

Lois Dodd: An Amaryllis

The Complex Simplicity of the Life Cycle

On view virtually at the Alexandre Gallery, NYC

By Jennifer Vignone

For over 70 of her 94 years, Lois Dodd has painted and been a known figure in the art world. In New York, she was key in establishing the Tanager Gallery in the 1950s. This was integral in the creation of the Tenth Street Art Scene which showcased painters such as Alex Katz, Lester Johnson, Philip Pearlstein, Sidney Geist, William King and Tom Wesselmann. Dividing her time between New York and Maine, she framed the everyday in what she found through her observations of landscapes, still lives, and nudes.

In 2006, Lois Dodd painted the life of an Amaryllis bulb from full blossom to its dried end. The Alexandre Gallery has this series of paintings displayed in their virtual viewing room. While they may be enjoyed for their green leaves and stems, red and pink flower petals, and blue, green, orange and yellow backgrounds, they are especially striking in their tracing of life.

Amaryllis 01 is the beginning of the flower in bloom. Erect, brightly colored against a light foundation, Dodd's painterly presence is seen in the green-toned brushstrokes capturing the resilience of the flower's stem and leaves as the reds of the petals burst forth. The rays of the sun cast over the leaves adding energy and surging upward with youth.



Amaryllis 01, 2006, oil on wood panel, 20 x 10 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Amaryllis 03 expresses the activity of youth as flowers open in conversation. This leads to the beginning of new buds as families begin to take root. Protective love and growth are felt through the richness of reds ranging from babyish pinks to intense adult reds. One flower bends forward, assessing us as much as we examine it.



Amaryllis 03, 2006, oil on wood panel, 14 3/4 x 16 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

In *Amaryllis 04*, the family is assembled, with the parents bowing left and right, guarding the children beginning to bloom. The brightness of the yellowy-green background is crisp and summery. The flowers fill the entire space taking advantage of their time – enriched by the sun and earth and nurturing their growing bouquet.



Amaryllis 04, 2006, oil on wood panel, 13 x 18 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

In *Amaryllis 06*, maturity has set in. The petals are still a rich, passionate red, but they nod downward bearing the weight of wisdom that comes with time. Their beauty is at their most precious with wrinkles of purpled blue defining their ties to the earth. The dark background signals a pause to reflect from time spent and the transition to the unknown.



Amaryllis 06, 2006, oil on Masonite, 15 x 16 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Age is apparent in *Amaryllis 09*. The reds have started to fade and some tinges of brown spots streak through the petals. The stem yellows with a more tenuous grasp on the flowers who curl over with the burden of time. The mottled colors of the background are a beautiful medley of how the body ages and takes on the tones of the exposure to living.



Amaryllis 09, 2006, oil on Masonite, 12 3/4 x 13 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Amaryllis 16 is a psychological look at the period when one knows life is closer to the end than the beginning. Dramatic lighting accentuates the flowers as they bend into age with darkened purples and wrinkled pinks. Flowers bend like gnarled limbs in various directions as if reflecting down paths taken through life. A dark green leaf curving in from the right is supportive as it holds one of the flowers from behind.



Amaryllis 16, 2006, oil on Masonite, 15 3/4 x 10 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Flowers stoop in *Amaryllis 17* as their grayed stems can no longer support them. Like an aged face, their remnants of muted red and pink capture the glimpses of what they once were. The green leaf stands guard over the final moments of the Amaryllis's life, respectfully awaiting the end.



Amaryllis 17, 2006, oil on Masonite, 17 x 13 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Dodd once reflected that at first painting flowers made her think that she might be viewed as a “lady” painter and detract from her as an artist. However, when standing virtually among these paintings, one is struck not by their “ladyness” or an assumption of the artist being a woman as by the flow of life, and its brevity. The fourteen works capture the stages of the Amaryllis’ life giving pause at life’s natural path.

Her treatment of other subject matter furthers Dodd's ability to impart a sense of the history in the commonplace.

The Alexandre Gallery has also shown several of Ms. Dodd's paintings that challenge the impression of a "female" theme, with laundry as a main element in the composition. In *Single Sheet + House*, hung linen flies on the laundry line, its wings of cloth suspended in the wind. Its shape cuts into the space, not once, but twice with its shadowy counterpoint creating another image on the ground below. Clouds mimic the color and curves in the sheet, as the shadow on the ground does the side wall of the house to the right. The playground of nature, housework and geometry raise the ordinariness of drying laundry to an engaging loop of activity that holds the viewer's attention with a sense of anticipation.



Single Sheet + House, 1980-1982, oil on Masonite, 18 3/4 x 20 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

In *Two White Sheets and Green Skirt at Left*, shirt sleeves gesture to accentuate their conversation. The pleats of the green skirt crease like the planes of the hills behind her, pulling them into the foreground as she disappears into their background. Painterly brushstrokes add to the liveliness as the images push forward, fall back, and angle from side to side, the viewer wafting along in their backyard gossip.



Two White Sheets and Green Skirt at Left, 1978, oil on Masonite, 11 1/8 x 14 1/2 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

In her lifelong investigation of the nuances of repeating subjects examined different light and weather with dramatically different results, Ms. Dodd also studies the magic of the night skies as quiet evening falls in works like *Night House with Lit Window*, trees fade into the dimming light as the glow of a single window fends off the darkness with mysterious promise. The cast of an exterior bulb leaves its circular impression, adding to the geometric structure of the space. The composition plays with flatness and dimension the way the nighttime plays with our ability to see true form, adding contrast and interest to a waning day.



Night House with Lit Window, Oil on linen, 48 by 72 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Blue House in Snowstorm is a small but monumental tribute to the melancholy of the winter night. The small house itself burrs in the frigid blue tones while the lack of windows suggests an unsocial inhabitant who is burrowed in for the night if not the season. Dramatic lighting crashing in from the right could be from the moon, streetlight, or car headlights. Hovering power lines are the only threads of connection to an outside world.



Blue House in Snowstorm, 1975, Oil on Masonite, 13 ½ by 17 inches. © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

Moon Over Mudflat, 4AM is another small but compelling look into the depths of evening. Flecks of the moon spray over the water like a glimmering skipped stone inviting the viewer to dare to walk across them into the dark horizon. The landscape is muted to suggestions of rocks, water, and patches of grass.



Moon Over Mudflat, 4AM, Oil on Masonite, 8 7/8 by 9 13/16 inches., © Lois Dodd, Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

What Lois Dodd is so masterful at is helping the viewer see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Flowers, laundry, houses, backyards, windows, are all worthy of our attention. The capturing of these moments and retelling them through paint shows a devotion to this experience that further accentuates their importance, our importance. We are worthy of time and attention in our extraordinary ordinariness.

Established in 1996, the Alexandre Gallery represents and exhibits contemporary American artists, specializing in works by early 20th century American artists, with a focus on the Stieglitz Group. The gallery has represented Lois Dodd for over 18 years with "An Amaryllis" being their latest show. It is a particularly effective exhibition because it comes at a time when many people are unprepared for the loss they have suffered as loved ones are quickly taken and their paths take a dramatic turn. Dodd's Amaryllis series maps to the stages of life, its own brief timeline highlighting an all too sudden end. Yet through this poignant juxtaposition, the paintings show strength in their sinewy stems and petals that twist toward the light of the sun, struggling to get the most out of their time. As the Amaryllis ages, each

canvas shows the decay, but in that decay, another depth of the beauty of each stage of life emerges. The message is that whatever time one is given, recognize the beauty of each stage and its uniqueness.

You may contemplate this series virtually any time on the Alexandre Gallery's website:

<https://viewingroom-alexandregallery.exhibit-e.art/viewing-room/lois-dodd-an-amaryllis#tab:thumbnails>.

All of the other paintings cited, as well as the other artists represented by the Alexandre Gallery, can be seen by looking through the archives of works on the gallery's website:

<https://www.alexandregallery.com/artists-and-work-index>.