



Red Bar, 2011.

TOMORY DODGE

As he moved deeper into abstraction, this young L.A.-based artist found that his true subject matter is the primal pleasures of paint. BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

Tomory Dodge didn't find his way to abstraction by steeping himself in theory and assembling a rigorous conceptual framework. Rather, as he tells it, a little sheepishly, "I sort of stumbled into abstract painting."

While a grad student at California Institute of the Arts in the early 2000s, he would drive out to the desert and take photographs for inspiration for his representational paintings. His snapshots weren't very good—sometimes he wouldn't even bother looking at them—so he'd resort to making up the image. The whole process began to feel like an "unnecessary burden," he says, especially because the fun

stuff was the abstraction, the little bits on the edges of the recognizable image. He'd save that for last, like the favorite part of a meal. His attention started to drift from the ostensible subject, say a Joshua tree or a tunnel. "The subject matter got pushed out until it wasn't there anymore," he recalls.

Now when he begins one of his dramatic canvases, it may be with no more than a horizontal bar of color. He keeps riffing—painting, scraping down, covering over, creating explosions of intensely hued strips—until, somehow, he knows he's finished. "Figuring out when you're ▷

ART SHOW



Ocean, 2007.

done—that’s tough,” he says. “I’ve come to the conclusion that doubt plays a big role for me.” Still, Dodge has been on a tear, with 14 solo exhibitions in the past eight years. His most recent show opened in early September at Acme gallery in Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife, a textile designer.

Dodge is a second-generation artist. His mother, Madeleine, is a painter in Denver, where she and her husband, a physician, raised their three sons. For Dodge, the example she set has been invaluable. “Having a practicing artist [for a mother], just knowing that’s an option, is

huge,” he explains, acknowledging that, in the minds of most children, artists are exotic, far-away beings. “Seeing someone struggle with their work prepared me for what I was in for.”

Dodge went East to attend Rhode Island School of Design and spent his senior year in Rome. “It’s really hard to make a painting there,” he says, shaking his head. “You’re confronted with the Sistine Chapel and Caravaggios all over the place. It’s historically intimidating. I made horrible work for a year.”

By the time he arrived at CalArts, following a stint as an art handler in Seattle, he figured he’d jettison painting altogether. But alone in his studio, he found that was all he wanted to do. “I love paint,” Dodge says. “I can’t pin it down, but that interaction with the physical substance drives the work.”

Anoka Faruquee, a mentor at CalArts and now an associate art professor at Yale, says that Dodge’s devout belief in painting kept him from being overwhelmed in grad school. “At CalArts, which is very conceptual, that can be a tough sell with some faculty,” Faruquee says. “He stayed true to his core.” Even today Dodge remains fascinated by paint’s ability to transform into something else: an image. He mentions Vermeer and the master’s famed *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. “A tiny blob of

paint, that’s all the earring is,” he says. “But you can’t stop looking at it. You know how it’s done, but it convinces you it’s something else.”

A course in psychoanalysis helped Dodge understand and relish abstraction’s mystery. “Some people like resolution,” he says. “I have no interest in doing anything I fully understand. I like stumping myself.”

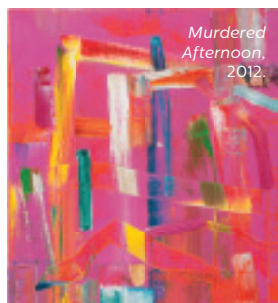
The art press has frequently described Dodge’s large, lush canvases as seductive, a label their creator does not dispute, though he adds, “on some level, I try to make them a little repulsive too. They vibrate; they undulate. But I want people to look at them, for sure.” ■



The Future, 2010.



Curtain, 2010.



Murdered Afternoon, 2012.



Penumbra (Study), 2005.