

# frieze

## Elemental Symbolism and Exotic Ingredients in Lucy Dodd's 'May Flower'

The artist's materials include avocado extract, wild walnut, yew berries, nettles, hematite and tea at David Lewis, New York

by Michael Wilson  
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A ring of chairs occupies the central space of New York-based artist Lucy Dodd's exhibition 'May Flower', her third at David Lewis. But these aren't the kind of hardwearing seats often placed strategically around museums to allow for relaxed contemplation – or, if they are, it's hard to tell, since each one is concealed beneath a thick coat of pigmented cotton. Dyed a wild variety of colours and spilling onto the floor around each object like dreadlocks, the woven strands of material covering each piece suggest unhindered organic growth; it's easy to imagine them doubling in size between the opening of the show and its conclusion a few weeks later. Dodd's titles suggest real-world referents (*Bzzzzz B* [all works 2018] is clad in yellow and black; *A Wash* in watery blue and white), but they're best regarded as objects unto themselves, a curious family, a collective shaggy-dog story.

As this series suggests, Dodd is fascinated by the notion of entropy, and by the possibilities of combining matter in new ways before pushing it to its physical limits. She makes paintings, yes, but often uses organic materials one might expect to find in a smoothie along with more conventional paints. Along with unmixed found pigments, her canvases are dyed with such ingredients as avocado extract, wild walnut, yew berries, nettles, hematite and tea (Tetley, specifically). This means they're subject to gradual change, with certain materials coming to the fore as others decay and fade into the background. Like the chair sculptures, the paintings are riots of semi-abstract gesture and texture dominated by an earthy palette that underscores their natural origins.



Lucy Dodd, 'May Flower', 2018, installation view, David Lewis Gallery, New York. Courtesy: David Lewis Gallery, New York

This is not to say that ‘May Flower’ is all about aimless (or only formalist) painterly rooting around; there’s a powerful elemental symbolism at play in Dodd’s work, too. Suggestions of flowers and moons, stars and crystals, splashes of water and cosmic explosions all contribute to an aura and visual lexicon of primal myth. In *Prince Porcupine*, for example, which the artist propped up against a column at the gallery, a pale-yellow semicircle haloed by sprays and splatters of white rises beneath a crescent set against a splotch of black cuttlefish ink. In her elliptical accompanying statement, Dodd describes this motif as a planetary ‘guardian’, and the picture certainly has the feel of an homage to something greater than ourselves. I don’t know if Dodd is religious, but if this was intended ironically, the aim remains well-disguised.



Lucy Dodd, *Father and Daughter's America*, 2018, paper beads, plastic beads, nylon cord, and wood, 2.7 x 2.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

In ‘Open Plan’, her 2016 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Dodd made the performative element of her work explicit, first by creating paintings in the space itself prior to the opening, then by inviting musicians to play in the installation once it was complete. ‘May Flower’ isn’t quite as ‘live’ as that, but there is still a theatrical atmosphere to the show, a sense that we are more than just viewers, and that a ritual of some sort is awaiting its completion. Even the raw space between the drips and swirls in paintings like *The Flight of Aunt Goose* and *A Wink from the Bottom of the Sea* seem here to connote such a possibility. Overseen by the monumental *Venus and the Bull*, the show as a whole has an imposing but ultimately welcoming feel, a back-to-the-land vitality that edges away from the here and now. Only *Father and Daughter's America*, a US flag in the form of a large plastic-and-paper beaded curtain at the room’s entrance, struck a current – and hence dissonant – note.