



## Tomory Dodge: Decisive Ambiguity

By Gary Brewer | 27 November 2024

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*“The first question I ask myself when something doesn’t seem to be beautiful is why do I think it’s not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.”*

—John Cage



Tomory Dodge, *Bad Lands*, 2024, oil on canvas, 80x72 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, NY, NY

In new paintings by Los Angeles–based artist Tomory Dodge we see a fresh approach at work. A wonderful tension between the flatness of the painting’s surface plane and a spatial ambiguity becomes sophisticated, poetic and humorous all at once. These works are drunk on their own beguiling complexity and generously share with us their intoxicating delight.

The paintings in the show that I find the most compelling have subsumed any figure-ground relationships into an overall pattern. In “Bad Lands” (2024), the zigzag patterns alternating in color and tone from dark to light create an elbows-akimbo geometric design that struts from top to bottom, suggesting perspective by transitioning in size as they descend in smaller to larger intervals. The painting entertains the mind and eye with its blend of humor and abstraction, engaging us in complex geometric spatial relationships with a playful wink.

In this painting the use of the zigzag, herringbone pattern and clashing colors creates a vibrant optical energy. Within the field are “glitches”—disruptions that create openings in the unity of the surface, allowing us to see the loosely applied gestural underpainting. These glitches alternately seem to float above the surface of the painting and act as holes in the pattern we can peer through.

“Bad Lands” is done in low tonal contrasts. This softens the optical sensations and gives the work an almost blurry quality. The gentle pulsation of chromatic interactions in the alternating orange, blue and red lines against green, animates the quirky cadence of the geometric design marching down the canvas.



Tomory Dodge, *Breakfast in Bed*, 2024, oil on canvas, 72x80 inches, Image courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, NY, NY



Tomory Dodge, *Visitor*, 2023, oil on canvas, 72x50 inches, Image courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, NY, NY

Another painting, “Breakfast in Bed” (2024), shares the same design motif. The sequences from small to larger geometric elements create a graphic equivalent to perspective that are much more animated here. Breaches in the pattern become small abstract paintings within the painting that vie for our attention. Dodge gives us a crazy quilt of information that dislodges our grounded interpretation of space. The confusing non-hierarchical composition creates a somehow musical visual score that could have been written by John Cage. It seeks to free our minds from a knowing, balanced order to experience a freewheeling, information-rich cacophony of visual delight. Dodge’s ability to walk a razor’s edge between chaos and a unique kind of order is a fundamental element in his strength as a painter.

The structure of these paintings suggests late 19th-century American crazy quilts. The overall patterning, with arrangements of different patches and blocks in a sort of painterly improvisation, brings this inventive American-born art form to mind. The unified design approach gives the works a formal resolve: they touch upon the innovations of abstract expressionism, where the hierarchy of classical composition is replaced with the power of a singular holist gestalt.

Dodge has said he approaches his work with a philosophical skepticism, interrogating each of his aesthetic choices. “I question the idea of quality—is one thing or experience really superior to another? When a passage in my painting is too beautiful, I paint it out, and through a process of addition and subtraction, I come to a point where I can feel the work is finished.” His method is an uncertain path guided by process and intuition, adding and subtracting passages while leaving a record of the painting’s becoming.

He demonstrates an exquisite sensitivity to color: in some paintings he explores an eccentric sweet-and-sour palette, in others the beauty and balance of harmonious colors. The tension between his ambiguous figure-ground relationships, the flatness of the patterns combined with a sense of spatial depth, creates a psychological tension as they all compete for the viewer’s eye.

There is a playful pop sensibility lurking in the folds and fissures of Dodge’s creative vocabulary. He has spoken of how as a child he would draw while watching TV. “The zigzag patterns in my paintings are a suggestion of analog

TV screens. As a young kid I used to watch cartoons while I drew. The television screens depicted in the cartoons were often filled with this pattern or with dot patterns that I also use. I also love psychedelic rock posters from the 1960s." The humor in his powerful work is a sweet elixir adding to the pleasure and joy these paintings convey.

Willem de Kooning referred himself as a "slipping glimpser" as he sought to find moments of resolve within the storm of his gestural energy. Tomory Dodge embarks on a journey to discover shimmering moments of cognitive illumination within his work. His paintings teeter on the edge of the haphazard and erratic, but find a beguiling equilibrium amidst the labyrinth of sensations.