

KALEIDOSCOPE

Interview with Lucy Dodd

by Ruba Katrib
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DIGEST

With the studio as its temple and the exhibition as an almost-ritualized performative moment, the elusive work of the NY-based artist is a language of symbols, relaying on various cosmologies and the unconscious to look in the gap between what is seen and said, and what is unknowable.

NEW NEW AGE

RK In "May Flower," your recent show at David Lewis in New York, you set up a ring of chair sculptures in the middle of the space, with a group of paintings hanging on the walls and a single painting installed on the floor within the circle. What did you mean to suggest with the configuration of works, and specifically with the inclusion of the chairs?

LD The installation mimicked the work I do in the studio, working with the powers of attraction (Venus) and action (Mars), with centripetal and centrifugal forces at once. The chairs were there to invoke the presence of all the people and forces who help me make my work. It was like an army of helpers. The obvious reaction when you walked into the exhibition was the strong feeling that you were in the presence of latent entities in the room. At first, I felt that for this reason, it was clear that they were not to be sat in. Now it's shifting. If people want to, they can sit in a chair—but once you do, you're literally woven into the work. You're participating in it. Some of the chairs had elements that created characters. These function as sculptures, which mirror the stories in the paintings; one chair, for example, placed in front of the very large *Venus and the Bull* (all works 2018), had horns, so it became a bull; another was turned upside-down, so the chair legs became the legs of a spider; the small stools were shaped like "Z"s, the "Z" shape being the sound made by buzzing bees, and were placed in front of the painting called *Busy Bee*. The chairs were centripetally arranged around a snail table in the center of the circle of chairs. The snail's spiral is also an important symbol, and mimicked the action of the painting called *Slowly Snail... Time is Creation's Bubble*, which shows the emergence of a magician from a spiral labyrinth. So, there were a lot of entities in the room, in the way of symbols and materials, that suggested other presences.

RK Do you always view your work as a practice involving specific entities and powers?

LD It's a question of the artist's ego. The work doesn't come from me—it comes to me. It's about getting myself out of my own way. Even though I don't have studio assistants—I do everything myself, and it is a very intimate practice in that way—I never really feel I'm alone. My work is very specific to time, place, geography and situation. To give you a more concrete idea: right now, I'm working on a show entitled "Miss Mars," to take place at Sprüth

Magers in London this fall. Even though I am not showing them, I have had this series of paintings hidden in a basement in London for five years now that I started making in a pub called the George and Dragon. They continue to be a sort of inspiration or touchstone for me. St. George is England's patron saint; his cross is their flag. England is also my homeland, my blood line, so it seems significant to do my first show there—a chance to better understand my personal relation to St. George and his beautiful white horse. St. George is associated with Mars. Being a Scorpio, Mars is one of my rulers, and it's been in retrograde the entire time I have been making this show. It's also the closest to Earth that it's ever been, so we are feeling the qualities of Mars right now in an unusual and strong way. So in calling the exhibition "Miss Mars," I was trying to get away from St. George, only to realize, during the process, that he is there, and will be there, regardless of what I might have consciously wanted. The symbol is unavoidable.

RK So your work for this show started off with a combination of site-specific references, intertwined with how you relate to various cosmologies?

LD Exactly. Mars is also related to the elemental spirit Ogun. Ogun is a deity from the Umbanda tradition. He is responsible for warrior energy—power and edge and grandeur. I've been thinking about what it means to make this show at a time where personally I don't have those energies. This is also why I'm calling it "Miss Mars." In a word play, missing Mars turns into being Miss Mars—the cosmic beauty pageant, and the feminine side of the warrior.

RK What are the different methods that you use in making a body of work, in terms of the belief systems that you operate within?

LD I approach the studio as more of a temple. I make it a very clean and clear space. I empty the space, I empty my mind, and I think about the specifics of the exhibition: the space, the time, the city, the season, the architecture, the personalities involved, their histories—everything. And then I wait until those circumstances suggest a story—in this case, St. George and "Miss Mars." Once I know the story, everything else appears, completely formed, absolutely clear. Then all I have to do is paint it! But I know everything already: I know the characters, I know their stories, I know everything about them. I know the palette that's needed, the materials—everything—because they



David Lewis

Lucy Dodd

Interview by RUBA KATRIB

Photography by CAROLINE TOMPKINS

A portrait of Lucy Dodd, a woman with dark brown hair styled in two braids. She is looking slightly to her right with a neutral expression. She is wearing a dark red halter top and a patterned strap with colorful floral and star motifs. She has small blue star-shaped earrings. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Lucy
Dodd



“Spirituality doesn't want



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are not really my decisions anymore—they are who these characters are, and the materials are Earth's readymades. For example, with "Miss Mars," since the challenge was to articulate the feminine side of the warrior, I used red for Mars (and Kremer's "English Red" for Mars in England), pink from the cochineal bug, iron oxides for Ogun the metalworker, fluorescent green for the heart, and so on. And Miss Mars is also (this is the personal side of the myth) my newborn baby, who was born in April, and ruled by Mars, so she of course contributes, giving me incredible chartreuse poop that I can smear on the paintings as needed, and integrate into the whole.

RK It's interesting, because that's one mode of how you work—maybe we can call it the "temple process." On the other hand, in several instances, you've brought the works into a collective, almost performative and ritualized exhibition moment, open to participation and collaboration. How do you view that part of the process?

LD At the Whitney Museum, I had a full program of events around the work. That was called for by that specific situation, the museum's huge size and amazingly broad audience. And it was spring, when everything is blooming into life. I felt to hold that space, to fill it, I needed to share it—and music has that way of penetrating. In prior exhibitions, I've used music and performance as a way to articulate the stories, to emphasize the operatic, the theatrical, as needed. But "Mayflower" was a meditative moment, so the music was limited to the daytime opening, as a form of celebration (and also a rite of spring, with flower girls and girls named for flowers). Ultimately, the paintings are about the actual truth in a moment of time.

RK Does it matter to you if viewers understand where the work is coming from—the exact references or spiritual practice that informs it?

LD I've noticed the paintings do talk to people and communicate on some basic level what my intention is. But I'm not really concerned about people getting the specifics.

RK Like with the chairs in your show—they became a very solemn and meditative element that evokes a state, rather than illustrating a concept. You aren't trying to show or teach people about something that you are representing.

LD Well, no, because I'm working in a contemporary art context. And while there are traces of my personal practice there, in the end, I'm making painting, and not for a spiritual community. It's a hard mo-

ment to be alive, to know how to contribute socially. I found that distancing myself from the art-world social matrix gave me the most ability to engage.

RK But do you think there is room for serious engagement with spirituality in the art world? A lot of people are turning to indigenous practices, esoteric traditions and outsider art. It's a moment in which the world is in deep crisis, and there is a renewed interest in other forms of knowledge and ways of being, which makes sense in a lot of ways. But historically, there aren't many positive examples of the incorporation of these ways into more mainstream art. Quite the opposite—there's a long line of mimicking and exploitation. Several recent attempts, in my opinion, show a worrying lack of sincere interest, dedication and respect. Do you think we have a different chance right now?

LD I have to have hope. And besides, I am very cautious about discussing the details of my personal practice. I can't talk about the spiritual in relation to my artwork, as it is very sacred thing.

RK Speaking about one's spiritual practice can be challenging, and I think I understand the resistance to state what is perhaps better left up to individual experience. It's a sacred relationship, your personal practice and your community: it informs what you're doing in your work and changes you fundamentally, but you don't have to put it front and center, use it as content, or claim it as tangible or formulaic.

LD Indeed. My work is subtle, and I think it remains that way. Painting is a very powerful language, but my contribution is humble; it's not out there to teach or to do. It's a subtle thing.

RK On the other hand, looking in the gap between what is seen and said, and what is also unknowable, can be an interesting exercise in itself. Can the spirituality be there and be felt without being explained and overstated?

LD It can *only* be there if it is never explained, or even talked about at all. It doesn't want to be talked about. When you chase it, when you look at it, it runs away. My work is much simpler than that: symbols and stories weaving together, weaving objects that are themselves symbols and stories. The spider weaves the canvas and on that canvas is an image of the spider, weaving the canvas. And so on. That's all it ever is. A language of symbols. A maze of masks. And then, after a long time learning and playing and living in the labyrinth, you find what you are looking for. ■

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