

Interview with Lois Dodd

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Tell me about how you became a painter – where you grew up, and who your first teachers were.

I was born in Montclair, New Jersey and I grew up and went through the public school system. The public school system had a good art program, actually. That was in the 1940's. And then, when I graduated from high school I went to Cooper Union. Actually I didn't know anything about art schools, and it was a teacher there [at Montclair] – a young teacher who came there to practice teaching – and she began telling us one day about the various schools in the city. And she mentioned that Cooper Union was free, and you went and took a test and maybe you got in and maybe you didn't. So myself and another girl went in and took the test and we both got in. So there I studied with a man named Byron Thomas. He was the painting teacher, and Peter Busa was the basic design teacher. They were all very supportive and nice people. So – but I was actually studying textile design as a major. Because I thought I would be practical. So when I got out of school – most of my friends were painter painters. So another friend and I who had taken the textile course tried to do freelance designing for a while, and that was kind of hopeless. The teacher at Cooper was very creative and she was a designer who had a big reputation in New York at the

time. So I think her idea was you start at the top and you do designs and you do it that way. But probably you have to start at the bottom and make color separations and that stuff. So I didn't really want to do that. We were spoiled rotten by this teacher. Actually quite a number of people did go on in the field and they were good. But I just hung out with my painter friends and painted more. And then I married Bill King, and he was determined to survive as a sculptor. And other friends Jean Cohen and Alex Katz – they were painters. And then we went to Italy for a year. Bill got a Fulbright – the first year that the Fulbright existed. And we looked at everything, and painted there, which was wonderful. And when we came back we got involved starting a gallery – Bill and myself and three other people. [Tanager Gallery] And it was a place to show, and a place to show other people's work. It was just a very exciting time.

What gave you the idea to start a cooperative gallery?

We got back, and Angelo Ippolito was someone we met in Italy and Fred Mitchell. Cajori went to Italy later. But we all talked about “What are we going to do?” There weren't many galleries in New York back then. And the big name artists were just beginning to show, so we figured there was no hope. So maybe we should start our own place. And it was not just us – there were a lot of other artists who had the same thing going on in their head. There were Area Gallery and Camino Gallery and finally 10th Street was just solid

galleries. So ours lasted ten years – from 1952 to 1962. In 1962 we closed.

That's a good long time.

Yes, and most of the people in our gallery had gone on to other galleries by that time, and began to get spots. So it just seemed like time to close it down. Things were changing.

And what kinds of paintings were you making at that time?

I was painting a lot of cows, actually. I was painting from my drawings. In the summertime I would go to Maine and draw cows from behind some bushes and when I came back in the winter I would use the drawings to paint from. So that when on for quite a while working that way.

Did you ever make abstract paintings?

I never made totally abstract paintings. They're not all that realistic either. But I never could paint without some visual reference. I just never could. Whereas Jean, on the other hand, became an abstract painter. She studied with Nick Marsicano – and I wonder if that made a difference. Because the painters I was studying with were all representational.

Except for Peter Busa, but he was talking about design. And I thought about that differently. So I don't know – I've often wondered – is it the first teacher you have kind of sets the tone, or is it something else? But I just couldn't sit with a blank canvas and figure out what to do, without something to bounce off.

But it's interesting that you started off making textile designs – which I assume were abstract.

Well, that's true. But maybe they weren't totally abstract – they might have had a leaf or a bird or something. Yes, they weren't totally abstract either. Yes, I never thought of that. They had a decorative motif.

Going back to your teachers at Cooper Union- what were some of things you took from them?

The first thing we did, which was wonderful – the first teacher Byron Thomas – he had us actually make paint. So they had pieces of glass, and we bought glass millers and then we went to the pigment place and bought pigment. And we proceeded to grind pigment – and we bought tubes, and we filled the tubes. So we started really at the very beginning and first we painted on brown paper. The first paint that we made was water-based. It was not

oil. So he had models, still lifes, things of that sort, in the classroom always. But – God, I didn't know what I was doing. But they were always very encouraging, so you kept doing it. The design teacher was much more terrifying. Her ideas all came out of the Bauhaus. Which was very wonderful, really. But it was just her manner and the way she ran things that was terrifying. I was working very hard.

We had an anatomy class at Cooper. But it wasn't taught with what you would call real rigor. I think the teacher was not what you would call an anatomy teacher. He was a teacher who was teaching anatomy, but it wasn't his thing. He had us working very loosely from the model, but we were beginners. He had us putting blotches of color all over the page with chalk, and then we'd take a black line and draw. It looked kind of nice – it almost looked like you had volume with the thing. And it was accidental. But I saw his work at the Whitney [Museum] on 8th Street one time and he was very representational – very anatomically correct. So it was interesting that he was not doing that with us. I never studied with Morris Kantor, who was the big name at the school. Then Nicholas Marsicano came – he was a lot younger and more abstract and connected with the New York School. That was just beginning to happen. But I wasn't really aware of that until we had come back from Italy, which was in 1952. And I think the show – that big 9th Street show was in either 1951 or 1952. It was amazing all the people and work that was there. And anyway, then we had our gallery going. And that's where you met so many people who came in to see the work that was hanging. It was a real social thing, those

galleries. At the time that Pop Art hit the scene, there were more galleries. It felt like people could get commercial galleries. And we did. Actually, I didn't have a gallery for quite a while.

During the 1960's?

Yes, during the 60's.

And what was it like being a representational painter at this time, when Pop was coming into fashion?

Well, I was always off theme. [My work] wasn't really abstract – but the abstract painters were tolerant. It wasn't really realist – but the realist painters were tolerant. It is funny. It was always somewhere in between. It was never quite Pop. All those things influence you, though. The looseness and vagueness of the cows is from the fact that everything was so loose and painterly at that period. And then when Pop art came in, I'd just moved here [East 2nd Street] and I was painting views out the back window. As they went along they became kind of cleaner, and the edges were straighter. And that is the bequeathal of Pop Art, which was a much kind of cleaner kind of painting. So there are these influences that really happen, but it wasn't about subject matter.

It was more about the form?

Yes, it was more about form.

Do you think there is a difference between abstract and figurative art?

To me, there really isn't. It's basically all abstract in that it's an abstract exercise putting a painting together. Really, no amount of wishing you could project a real object on a canvas is going to get it there, so in that sense, it's all totally abstract. And it seems like you have to see in some abstract way to be able to paint what you're looking at as well, no matter how realistic it becomes in the end.

Did you always have that feeling, or was that a realization you had?

I think it was kind of a realization, after a while. The more I learned, the more I began to realize the way to see so that I could put it down was flat, abstract, shape. First – shape. Which was always what had attracted me anyway. Textile design was about shapes. And we had that design course. It was very good for painting really. Because the basic ideas there were really useful. I'm not sure that while I was a student I was aware of what I was

doing. But then after you get out and try to start painting, you realize these are ways of looking at things. Although there it was really just creating things. But you can also use that in looking.

Who were some of the artists that influenced you, during those days at Tanager?

Oh really just about anybody that was around – Milton Resnick and Pat [Passlof] – they both had lived and had studios on the block. De Kooning was down the block. [Philip] Guston came by once and a while. They all stumbled through there, and then the people that are younger – Mike Goldberg, Joan Mitchell, once in a while Helen Frankenthaler, Jane Freilicher. In the summer Jean Cohen and Alex Katz and I got a place in Maine, and we were up there. That's how the Maine thing started. They had all gone off to Skowhegan. I was married to Bill [King] at the time. I've been going to Maine ever since.

Earlier you were mentioning that the paintings of cows were started from drawings.

Yes, so they were invented in some way. As far as color and where the cows were situated – that was pretty much invention.

I've also read that you generally paint from life. Is that true?

Yes. I like to go outside and paint from life. Although, the last couple years, I've been painting again from drawings. Which were drawings of a model outside, in the summertime. And then again I'm back to kind of again inventing places for this model to be. I mean, it's usually beautiful under the tree or wherever she actually is. But sometimes I have a whole bunch of drawings without any reference to what's behind the figure. So then I pull in stuff from other things that I've done, or just kind of make it up.

What are the differences between working from life versus from your imagination?

Well, the thing with sticking the figures together is that it's the same model. So she's taking all these different poses and I'm trying to get her on the page in a way that looks like she's a group of people. You know, the different sizes and relating to one another in some way – that two or three people could be doing. Which is fun, really. And then, after that – if I want to make a painting out of it, then I've got to figure out if there is going to be a tree over here, or part of a house. What was nice about the model was that in her yard, there was a pile of lumber, there was a garden, pitchfork, laundry line, all those things. So we used all of those. Sometimes she's hanging up the laundry, sometimes she's sitting in a woodpile, sometimes she's digging up the garden. So that would start the painting.

How long do you generally spend working on a painting?

When I go outside, and they are small, it's usually maybe three hours.

So you complete them in one sitting?

Yes, in one sitting. I don't go back. If they were larger, like there were a number of years when I was working in the woods across from my place, and those were all big paintings. I did a few little tiny ones, but I realized you can't squeeze it onto a tiny surface when it's going around you – you just have to have a bigger format. So those would take maybe a week or more. But they were on canvas. So I'd have to go back every morning, if the day was the same kind of day. But I would never work more than three hours even then, because of the change in the light. Finally it's just so different that [you can not continue] unless you're not going to pay any attention to the light, which is really what is so beautiful. I really like to try to deal with the light. So that's the way the big ones would go. But that's really the only time when I was working on great big paintings. Otherwise, if I have something small, and I decide to make it bigger, I'll do it in the studio – I'll enlarge it basically. So then it's a mechanical process, gridded off. So they change, by the nature of that process.

And something like the nudes – when you bring them back to the studio, how long do you spend working on those?

Anytime I'm stuck working in a room, it takes longer. Anytime I'm in a box. It's longer because you get to sit, and look at it, and think, "I'm going to paint over here. I'm going to paint over there." It's so much more of a kind of mental game that I could spend a lot longer – or maybe it goes well, and it's done fast too. The thing is when you're outside, you're absolutely compelled to work – now. Before the light changes, or whatever is going to happen – it could rain, whatever. There's a kind of pressure that you have outside that you don't have inside. Which I like. So you're forced to make decisions, and to keep making decisions. Whereas when you're in the studio, it's a little harder to make decisions, because you're not pressured in the same way.

How do you find your motif when you are out in the landscape? How do you start?

Well, I wander around. Sometimes you're driving someplace and you see something interesting. And you go back, but it might be the wrong time of day, and it's not even there – you can't see it anymore. There are spots where I go back – like the "Woods" paintings went on for a number of years. I could go back in those woods and wander around and find something. At first, with the woods, it's like a unfolding scenario. But first I went

there and it was hard to figure out what to focus on. I did a few, but then I began taking in furniture, to give myself some focal point. And then I got tired of that. I took a mirror in one time, that was as successful as any of them, because it kind of mirrored what was in back of me. And then I stopped doing that, because I'd walk in the woods, and I'd see some tree was falling and it was a beautiful triangle in the woods, and I thought if I lay out this triangle on this rectangle of the canvas, and then just work in what's left – that worked very well. So that went on a number of years. And the woods would change a little bit every year. There would have been a storm, things fell down, it was fun watching it. But then, finally, one year, I walked in the woods, and nothing happened. It was like “we're finished, it's finished, you can't see it, it's just the woods, go walk in the woods.” It was very strange. You always think, I'll never see another thing I'll want to paint. And sometimes I think, Gee, maybe I should move. But then you see something else. It's hard to explain what it is – why you're suddenly intrigued with something else. There's that mystery to the whole thing. Then I got involved with laundry for a while – flapping laundry on the line. That seemed to be about color, because all the years of working outside, the color is limited in that it's not very intense. I was mixing [colors] – I was not working like a Fauve with hyped-up color. But with the laundry, then you could hang out stuff that was more brightly colored or contrasty. And then it would flap and move. So then it's the problem of what do you do with something that is constantly moving. And repeating a kind of movement. So that was very fun, that was exciting for a while.

With those paintings were you using color directly from the tube?

Yes. Red, blue, yellow – every primary. Instead of all the greens and rust colors from the woods. But some of that was during the wintertime too, so the ground was covered with snow, and it would be white. It's right out my door in Maine — the clothesline — more or less, so that's a reference, and the light and shadow is good there too. The "Windows" paintings started at my house. I was on the outside, looking at the window, and the window in the barn must have been the first one. I just made a small painting. And then the window in the back of the house had some bottles and stuff. And then I was driving around, and I saw the Grange Hall had a nice window. So I stopped there – and I painted three of them at the Grange Hall. And then after that, I got to a house down the road that was vacant. I pulled up there and stared into their window. That was the one where I began to use reflections. Up to that point I was just painting the sun as it hit the shade that was inside – it made a nice double pattern. If there was a curtain I would have this wonderful shadow on the curtain. So then I was enlarging them – they were bigger – and when they were bigger, I could also have the reflection. I began looking through windows that had interesting reflections. And this one had a reflection of the river and all this stuff behind me. Fascinating. Then they were lifesize. And then I got involved measuring – I thought I'll make it exactly the size of the window, and it will be very *trompe-l'oeil* if you

hang it on the wall. That was the next stage – I did a bunch of those. And there were a few inside the house. And I have a room inside my house in Maine that I painted on the plaster walls – one whole side of the room is painted with woods, from one of my paintings. I was actually going to paint the room! And I was spackling on one side. The old plaster has a silvery gray look. And the spackle I used was white, so I couldn't leave it like that. So, I thought, all right, I'll put a little blue paint and have fun, put a sky around, make it look like clouds. And then the next year, I thought, if I'm really doing this, why not just paint the trees, all over the walls, so that's what I did. But in that wall, there was a window that I had painted before. With a view out the window, and a curtain blowing. And I thought, now's the time to paint it again, because if I include part of the wall, it's the woods, the window appears to be hanging in the woods, except there's another view out the window – it's not the woods, it's a road and a field. This window has a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, so that's the clue you're in a room. It's not a surreal experience, it's a real place. So that's the most ambitious one I did.

How did you become interested in this idea of the trompe-l'oeil format?

Well, it kind of grew by itself. I was working smaller and I was thinking of Mondrian – Where you're going to put the window frame on the surface is the whole thing. Where you lay it out is where the rectangles are going to make their space. So it wasn't until I'd done

that a few times, and I was looking at this vacant house where there was just a shade, and somehow the reflection was very strong, so that made me want to make the painting larger. And then I thought, why not make them the actual window size. Pretty much the rest of them were all window-size.

Is the window frame a focal point – to use your term?

Yes, the other thing I have realized over the years, is that I never paint just views –receding mountains, or some wonderful vista. Vistas are not for me, pretty much. Like in the "Woods" paintings, I just want to divide up the thing and then work within the divisions I've made. The window is like that too. It's right in the front – right on the surface – if not in front of the surface. Which I guess is the modernist idea – of keeping it flat, and not making holes in the thing and it not going way off in the distance. This is true of the laundry paintings as well. Behind the laundry, the view could go way off in the distance, but this thing is in your face, so it can't. Which I like, too, because then it squeezes the landscape around the edge. Like those Renaissance portraits where there is the man's head and then the landscape stuck in over there. The figures aren't so flat, but they're not far away either.

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It seems to me that I see things that are so much more fantastic than I could possibly dream

up. There are all these amazing things out there to see. And then, from that, to just get it down in some way that is simple and strong. But the color thing – it is interesting – I think I am kind of tied to the color I see, and I really admire paintings where the color is powerful, and there is thick paint. I've never painted thickly. I just can't do it. It's so strange, how basic it is. The other thing is, I don't like cotton – I just like linen. Or masonite panels, which are firm. The thing that I noticed about cotton is that it seemed to give, to push in. And I found that really disturbing. Linen doesn't seem to do that. The whole thing is so responsive to what you feel like, or what you can do. It seems that once you really find what you want to paint, you can paint. Up to that point, you're flailing around. It's a very strange process, over the years. But once these things that attracted me presented themselves it didn't seem to be such a problem.

What colors are on your palette?

That's another fascinating thing. When you compare your paint box with a friend, you find somebody else buys completely different stuff. It's just very strange. I have all the cadmiums – red, yellow and blue. And ultramarine. And I guess I try to get at least three blues. I have a lot of greens. And then in the last few years – that unbleached titanium white seemed like a lot of fun – let me have some of that! The only thing that stops me is whether or not it is permanent – whether it is going to turn black or something.

How do you know when a painting is finished?

When I start feeling like I might start refining something – then I realize, No, that’s another painting. It’s pretty clear, when the last brushstroke is done, to me. For better or worse, there’s a point where it’s finished. There was a point when I was doing portraits of people and it is very noticeable with portraits. I’d work for a couple of hours, and then I’d look at them and think, Gee, I’d really like to paint them the way Sargeant would – somebody who would make them really beautiful – I’d really would love to do that! But then you realize if you started to try to clean up your act, so to speak, in the middle – it wasn’t going to work. The only thing to do was to do another one. Perhaps that would work better. But I couldn’t keep going on things. They would build up, build up, build up, you’d have the person there, and then you’d start refining, and that would start taking it apart, as you began doing that. So finally I learned, it’s pretty clear. It’s like a different impulse. You’re painting and you’re looking, you’re painting and you’re looking, and then you think, but now I could fix this. The moment you have the thought of fixing something, it’s time to stop. If it’s wrong, then you’ve got to start another one.

Do you do that sometimes, take out another canvas while the person is sitting?

With some of the portraits, yes, I do another one a second one to be different, more

interesting, whatever.

The portraits you do in one sitting as well?

Yes. They are all in one sitting as well. I mean if you did it differently, if you drew somebody and then put a drawing on canvas... I mean, I could see doing it that way, but I haven't done it that way. And it's not the way I do other painting, so, it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to do that. It's like you're stuck with yourself. Whatever you do, that's what you do. I could start all over at some point, but it's a little late in the game to be learning how to draw and paint. So I just have to do what I do. As long as it's exciting.

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