

Winter 2017

Lucy Dodd by Rashid Johnson

Efforts to wrangle Lucy Dodd's performance-based installations into a tidy summation might work against their effusive character. An abridged list of the materials that are splashed, stained, or smoked into her unwieldy canvases give a better idea of their flavor: black lichen, kombucha scoby, foss mud, yerba mate, pomegranate from Segura de León, iron glimmer, fermented walnut, hematite, sumac extract, bat guano, and urine of a dog named Bub. These unlikely and far-from-archival sources of pigmentation are akin to a shaman's brew, not only in their earthy origins but also in their activation through ritual.

With Rashid Johnson the artist walks us through the idiosyncratic conventions of her practice, discussing scents, sounds, and other interventions that guide each new body of work.

RASHID JOHNSON My first question is: Do you consider yourself a painter or a sculptor?

LUCY DODD A painter.

RJ Many of your objects have sculptural qualities. They are not necessarily married to the wall, which is how we typically encounter paintings. Often, they live in the middle of the room. How do you feel about people moving around the things you make?

LD I think about painting in a theatrical way. The paintings are actually characters that people have to interact with. I did my MFA in sculpture. But underneath all I was doing was always a desire for flattening things and making paintings. My deepest interest was to strip everything down, creating a flat object—painting as an object.

RJ That makes a lot of sense. There is something very flat about your objects. In full disclosure, I am lucky to own a painting by you. I've lived with it for several years, and it has been interesting to witness the aging of that object and how it has evolved, both in my thinking about it and on the wall of my house.

Your training as a sculptor must really affect the way you think about shapes. Can you tell me how you got to the shaped canvas? Were you looking at Frank Stella, thinking about his history with shaped canvases? Or Ed Clark? You may or may not be familiar with him. He's not the most celebrated artist. Were you thinking about those artists' ideas and that history?

LD Not explicitly, no. I went into the studio and the shapes . . . Well, you know, I was working in a really odd-shaped studio.

RJ I love how pragmatic art practice can be. *(laughter)*

LD I really don't try that hard to come up with ideas. I basically take what is in front of me and interpret it. I was working in a studio that didn't have any right angles, and that must have been formative somehow.

When I go into the studio I don't think about art history, I really don't. I leave that at the door. Of course, in art school I studied Stella and Ellsworth Kelly. In undergrad, I actually remade some Kellys. He was a huge influence on me, but I didn't think about that ten years later when I started making shaped paintings. It was just something that filtered through. I wasn't explicitly referencing anything when making these shapes. Really what I did was "stretch" the whole floor of my odd-shaped studio, in canvas, thinking: This is where I begin.

RJ Which eventually lead to the results in your show at Blum and Poe.

LD Right. My whole studio floor was shaped like a giant sail, so it was natural for me to treat each canvas as a sail both in shape and in story. I did not alter their shapes after. I had a very specific number in mind that I was going to work with.

RJ How did you come up with that number?

LD It was cyclical: twelve with a key. There were eleven paintings and a key that fit them all together. I started with a triangle, which became the slot that then split up the canvases in the room. It made sense to me.

RJ If it makes sense to you, then it does make sense. It's an artist's practice. Stretching a canvas the size of the studio sounds quite performative. I'm thinking of Nauman, mapping his studio. Pollock comes to mind, and other artists performing painting. You've also used other aspects of performance and music in your work. What role does performance play both in your studio practice and in the exhibition space?

LD When I enter the studio, I am on my best behavior. Do we actually think we are alone when we are alone? There is always an invisible audience of people/others there, voices helping me to create these works. And music helps.

RJ What do you listen to?

LD Mostly Afro-Brazilian music. Stuff that calls out to the invisible forces we are or are not aware of that are helping us. That's my studio practice. I am very



65 Installation view at Galleria Alfonso Artiaco, Naples, Italy, 2017.

- private, no assistants. Before a new series of paintings or a show, I clear my whole studio and start completely clean, spic and span. Then it all gets made, and it all goes out. Then it's clean again, very much like a stage. How that translates into exhibiting and openings—it *has* to translate. I can't help it. It's inevitable.
- RJ Do you feel like the music or the energy that was in the studio needs to be duplicated?
- LD It can't be duplicated. The studio is one world, the exhibitino another. The paintings are characters, and the exhibition becomes more of a performance. I sometimes bring in performers.
- RJ Do you feel like that's a part of the work? When those people are not there to perform with the works, are the works missing them?
- LD No, they absorb them.
- RJ They suck them in like material. It's an ephemeral quality in the work that can be present or not.
- LD Totally. It's almost a necessity to perform or do something at an opening. I feel really odd if I don't.
- RJ Otherwise you would be just standing there.
- LD Yeah—my worst nightmare. In any social situation, I was/am the Tasmanian devil. (*laughter*) I have to keep active. Sitting there at my own opening, with the most precious thing that I've lived with for so long and then all of a sudden, all these people are there. I feel naked and splayed open.
- RJ I hide in the back sometimes.
- LD I hide or just keep going. At my opening in Berlin, tons of people were coming in, and I was like, Here, have some milk. I'm performing. (*laughter*)
- RJ The escapist tactic. You don't have to be this person on display.
- LD But then I am even more, times 100.
- RJ Right, you become a character.
- LD Yes, I have an outfit, and I'll put it on.
- RJ It's theater, in a way. You spoke about how the work can absorb things. Is there something shamanistic in your projects, in your approach to making paintings?
- LD I cannot say no. Although it seems quite embarrassing.
- RJ I don't think so at all.
- LD I don't think an artist and a shaman actually have that much difference if we go back, way back, in time. Today, it's just gotten so wrapped up in intellectual stuff that we've gotten far away from a basic truth about what artists do in the world. I do find this difficult to talk about. Because shamans are doing something very different and important and really real.
- RJ What about ritual? You have the ritual where you listen to music in your studio, the ritual where you clean it in its entirety before you start something. What kind of other rituals do you employ that might be parallel?
- LD A lot!
- RJ Can you give me some examples?
- LD I "defume" the studio—clean it with smoke, sage, copal, lavender, cedar, which also comes into the work because I use the ash inside of the paintings. Even on a daily basis, what I do and how I take care of my body and all of that, is pretty ritualistic.
- RJ Do you work nine to five? Do you work at night?
- LD Everything changed once I had a baby. It's been so different working. I used to work at night. Now I don't.
- RJ I have a similar story. It's odd because I always find that people will ask female artists how their work changes after they have had children, but they never ask male artists! Which I find to be really sexist.
- LD Old fashioned, yes. You don't need to be a dad, right. You don't need to really pay attention.
- RJ Being a parent changed my work a lot. Now I am more standard in my hours. I go in at a certain time, allot a certain time to work, and use that time to work.
- LD I have to say, having a child has made me much more sane, which is a positive thing because I could get way too involved in myself. It is good to have a more focused, very clear idea of what needs to be done in a certain allotted time.
- RJ Do you feel that when you leave the studio you are in a different mode? Are you still the artist?
- LD I'm the mom, I love it. It's fine. I take my son to the studio, too. I always try to not control my situation too much. He collaborated with me on a painting a few days ago in the studio. That was amazing. I loved it. I am totally okay with that! (*laughter*)
- RJ Let's talk about materials. You use quite a few different things, mostly stuff that you don't find at the art

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supply store, which is something close to my heart because I don't do much of that sort of shopping either. You use liquid smoke, and one of the more interesting materials is dog urine. Where and how do you come to them? Are they signifiers, things you want to express different ideas with, or are you just using them for their actual characteristics?

LD I am using them because they are meaningful. I have a relationship with them, I can believe in them. They can be themselves as materials. I feel I don't need to control them as much as something I would buy, because those things in their essence are already so controlled. I can really let a material be what it is. That relationship between what I am going to do, what my intervention is with that material is interesting and fun, and also gross sometimes and smelly and sometimes it doesn't work.

RJ Like life.

LD Yeah! (*laughter*)

RJ Where does one go about collecting dog urine?

LD Well, I have a dog!

RJ Wait, does he urinate directly on the paintings or do you collect the urine?

LD To be honest, my dog was urinating on the paintings. She passed away, a very special dog, my best friend and studio assistant for thirteen years. Bubs. When I first made those paintings, they were on my floor and she was diabetic so she had a lot of urine.

RJ Were you upset at first?

LD I was, and then I surrendered. I was like, Oh, what if I add pigment to this. I really don't try to fight what's happening. I set up the studio so that everything is purposeful. Anything that enters is part of it.

RJ It's supposed to be there.

LD Yeah, if you set it up that way, it's all a part of the master plan. One summer, bats were coming in, leaving droppings on things. I poured some liquid over the droppings, pushed them in, and there you go.

RJ I'm interested in that idea of surrender, of being accepting and how difficult that can be, but it's also difficult to control every single thing. Some artists' practices are very much about exactly that kind of control. Yours is really quite loose.

LD Quite loose, but rigid on the outside. I am very rigid in my rules and in my world.

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I don't think an artist and a shaman actually have that much difference if we go back, way back, in time.



- RJ You seem to have a formula, a strategy. Your ritual cleaning is done in order to produce these objects that later feel dirty. Something I notice in a lot of these paintings is a kind of skirt around it. Stretched traditionally around the stretcher bars, but there's this top layer of fray. How does that function?
- LD That's because I am reversing the painting process. I end with the stretcher bar, not begin with it. I had to figure out a way to do this, how to stretch it on the floor without wrapping the side, so that the whole surface would—
- RJ —stay present and flat and unmolested?
- LD Right. The painting is what I meant it to be, not to be wrapped around the sides. Simple!
- RJ I love your pragmatism. There're parallels in my process, where the mess happens in one location, then there is a display moment. And those two things are not necessarily together. But there are a lot of funky materials that you use that are so exciting to see.
- LD They are what our world is made of.
- RJ Do you think about how those things will change? Do you think about patina? What do you expect them to look like in thirty years?
- LD I said once to a gallerist I work with, "People really shouldn't complain in a hundred years if they have a monochrome; that is totally fine by me!"
- RJ It's not dissimilar to the music that is played and gets absorbed into the paintings. You don't get to see that. The experience and story of the painting is still there, and the performance of the painting is still there, even if it's not present.
- LD And there are always photos.
- RJ At the Rauschenberg show at MoMA, I wondered what his work looked like thirty years ago.
- LD All the yellowing and all.
- RJ Right. How much different it must have felt, how it must have felt so "now." I think your work is going to tell a similarly complex story about time and change.
- LD Have you noticed yours change?
- RJ Not a lot, no. But I am also welcoming to any sort of change.
- LD Okay, good. (*laughter*)
- RJ What brought you upstate?
- LD It's not an interesting story. It's just quality of life. I wasn't making money yet, and I just couldn't live in squalor anymore.
- RJ Trust me, I get it.
- LD If I could have just held out a little longer, maybe I would still be there.
- RJ Where were you living before you left?
- LD Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn.
- RJ In a small place?
- LD Not as small as you might think, I actually made my first two twelve by twelve foot paintings on the floor of the room I had there. I ripped up the linoleum floor, refinished the beautiful, wide wood planks and stretched the canvas down. There was a puff-ball mushroom growing in between the cracks in the floorboards, and I used the power inside of it in the paintings. But I am glad I got out.
- RJ Do you love where you are now?
- LD I love it, yes.
- RJ It feels like home? You feel you will stay?
- LD Kingston? Yeah, totally.
- RJ What effect do you feel it has had on your work?
- LD Well, I bought a studio, so I can create my whole world, which is all I ever dreamt of doing.
- RJ Is it a pride of ownership sort of thing?
- LD It's a sculpture in itself. I have my mothership where I can disappear and do my thing and sail away. That's what I needed and what I wanted for so long. I got into Kingston before the big hype and was able to get something super cheap. After the first show I ever made money on, I never saw any of that money. I put it right into my building and just began again.
- RJ Smart. I think what we talked about kind of answers this, but I still feel I should ask: Are you more interested in poetry or concept?
- LD Poetry!
- RJ Do you think they are indeed two different things?
- LD Did I answer too quick? (*laughter*) Concept is just so

- complicated, in terms of art history. People are saying, I'm a conceptual artist. I mean, what are you talking about, really? There was a movement in the '60s and '70s, but where are we going?
- RJ Like people are defending themselves with language?
- LD A little, yeah. One of my favorite teachers at Art Center was John [Knight]. He's like Mr. Conceptual Artist. It was ridiculously hard to be in his class, because everything was worthless. It taught me a lot, and . . . it's complicated.
- RJ Do you think these materials have a conceptual nature as signifiers and vehicles, but you use them poetically? Or are they merely tools for that poetry?
- LD (*sighs*) . . . More the first thing you said. I would just be wary of talking about this myself.
- RJ You're happy to have other people read through the lines?
- LD Yes.
- RJ I get that. Another question: You often make these really big paintings. Are they large because of the space you are working in, or your mood, or is their size related to historical abstract large painting narratives? Why are these things so big?
- LD Why are they so big? I have a lot to say! I think they—
- RJ —kind of bully the space.
- LD Yeah, they bully me, too. Maybe there is a little bullying that needs to be happening. Especially in the moment when I felt, Okay, this is how I am going to enter the art world. I had been on the outskirts for ten years or so, and I thought, This is the moment, this is the time, and I have what I need to do it, which was large paintings. I also make small ones.
- RJ Which do you like more, does it matter?
- LD No, it doesn't. The big paintings swallow you up, and you become really small. The small paintings allow you to see a whole world which is huge.
- RJ Do you think about the space that they are to be in before thinking about scale?
- LD Yeah. For the last show I did, I didn't even visit the space. Usually I have to do that. I see it, and I know.
- RJ I like the scale of your works. I think they are challenging and have an objectness that makes you feel, like you said, that you are negotiating with something bigger than yourself. They also encourage you to imagine the challenge the artist went through in their negotiation with this object.
- LD Kind of like sports. The physicality.
- RJ I love the idea of physicality. I often make things that are quite heavy, and I think about my body having to be challenged to pick them up to move them.
- LD Do you ever make something you can't move yourself?
- RJ Absolutely, all the time actually. I do have to have help with certain things because I cannot move them. It's interesting how collaborative that becomes. It's like moving a couch down the stairs. Everyone is thinking to himself or herself, Do we turn this way or up? Thinking about how it moves through space is in some ways like how I think about moving it through the studio. But you work without any help, how do you move these things around?
- LD Everything I can move on my own because until those last steps of building the stretchers, which I don't do myself, they are basically like tents. I can roll them up and drag them around.
- RJ Stepping on them and bringing different materials in.
- LD Sometimes I bring them all over to different locations. I might do some rubbing and move them to the barn, then back to the studio. It's like sails or tents, a big canvas thing I roll up to go. They are very mobile.
- RJ Do you think of your works as being masculine or feminine? People have written about their femininity.
- LD I definitely feel the work has a masculine quality to it, but the way I do things is inherently from a female perspective because in this incarnation I am female. But I definitely have a strong male component to my personality.
- RJ Are you a feminist?
- LD Absolutely! Duh. (*laughter*)