants to see what lies under things. And just as Dodd's architecture can be read as a "body double," so can the pink rock of *Bibémus*, with its undulating horizon cresting high in the picture plane like the contours of a reclining nude. Dodd's modernism is rooted in Cézanne, of course, and homage is folded into her quarry paintings as another thread of content. But she is never preoccupied with emulation or historical debt. The open flatness of her shapes, the exposed geometry and broadly tonal palette all cast her as a painter of her own time.

Dodd's style is perhaps less ironically streamlined and radically elegant than that of her good friend Alex Katz (with whom, in 1954, she and Jean Cohen rented a Maine summer house), but the two artists often do, in their rendering, share a certain monumental geometric shorthand. Her lack of interest in urban settings may entail the sacrifice of a broader contemporary audience, but Dodd is widely admired by other artists: the appellation "painter's painter" suits her perfectly. Her small show in the back room at Fischbach a couple of years ago, which featured studies of a house and woods in winter light, was the stuff of painters' conversations for months. Time is on the side of such artists, and it will be especially friendly to Dodd's fresh look and essentialist poetic. □

*"Lois Dodd: 25 Years of Painting" was organized by Suzette Lane McAvoy of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine. It opened at the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, N.J. (Feb. 11-May 12), then went on to the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland Me. (May 19-July 7). It is currently at the Trenton City Museum, N.J. (Oct. 12, 1996-Jan. 5, 1997).*

Author: Stephen Westfull is an artist and critic living in New York.



Road and Hillside in Headlights, 1992, oil on linen, 36 by 50 inches.

Moon Shadows, 1992, oil on linen, 36 by 50 inches.

