

PETER RUDOLPH NH CORRIDOR PROJECT ARTLORDS FIRED UP LOIS DODD

ART NEW ENGLAND

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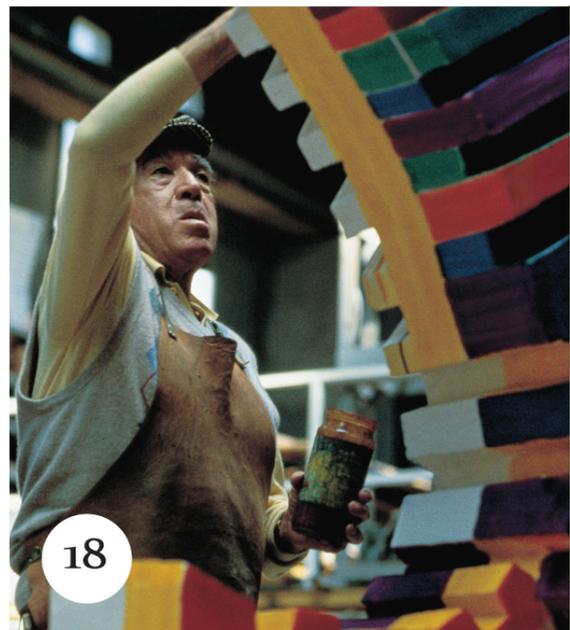
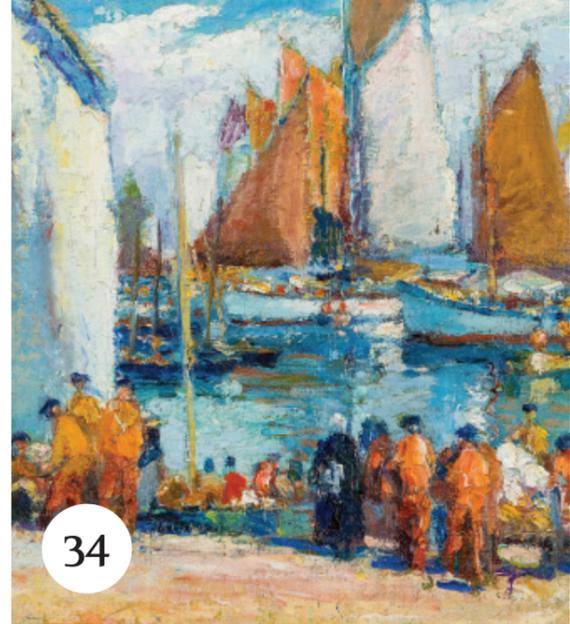
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ON THE COVER: *Honoring Honar* is a collaborative mural project between members of the ArtLords, Tape Art, Brattleboro Museum & Art Center and community partners. These temporary murals were on view August 13–28, 2022, throughout downtown Brattleboro, Vermont. Photo: Kelly Fletcher/BMAC. See page 30.



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CORRECTION: On page 11, in the FlashPoints section of the September/October issue, Chesterwood's interim director Margaret Cherin was mistakenly referred to as Margaret Chin.

CYNTHIA CLOSE

Lois Dodd: *Natural Order*

"Doctors and lawyers have a 'practice,' artists have a life." —Lois Dodd

The quiet, intimate paintings of New Jersey born modernist painter Lois Dodd belie the feisty, sharp wit of the artist who made them. The introductory comment occurred during an online discussion between Dodd and Vermont artist Eric Aho in conjunction with the 2020 exhibition *Figuration Never Died: New York Painterly Painting 1950–1970* at Vermont's Brattleboro Museum. The 95-year-old Dodd briefly bristled when asked about her "practice," but gave each questioner her undivided attention during the Q&A.

Dodd's usually calm, thoughtful demeanor was on display the last time we spoke in early June of this year following the opening of her solo show, *Natural Order*, at the Hall Art Foundation in rural Reading, VT. Though I caught her at a busy moment, Dodd was preparing for her annual summer transition to Maine, she generously gave me her time to discuss her life, her work, and immediate plans. Our far ranging, relaxed conversation revealed Dodd's deep ties to New England, from teaching at the Vermont Studio Center and at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture where she is a Governor Emerita, and now, to the "little house in a cove" off the Maine coast that she purchased in 1964.

The scale of the room-sized galleries and the 'off the beaten track' location of the Hall Art Foundation are well-suited for the career-spanning display of this artist who claims, "I can't invent anything. I need to observe from life." That sense of place, which Dodd manages to capture in oil on canvas with a haiku-like essence, is difficult to communicate digitally. The subtle feel of the artist's touch, the quiet whisper of a breath of air as it passes by a piece of laundry on a line, emanates from each carefully constructed composition. Although I had previously viewed much of this work online, the physicality of the paint surprised me as I meandered through the galleries. Approximately 50 paintings are arranged as a seasonal round, rather than chronologically, encouraging an experience of moving through time. The brisk fall breeze that fractures the



Above: *Morning Snowfield*, 1983, oil on linen, 40 x 50" (101.5 x 127 cm). Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Lois Dodd.



Left: *Natural Order*, 1978, oil on linen, 50 x 38" (127 x 96.5 cm). Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Lois Dodd.

composition of *Natural Order* (1978) into cubist-like fragments transitions to the sharp bite of winter on silent snow-covered ground in *Morning Snowfield* (1983).

This work is modest, like a modern-day Vermeer. Although very different in style, the paintings quietly invite you in for a closer look. Also, like Vermeer, the artist's subjects stay

close to home. Dodd paints her everyday surroundings—landscapes around her weekend home near the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey, the views from the windows of her Lower East Side loft in New York City, and the outdoor scenes painted en plein air when possible, from her summer home in Cushing, ME. She traces her need to observe the world she paints back to her art school training: "All the people I knew at Cooper Union worked from life. It was my friend Alex Katz who first got me outdoors painting in Maine." In her early work from the 1950s she would, "draw outside and go back to the studio to paint in a larger scale." When she bought the Maine house, "it took a while to get used to painting outside. I would take a Masonite board and paint directly with a brush. It has to be one session. You start and keep going till you finish." This immediacy is distilled by her diffused light and tonal range giving all the work a feeling of timelessness. Moments captured.

Windows occupy a significant place in Dodd's oeuvre. They appear repeatedly in

The immediacy is distilled by her diffused light and tonal range giving all the work a feeling of timelessness.

every decade. Sometimes their presence is hinted at by sun-streaked shapes on the floor and a fragment squeezed in the corner as in *Sun in Hallway* (1978). At other times the window is the subject, front and center, like *Broken Window, Maine* (1975). One of her most complex compositions, and one of my favorites, *Night Sky Loft* (1973) features a window. This painting, at 66 x 54 inches, is one of the largest in the show. Unlike the majority of her work, it is self-consciously arranged, rather than "discovered." Part still life, part nocturn, Dodd played with the placement of the oval mirror before setting it on the floor next to the radiator, which she slyly notes is, "my favorite still life object." The painterly details in the almost black night area subtly illuminate the interiors through the distant windows of the surrounding buildings. This spatial complexity draws you in and through the painting then bounces you back to the room reflected in the mirror. Dodd's tactile paint handling is lost in reproduction but was impressive when viewed



framed and hanging on the wall in the first gallery of the Hall exhibition.

Although in the 1950s Dodd was a founding member of the influential Tanager Gallery, one of New York's first artist run coops, and is now represented by the well-established Alexandre Gallery in Manhattan, as well as being included in many major museum collections, it wasn't until 2012, when Dodd was 85, that she was given her first museum retrospective at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City. Titled *Catching the Light*, the show traveled to the Portland Museum of Art in Maine and included a hardcover book of the same title offering a comprehensive overview of Dodd's art in full-color reproductions, photographic documentation, and essays. In 2018, *The View Through Elliot's Shack Looking South* (1971), was acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was her first painting to enter a museum collection.

Dodd's independent streak seems undiminished in the middle of her ninth decade. She has never worked with studio assistants; "I like to do all the chores myself. Even the mindless stuff. I gesso my own boards." She tried painting in acrylic but found, "it felt like chewing gum." Yet Dodd is also receptive to new tricks. One

Above, left: *Sun in Hallway*, 1978, oil on linen, 50 x 30" (127 x 76 cm). Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Lois Dodd.

Left, right: *Night Sky Loft*, 1973, oil on linen, 66 x 54" (167.5 x 137 cm). Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Lois Dodd.

Below, left: Lois Dodd in her studio in Maine, 2021. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery.

of her students at the Vermont Studio Center introduced her to the use of aluminum roof flashing as a substitute surface for painting. It was used in some of her Matisse-like, rare, nude figurative works. Most of her painting is now done on smallish, no larger than 20 inches in any direction, gessoed boards. She finds them easy to carry around outdoors.

Dodd's meditative approach to "finding and framing the everyday" gives the illusion that painting is easy. At the end of our conversation, she reminds me, "If painting isn't hard, it's probably not good." Lois Dodd's lifetime of hard work is beyond good. It is sublime.

Cynthia Close is contributing editor for *Documentary Magazine* and writes regularly for *Art New England* and several other publications.

Lois Dodd: *Natural Order*
Hall Art Foundation, Vermont
Through November 27, 2022
hallartfoundation.org