



ART REVIEW: Dodd and Bigbee Make Passionate Arguments for Painting's Vitality

January 23, 2019

by Peter Malone

For a second time, Alexandre Gallery in midtown Manhattan has chosen to mount a dual exhibition of painters Lois Dodd and Brett Bigbee, first shown together by the gallery at the Fuller Building in 2015. Separately titled—"Lois Dodd: Flashings" and "Brett Bigbee: New Paintings"—both exhibitions run concurrently through February 9, 2019.

It may be true that the now common practice of mounting simultaneous one-person shows began as little more than a concession to economic pressures from art fairs. Still, credit ought to be accorded gallerists who take extra care in matching artists for whom the inevitable comparison—despite separate titles, rooms and accompanying documentation—stimulates engaging similarities and divergences.

This particular double-header does more than present the pair as masters of small format painting, though it does so convincingly. It also demonstrates how a perusal of multiple examples from each artist's output can direct a viewer's focus toward the way each painter partitions a long-term project, which in turn leads to a deeper appreciation for how each approaches his or her subject. In this instance, even the number of paintings chosen proves illuminating. For Dodd, many small paintings calculate to 85, for Bigbee, just eight, a discrepancy that amplifies fundamental distinctions in both method and vision.

Dodd is perhaps the preeminent plein-air painter of our time, and so the length of Dodd's typical painting session is limited to the availability of sunlight and capricious weather conditions. Thus, her familiar touch, evident in each panel's lean surface, reads as a hybrid of drawing and painting, accentuating those observational and spontaneous properties that lend her work its unique authority.

In sharp contrast, Bigbee's protracted painting method tallies months of effort against the completion of a single panel that measures no bigger than a book cover. Fastidiously applied layers of translucent oil paint build to a hyperreal ambience, an ambience that gave his earlier portraits an ethereal glow. In this new work, according to the artist's brief and somewhat cryptic statement, these layers are redirected to the demands of narrative introspection.

Dodd's project, as Faye Hirsch suggests in the accompanying catalog essay, is in some ways a "respite from an accelerated and increasingly ungraspable world, in which the certitude of nature feels increasingly threatened." For Dodd, direct observation is key. For his part, Bigbee, already a

fabricator of dreams, is now turning more inward, mining those emotional veins that yield imagery he quite literally lives with for months. Though the two artists occupy radically different psychological landscapes, considering their work together illuminates a shared and sustained restlessness.

Dating from 2004, Dodd's 5 x 7 inch panels are executed on a thin metal roofing material called flashing, which seems novel, though there are historical precedents. For example, there is the 1607 three- by six-inch [Brueghel landscape in the Met](#), painted in oil on copper. Metal lends stability to very small panels.

Unlike the Baroque inclusiveness of her Flemish precursor though, many of Dodd's panels project the visual equivalence of their reductive Haiku-like titles. *Waning Yellow Moon, Purple Sky*, 2015, consists of a spare yellow dot, not much bigger than a thumb print, emerging from a warm black sky intruding on the glowing orb just enough to record its waning phase. A wet-in-wet technique allows the red employed in the black of the night sky to encroach on the yellow, producing a fiery aura with impressively little fuss.



"Waning Yellow Moon, Purple Sky" by Lois Dodd, 2015. Oil on aluminum flashing, 5 x 7 inches. (LD 15.12). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

Though this minimal approach suits the limitations of the panel's intimate scale, there are others in the exhibition that tackle more complex motifs. *Cloud Formation #1, July*, 2008 reconfigures an evening's cirrostratus formation into a geometrically inspired approximation that swerves just enough to set the pattern free of its rectangular support.



"Cloud Formation #1, July" by Lois Dodd, 2008. Oil on aluminum flashing, 5 x 7 inches (LD 08.14). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

Queen Anne's Lace, 2018 and *Monarch*, 2017 manage to capture their delicate subjects—a wispy flower and a butterfly wing respectively—with characteristically understated clarity.



"Queen Anne's Lace" by Lois Dodd, 2018. Oil on aluminum flashing, 5 x 7 inches.

(LD 18.27). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.



“Monarch” by Lois Dodd, 2017. Oil on aluminum flashing, 5 x 7 inches. (LD 18.27).
Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

Bigbee, whose observational concerns have always been tempered by an inclination to conceptually reconstruct his motifs, now moves into the realm of narrative, an approach often hinted at in his earlier work. Among these recent paintings are two notable deviations from his usual method, *Meteorite*, 2017, and *Study for Atonement*, 2017, both of which are loose, direct and surprisingly painterly.



“Meteorite” by Brett Bigbee, 2017. Oil on wooden panel, 5
16/16 x 4 inches. (BB 18.06). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.



“Study for Atonement” by Brett Bigbee, 2017. Oil on linen, 8 x 5
16/16 inches. (BB 18.07). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

Both paintings look more like studies than *Heritage (First Version)*, 2018, which despite its provisional classification appears highly finished.

The next iteration, *Heritage*, 2018, is larger by three inches and apparently refined into a tighter composition. How they relate raises several questions: was the earlier panel meant as a study, or is it the first in a narrative sequence of two? Will there be three?



“Heritage (First Version)” by Brett Bigbee, 2018. Oil on linen, 10 17/32 x 8
3/4 inches. (BB 18.05). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

In the first version the serpent's eye indicates menace, to which the female responds with an anxious facial expression that contradicts her serene, pastoral pose. In the second version the serpent is the one that seems startled, while the female's countenance has been adjusted to one of self-possession and confidence. The differences are subtle, but in the context of Bigbee's precise rendering, significant—even more so considering how the viewer has been prepped for a narrative reading.



"Heritage" by Brett Bigbee, 2018. Oil on linen, 10 17/32 x 8 3/4 inches. (BB 18.04). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

What ultimately ties the two artists together is the way their work instills in the viewer an appetite for more. Dodd's sketches suggest a universe of minutiae viewers rarely take the time to notice, let alone contemplate. Their fundamental generosity implies open-ended experience. In strictly visual terms, Bigbee's images are thoroughly realized, yet remain mysterious, as if the artist is reluctant to reveal details. *Heritage*, 2018, suggests Eve and the serpent in the Book of Genesis; *Inner Judgement*, 2018, a snarling ravenous dog with of a greenish hue, infers the dread of a fairy tale. Neither seems conclusive.

As separate exhibitions, each provides the viewer a substantial look at exceedingly individual painters. Taken together, their individual passions merge into a compelling argument for painting's vitality.



"Inner Judgement" by Brett Bigbee, 2018. Oil on linen, 7 x 5 inches (BB 18.03). Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

BASIC FACTS: "Lois Dodd: Flashings"/"Brett Bigbee: New Paintings" are on view November 29, 2018 to February 9, 2019 at Alexandre Gallery, 4th floor, 724 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019. www.alexandregallery.com

Copyright 2019 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.