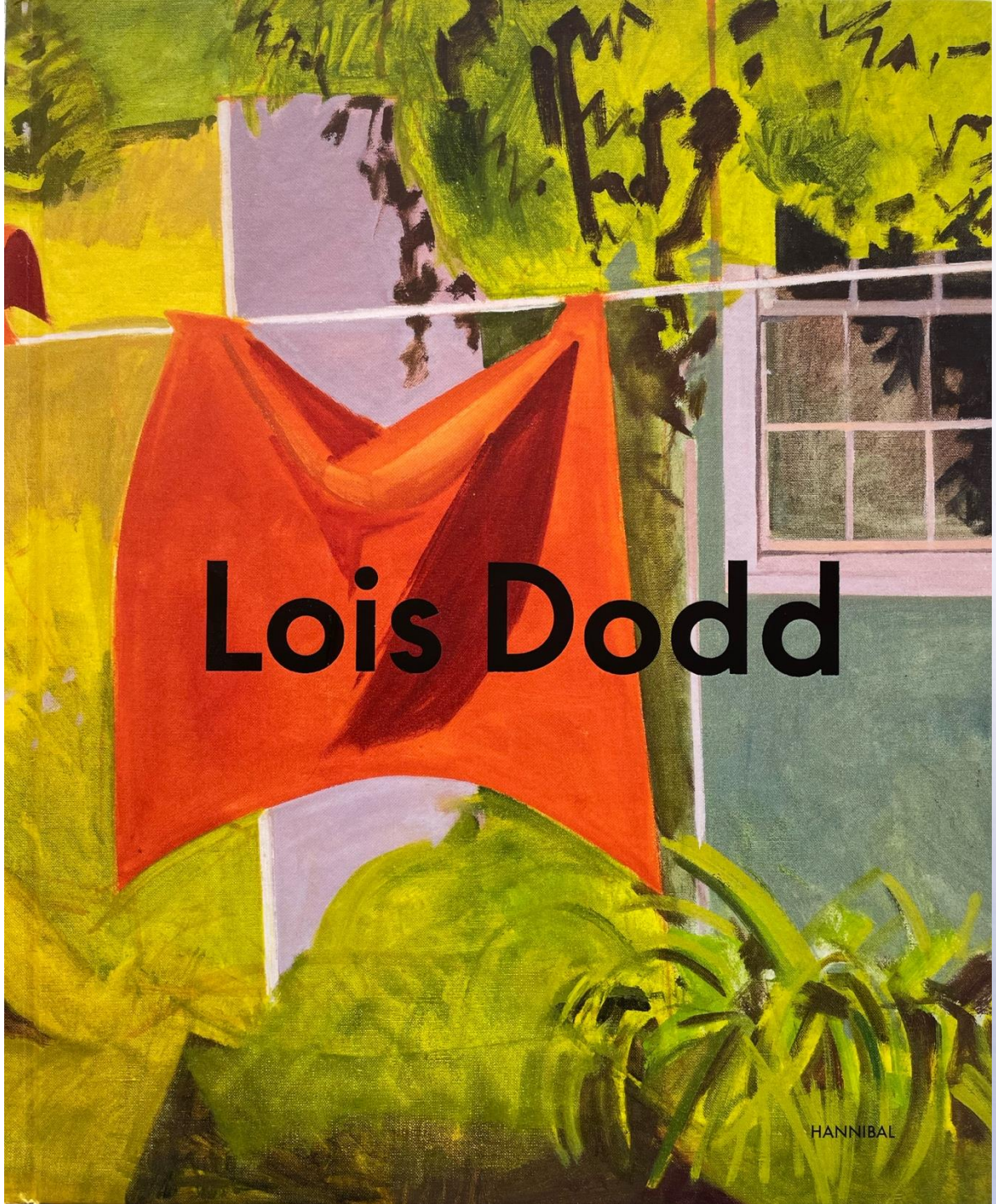


"Look, the trees"

By Janice McNab

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting, and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is,

is nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

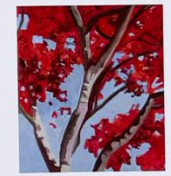
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

In Blackwater Woods
Mary Oliver
American Primitive
(Back Bay Books, 1983)

In *Red Maple* (2013), scarlet leaves lift off branches as if they were fire. A moment has been captured in a painting that says, in an echo of Mary Oliver's poem *In Blackwater Woods*, "look, the trees." Lois Dodd's work slides out of such moments in time, a flow of images that has recorded a lifetime of connection with what she sees. She paints quickly, in single sessions, and with thin layers of color that allow the white gesso ground to illuminate from within. It is an approach to the image that proposes, while not entirely fulfilling, a commitment to depth and illusion. In Dodd's work, recognizable places and things waver within an abstracting vision of the landscapes of Maine, the Delaware Water Gap, and around her New York studio. She has said that "you could spend forever in just one place, watching things change,"[1] but over her lifetime that has turned out to be these three places, which she has spent that life migrating between. They are the habitat from which she has drawn her art.

In Mary Oliver's poem, autumn trees turn themselves into "pillars of light." Blackwater Woods are on Cape Cod, where the poet lived for many years, walking its low-slung land. The ponds and clapboard architecture of Maine are quite like the Cape, but we can almost see Dodd's painting as we read Oliver's poem because both women share a commitment to the glimpsing sort of vision that can only be released through close, repeated looking. Both are also committed to a brevity of remark. Oliver's short, spacious lines guide us inward from our own imagined view of "the blue shoulders/of the ponds" to the heart of the poem, an insight into her own mortality and the fundamental strangeness of other living things "whose meaning/ none of us will ever know." When Dodd sets out to paint a tree in an afternoon, it is to capture a similarly fleeting insight, a moment deeply seen but noted down with the simplest possible strokes.

The fundamental strangeness that Oliver describes is even clearer in *Winter Sunset, Blair Pond* (2008) [p. 120]. The light here is low and cold, and we are both drawn in and pushed away by the sun's harsh reflection. It has become an unblinking eye, staring us out. An austere vision of a familiar pond that is suddenly quite apart. Time itself is being painted, as a short winter's day held against the artist's bones. Time is a limited resource; it disappears on us like December sun. Here, it stares back as it goes, one of the painted remains of so many days spent recording its flickering brightness on water, a wall or "look, the trees."



[p. 123] *Red Maple*, 2013

Winter Sunset, Blair Pond, 2008

The artist has often cited American landscape painter Arthur Dove as an important influence on her work. His distilled earthiness was also drawn from close looking at his immediate surroundings. In a 1942 diary entry, he described this creative process as "extracting" from what he saw until his work reached a "point where abstraction and reality meet."[2] Dodd has described a similar search for "underlying geometric structure ... not looking for details or surface description ... looking for the light."[3] In Dove's *Haystack* (1931), such light is found in the glowing ball of an autumn tree. The image value of this yellow orb, like the white and yellow eye in *Winter Sunset, Blair Pond*, is only marginally tethered to what it depicts. Both painted tree and painted lake radiate light in their own, material, terms.

The weighted strokes of *Haystack* float and glide in mellifluous movements that build on the quietude within nineteenth-century American Luminism.[4] Dove developed an idea of light as an abstraction that might, nevertheless, be recorded through things. He hoped the aesthetic effects produced by this might illuminate some aspect of inner life. In the 1920s and '30s he was part of a modernist grouping who exhibited with Arthur Stieglitz in New York, but Dodd first encountered the ideas that drove these artists through her early exposure to the Bauhaus at art school. In 1945, aged seventeen, she found out that, in line with the democratizing ideals of Modernism, Cooper Union offered a free education to those who passed its entrance exam. She was accepted to study textiles and, years later, recalled that:

> They had a basic design course and it was based on the Bauhaus. You came out of school with a vocabulary about line, shape, form and colour. All those things have been separated out now so it is more difficult to study the vocabulary of art and put it together into a painting. The Bauhaus people invented this wonderfully useful thing to study, this visual vocabulary.[5]

The German Bauhaus had only existed for fourteen brief years between the wars, but the school effectively condensed many of the political experiments of the European avant-garde into a teaching method that explored aesthetics and functional purpose as unified goals jointly founded on democratizing ideals. In breaking down the cultural barriers between artist and artisan, the Bauhaus proposed creative projects that might bring beauty and more pleasant living conditions to all people.

One of those bringing such ideas to Cooper Union's textile department was painter and designer Ruth Reeves. It was rare for a woman to have such a teaching position, but after studying with artist Robert Henri in the US, Reeves had worked under Ferdinand Léger at the Académie Moderne in 1920s Paris. Henri also taught Edward Hopper and urged his students to paint the everyday conditions of their own world. These ideas would have been further worked through in France. By 1945, Reeves was back in the US and one of the most influential textile designers in the country. She was known for fabrics that depicted contemporary American life and, latterly, for her commitment to education.[6]

Dodd readily notes the importance of her time in the textile department, especially in her approach to pattern.[7] And within the Bauhaus, this did not mean ornament. Form rigorously followed function, so when the artist's insistence on a no-frills approach to the mark leads to her work being called "the painterly equivalent of plain speech,"[8] something of this underlying politics becomes naturalized, and goes unnoticed. Dodd's artistic education was steeped in ideas about accessibility, and her formal approach to the image has an egalitarian

Arthur Dove, *Haystack*, 1931

discipline within its brevity. This is its real connection to the poetry of Mary Oliver, and it is too easily overlooked. Metaphor lies coiled within all artistic production and today, as our distorted connection to other living things becomes increasingly volatile, Dodd's bare observations reveal a set of values we might usefully revisit.

In Oliver's poem, the woods in winter become the poetic material within which she curls thoughts about living and dying. Dodd also looks out to look in, and apertures—doors, tunnels, holes in the ice—are embedded in many of her paintings. Their counterpoint is the house on fire. This group of paintings do not record real disasters, but staged burns set by the fire department as training exercises. They rehearse the drama of absence. Dodd is a painter of stillness, like Hopper and Dove, and these high-action fire scenes are almost an anomaly within her life's work. They make sense, however, as a burning core within a more diffuse sense of vacated presence that Amy Sherlock noted as a sense of waiting in her many window paintings.[9] When these frame the view from her New York studio, mortality is directly addressed, as the vacant lot in *Men's Shelter, Winter – April* (1967–68), and in the many other paintings of that view, is the unmarked graveyard attached to a hostel on the Bowery.

Dodd once described how, as child, she often slept in the porch in summer. "My oldest sister and I—I'm the youngest—slept in a porch with eight windows and eight black window shades, or green, with all the little pinpricks and all the images you think you can see."[10]

In the dreamy space between being awake and asleep, the outdoors became transformed into shadows falling on the walls of a warm cave. The blank canvas of blinds turning into magical paintings filled with fugitive pictures that "you think you can see." In a life lived under weather, in the scruffy architecture of Robert Henri's "ordinary life," Dodd has kept looking for such flickering glimpses. She has painted a world in which glass still mists up in winter and laundry lingers on the line. The accumulative excess, the emphasis on consumerism and leisure that is reified in much postwar American figuration, is entirely absent. Her paintings sidestep a half century of baroque overconsumption to recognize instead the things we never really possess—time, light, and other living things.

[p. 124] *Men's Shelter, Winter – April*, 1967–68

Notes

1 *Lois Dodd: Natural Order*, exh. cat. (Greenwich, CT: The Bruce Museum, 2023), 7.
2 Arthur Dove (1880–1946), 1942 diary entry, Archives of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dove/hd_dove.htm
3 "Conversation with Lois Dodd," interview by Larry Groff, *Painting Perceptions*, March 15, 2015. https://paintingperceptions.com/conversation-with-lois-dodd/
4 Dodd also seems to have been influenced by the Luminists. She has remarked on her love of the iceberg paintings of Frederic Edward Church (1826–1900). Church was also one of the most well-known painters of the Hudson River School, which in turn influenced the work of Ruth Reeves.
5 Groff, "Conversation with Lois Dodd."
6 See Whitney Blausen, *Ruth Reeves' "Personal Prints" Printed Textiles from the 1930s and 40s*, Textile Society of America Symposium (1992), University of Nebraska, Lincoln. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1559&context=tsaconf Reeves is remembered for the carpets of New York's Radio City Music Hall, but she also designed Green Pastures, a contemporary *toile de jouy* inspired by the Hudson River School. She often exhibited her own paintings as the source material for her more widely available fabrics.
7 "Beer with a Painter," interview by Jennifer Samet, *Hyperallergic*, March 28, 2015. https://hyperallergic.com/194330/beer-with-a-painter-lois-dodd/
8 Artist and critic Robert Berlind in Faye Hirsch, ed., *Lois Dodd* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017), 65.
9 Amy Sherlock, *Lois Dodd* (London: Modern Art, 2019), 6.
10 Ada Katz, ed., *Eight Begin: Artists Memories of Starting Out* (New York: Libellum Books, 2014), 23.

Red Maple, 20