

Calm Uncertainties

by David Cohen

Imagine, please, a serene, sunlit room in a private museum hidden in backwoods somewhere in New England. Oblivious of received wisdom, the curator has placed together three seemingly disparate objects: a landscape by Lois Dodd, an abstract painting by Agnes Martin and a Shaker bench.

Like Shaker furniture, Dodd's plainspoken but idiosyncratic painting is at once tough and elastic. It has an unpretentious inventiveness about it that strikes the present writer, an immigrant, as distinctly American. Another homegrown comparison comes to mind: the music of Aaron Copland, with its raw cheerfulness, its exposed chords. Even when Dodd is clearly looking abroad--at Cézanne's bathers, say--she continues to deliver in a Yankee twang.

Like Agnes Martin, Dodd represents the transcendental through plainness. If Dodd had to be described in just three words, they might be: Economy without shortcuts. Her painting states unembellished truths. The frankness and sincerity of her empiricism results in deadpan images whose very blandness inspires enigma. Ironically, therefore, her very factuality comes across as poetic. Unlike the forced incongruities of Surrealism, however, Dodd's metaphysical edge is a by-product of a refusal to compromise between fidelity of observation and a search for convincing structure.

Dodd's style reveals an unusual overlap of allegiances: towards modernism and realism. There is the geometry and flatness we associate with late Cézanne, Cubism and Matisse, but there is equally an almost naïve determination to record things as they seem that recalls Americans like Edward Hopper, Ralston Crawford, even--in some of her more fastidious canvases of the 1970s—Andrew Wyeth.

More than in any other phase in her career, Dodd's recent series of nudes in the landscape is energized by oddity. Witness the at once relaxed and tortuous pose, for instance, of "Tennis, Anyone" (1999). This painting is a modern day pastoral in the tradition of Puvis and Matisse. It depicts a woman lolling around as the washing dries. The strangeness of the figure arises from pictorial compression, whereas the convincing sense of being at ease comes from the artist's degree of empathy and depth of observation. Dodd's nudes are at once idealised and credible, abstract and true to bodily experience, modular and characterful. (In this last respect they recall the sculptures of Joel Shapiro.) Awkwardness, in her case, might be said to arise from the collision of competing ambitions: to capture essence and to be inclusive.

John Ashbery has noted Dodd's fondness for "the contrast between man-made geometrical shapes and natural messiness." In her treatment of the body, however, Dodd seems more intent on using geometry to convey contingency than to oppose it. Her often boxy figures seem to arrive at their improbable shape from a sense of being "blocked in" to the landscape; the painting fixes them in their tentative search for space. On the other hand, geometry does operate counterintuitively in Dodd's elaborate shadow play: *Two Nudes and Laundry* (1998), for instance, orchestrates shadow into a flattening series of triangles running in fugal opposition to the volumetric suggestiveness of flesh.

Although temperamentally incapable of mannerism, Dodd is more than merely accepting of awkwardness. She embraces it, welcoming the affinity, for instance, with Cézanne's "nice and clumsy" bathers.* Pressed as to why she should value clumsiness in Cézanne, Dodd explains: "It's not slick in any way. He is not so adept as to become a bore."

The enigmatic quality in much of Lois Dodd's work, which also marks a point of affinity with Cézanne, comes down to a cohabitation of opposites: oddity and evenness. Her strangeness does not induce unease, nor is her awkwardness accompanied by angst. Without feeling bottled up, feeling on the contrary at ease with her world and accepting of its idiosyncracies, her painting is blessed by a kind of anti-expressionism. Typically, the painter-poet Fairfield Porter got it right (and early) with the observation, upon reviewing her third show at the Tanager Gallery in 1957, that "the uncertainty of her painting is not restless, but calm."

The Nudes in the Landscape series brings together two distinct strands in Lois Dodd's distinguished half-century as an artist: drawing as an expression of curiosity about the figure, and painting as a response to landscape, in particular the landscape of Maine, with its intense, clarifying summer light. The inclusion of figures in the landscape represents a departure for Dodd. She remains best known as a painter of landscapes which are depopulated but contain subtle evidence of human presence, such as deserted houses, or disused quarries. The female figures, depicted at work or leisure, are as much an extension of, as a departure from, her previous level of concern with human environment. The series was first exhibited at the Caldbeck Gallery, Rockland, Maine, under the humorous title, "Women at Work".

Lois Dodd was born in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1927, an *annus mirabilis* for American painterly realism as John Yau has observed: Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz and Paul Resika were born the same year. She studied at Cooper Union, where, naturally, life drawing was obligatory. "We were using colored chalk covering the whole paper and then working back into it with line. The colored chalk that you would put down would give it a kind of volume accidentally which was nice." This "loose" teaching method contrasted with the instructor, Tully Filmus's own academic style. "I

remember seeing his work one time at the Whitney on Eighth Street, and he was very, very representational, fairly tight. It's interesting that he had us doing this free stuff."

When she was a student at Cooper, in the 1940s, the abstract expressionists she would come greatly to admire were hitting their stride: "De Kooning and Guston, all of them, were so exciting and just around the corner." But Dodd did not become aware of the New York School until she went abroad. In 1949 she took her honeymoon in Italy with the sculptor William King, who was on a Fulbright there. Together, they saw their first exhibition of Jackson Pollock in Milan. While Dodd was a student at Cooper, the house gods there were Cézanne and Picasso, and she would never abandon landscape or the figure as the core of her activity. But she belongs to a generation "lost" between free, open, gestural abstraction and modernist figuration. "Lost" only to find in that very ambivalence their own identity.

Later, in 1964, Dodd was an assiduous member of a group of artists, brought together by Mercedes Matter, who met to draw from the figure. Matter was the founder of the New York Studio School; her own work straddled the divide between abstraction and figuration. She nonetheless insisted on the role of life drawing in the education of the artist. Her drawing group gathered at the Studio School, which started life in 1964 in a large loft on the corner of Broadway and Bleecker; the group continued at other places, including Dodd's own studio in the East Village. Members included Charles Cajori, Sideo Fromboluti, Diana Kurz, Gabriel Laderman, Philip Pearlstein, Nora Speyer and Bill White. The models were usually students, and in what remains a distinctive tradition at the Studio School, Matter would place the models within elaborate set-ups, with props and still life arrangements making the scene formally and iconographically more stimulating.

The group fizzled out after a couple of years, but drawing in company from a model remained a feature of Dodd's art life thereafter. In Maine, in the 1980s, such a group formed in the home of Charles and Daphne Duback but when the hosts wanted the models to hold a long pose, which didn't interest Dodd, the group broke up. One of the models, Sandy, volunteered her own garden as a drawing venue, along with her services. The artists who took up her offer, Dodd, Cicely Aikman, John Wissemann and Nancy Wissemann-Widrig, later joined by Phyllis Janto and Deborah Winship, continue to draw there to this day. All the images in this exhibition were sketched in Sandy's garden or worked from drawings back in the artist's (Maine and New York) painting studios. The compositions of two or more figures comprise multiple views of the same sitter.

"What's nice about Sandy's place," Dodd says, "is that there's a wood pile here, a laundry line there, flower beds in this corner, a couple of beautiful big trees, the dog and plenty of interesting things. That's when I said, 'Why don't you do a bit of gardening or sit on the wood pile?'" The tableaux vivants of Mercedes Matter came to life in Maine.

It is this preference for activity over stasis that separates Dodd from the traditional figure painter. An instructive comparison can be made between Dodd's treatment of the figure in nature and her friend and fellow Mainer, Neil Welliver's. Like Welliver, Dodd delights in strong light dappling flesh, as in "Legs Up Against Tree" (2002) and "Striding Nude with Tree" (2002). But where Welliver will insist on a figure-ground relationship to enforce the striking individuality and sexuality of his sitter, Dodd is happy to allow the intruding light to break forms down, to encourage ambiguity as to where limbs end and background starts, to have her faceless model melt into the surroundings.

The Nudes in the Landscape series is a significant departure for Dodd in terms of the relationship between painting and drawing. It was in Maine that Dodd discovered the experience of painting outdoors, of responding directly to landscape. In the Summer of 1954 she began to share a place in Lincolnton, Maine with Alex Katz and his first wife Jean Cohen. (Later, when Lois and Katz's second wife, Ada, had children, Dodd moved to Cushing, where she still summers, leaving Lincolnton to the Katz's.)

Cohen, Katz, and Dodd's former husband William King had all studied at Skowhegan, the summer art school founded by their friend and patron Bill Cummings. (Today, Dodd is a governor of Skowhegan.) Plein air painting played a vital role at that time in the school's curriculum. Katz has compared the "blast" of first painting that way to "feeling lust for the first time." Dodd had felt inhibited about painting out of doors in New York, preferring--in the traditional way--to sketch outdoors and then use the resulting drawings at the easel back in the studio. But she was inspired by Katz's example and began to paint outdoors in Maine. As she told Joe Giordano, "The whole process was much more exciting than agonizing for days over every paint stroke, which was the way I had been working before. Here was this thing where you really had to put it down fast because night was gonna come or something was gonna happen weather-wise. That's great incentive." **

From then until recently, painting outdoors was essential to her modus operandi. In the sessions at Sandy's, where the model takes short poses, she confined herself to works on paper, reserving oil painting for the landscape. But then the Summer of 1998 "was so unbearably hot that I didn't want to go standing outside so I began to look at the drawings and think 'Oh well, maybe I will make a few paintings from these,' and then I just kept on going. Its been about five years."

The results are the blessing of true artistic maturity. They are studio paintings in mundane fact alone, for they retain the lessons of decades of painting in the open, and make profound use of twenty years of drawing the same model. They have all the spontaneity and freshness of quick, intuitive responses to things seen and spaces sensed. In Dodd's often humorous work, observation is as much of human character as surface appearance (mere verisimilitude is not the measure of her realism). The paintings also take the kinds of liberties with form that are traditionally associated with distance from observation, although the marvelously free and varied drawings made in Sandy's garden frustrate this last idea, remote as they are from convention or inhibition. Whether it is the act of drawing or painting, indoors or out, or just the originality of Lois Dodd's vision that is to be thanked, these figures in landscape represent the high point so far of a career distinguished by its embrace of the ambivalence between vital presence and transcendent value.