

The San Diego Union-Tribune

At Lux, artist Tomory Dodge embraces imperfections and breaking the rules

by G. James Daichendt



Artist Tomory Dodge, the final artist-in-residence at Lux Art Institute, in front of his painting "Unexplainable Cat." (Courtesy photo by Ernesto Gonzalez)

Assembled unruliness describes the work of artist Tomory Dodge. This is especially prevalent when large gestural and explosive brushstrokes juxtapose soft and sometimes awkward marks. In his most recent exhibit, the Los Angeles-based painter explores these tensions and layers them together until they become a cohesive work of art. The final artist-in-residence in Lux Art Institute's 2017-18 season, his exhibit completes the year with a bang.

The work on display covers the last four years, with the most recent being a painting Dodge completed during the residency. A host of textures and colors created with a variety of tools overlap one another in this new painting as they fight for attention. The canvas buzzes with excitement as forms evolve and emerge from one another, much like an uneven quilt whose lines fall off their grid and now have a mind of their own.

The myriad of visual languages push and pull to create a number of paintings within paintings. This handcrafted aspect is important to Dodge as he is opposed to mechanical processes and embraces the imperfections of the human hand. Whether it's inconsistent lines, textures or patterns, it's what he does next that saves the work and makes it interesting.

Dodge was quietly working on a few color studies in the corner of the gallery when I arrived for my visit. Soft-spoken but serious, the artist is thrilled with the response he's received from San Diego visitors. The following are edited excerpts from our conversation.

Q: How has the Lux residency treated you?

A: It has been really nice. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday people can come in and look around when I am working.

Q: Have San Diego visitors been talkative and receptive to the work? It can be intimidating to ask an artist a question.

A: I've been asked a lot of specific questions about the paintings, but it can be intimidating for the artist as well.

Q: Were any comments more memorable than others?

A: There were a few young painters that visited and looked very closely at each painting on view, and we had a chance to chat afterwards. That was really rewarding to see someone spend that much time looking.

Q: An art museum is such an unusual place to work compared to an artist studio.

A: It's weird to work with finished work properly installed right over my shoulder.

Q: What kind of limitations have you encountered?

A: A month is a short amount of time, so I've tried to keep it simple, and I couldn't make irrational decisions like painting it all blue that last week of the residency. But it's also nice to get out of the regular routine and be in a different situation. In the studio, I can work on multiple images so I've had to catch myself from not touching the older paintings.

Q: Is the work ever really done?

A: A painting is done for the moment. I am trying to decide if the most recent one is done or not.

Q: Do you have a particular process you follow when starting a painting?

A: There is no set structure or process that I use to make the work.

Q: So you don't establish any rules or guidelines?

A: Constantly — but I break them. There are certain structures and imposed limitations you can see in some of the marks but it all goes out the window at a certain point. It's helpful as a place to start.

Q: There is an amazing array of abstract language across your works — do you pull from any historical sources?

A: Hans Hofmann for sure and, of course, the New York School, plus I've always had affinity for the Bay Area Expressionists. Philip Guston has also been huge for me. Conversations in painting develop a lot slower than we think. So the concepts started in the post-war period are still going on and are still relevant ideas.

Q: Even though we are referencing abstract artists, your work is not purely abstract.

A: The last few years, there has been an emerging figuration coming into the work. In a way, all of these works are figures in a sense.

Q: How important are your titles?

A: Titles are one way that help me finish a painting. They are not straightforward, but it's a way to introduce additional language.

Q: Why is failure important to you?

A: I really depend on failure. Starting out with structures and have them fall apart seems to propel the painting forward.

Q: Is there anything you hope folks understand when they visit?

A: I only hope visitors come, look and spend some time with the paintings.

Daichendt is Dean of the Colleges and Professor of Art History at Point Loma Nazarene University.