

## **Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting by Bob Nickas**

**Phaidon, 2009**

**Tomory Dodge**

“I love disaster / and I love what comes after.” Tom Verlaine’s lyric from the song “Ain’s That Nothin,” performed by the group Television, resonates with the work of Tomory Dodge. In his paintings we are confronted with explosions, tornadoes, collapse, and entropy, and even when something is recognizable, or barely recognizable. Dodge blows it to bits with a whirlwind of paint. Some scenes are reminiscent of photos taken in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in which houses were reduced to so much splintered debris. Inside Out and Floodscape (both 2004) come readily to mind, as does Robert Smithson - “The earth, subject to cataclysms, is a cruel master”? - as well as Jean-Luc Godard. When Dodge paints consumer objects, like a coffeemaker, a refrigerator, and a golf cart, it’s as if his paintbrush is a stick of dynamite. Almost forty years after the fact, Dodge made a painting titled Weekend (2006), after Godard’s 1967 film, which captures something of its nightmarish mood as it unknowingly (or not) foresaw the convulsive events about to occur in May 1968. But the most Godardian painting of all is Supermarket (2004), an image that could not possibly be identified as a supermarket, or as anywhere else for that matter, without our having been prompted by the title; Dodge has violently, though precisely, painted “the supermarket: to shreds. Here, he posits more of a dislocation than a location, more of a non-site than a site. The image might as well be an extreme close-up of exploding confetti, and yet his brushstrokes are in no way random or quickly executed. One thing that Dodge has in common with other painters whose images seem to have exploded onto the canvas is that the opposite is true: a painting that appears to be the result of a spontaneous combustion is in fact the product of months of deliberate work, of intention rather than intuition. What might read as “action painting” is in actuality a cerebral form of body-operating. Dodge admits to “a wariness of gestural painting,” and in his work, gesture is evident and at the same time measured.

Dodge works from photographic sources, using pictures of swamps and deserts (Smithson’s wet/dry dialectic), of icebergs, clouds, and trees. He starts with the basic idea of an image, and “with more recognizable imagery,” he says, “the image acts as a guide.” In recent years, as the level of abstraction in his paintings has increased, the actual activity of painting has become his guide. In his studio, standing in front of a new painting, Space Junk (2008), he moves toward the canvas. “Before, the brushstrokes constructed the image,” he says, and, stepping even closer, “Now the brushstrokes are the image, and in doing so calls greater attention to the placement of forms, the representation of gesture, and the color interactions; the very activity, decisions, and energy that have brought the painting into the world are not only there to be seen, but become, in effect, part of the painting’s subject matter. Where previously the subject of a painting would be, for example, a nocturne in which a tree is illuminated with strands of colored lights, the subject now, in many ways, is painting itself. Abstraction has always

been its own legitimate subject. This we know. These recent paintings by Dodge send us back to his earlier work, where even the representational pictures appear to be about the abstracting of what is familiar or recognizable. The “zoom” that is present in his paintings now can’t help but recall a seminal publication of Gerhard Richter’s, 128 Details From a Picture. The book comprises 128 photographs of one of his paintings, seen in close proximity and from different angles, suggesting nothing less than the notion that every painting contains many paintings - as if to propose not so much the idea that a painting is composed of its parts, and that the parts build the overall image, but that a painting is an active site of pure potential for both painter and viewer alike. Dodge, like many other abstract painters working today, considers painting and abstraction an image to be more freeing than any other kind of picture-making. After years of working from photographs, he has begun to make collages, further fracturing his image sources. This fracturing also has a political dimension. Daisy Cutter (2008), which takes its title from the megabomb used in Afghanistan, and before that in Vietnam, reanimates - or re-ignites - history painting through abstraction, an approach also evident in the work of Wayne Gonzales and Chris Finley.

Dodge suspends his marks, as it were, in midair, or immerses them buoyantly in water. The aptly titled Levitate (2006) is a perfect example of this approach, for we could be looking at an image of a painting that, stroke by stroke, has come unmoored from the canvas, only for those brushstrokes to become entangled as it drifts into the ether. Zero Gravity (2008), an atmospheric image of deep space, is about weight/weightlessness and, of course, paint. Iceberg (2005) pictures an impossibly heavy, dense object that floats in its own cold, glassy reflection. All of the stuff/brushstrokes hovering in Space Junk can be seen as eventually destined to meet an event horizon, the area around a black hole or wormhole. For the background, Dodge has used both matte and glossy blacks so that part of the ground appears object-like and reflects light. Unlike a black hole, in which the inner light of the horizon is unobservable, Dodge’s painting makes visible that which will ultimately disappear. The painting, via its title, also makes us think back to the everyday objects the artist has painted/exploded - the coffeemaker, the refrigerator, and the golf cart - as well as to the supermarket disaster, and shows us an absurdist, dark scene of future dread: space itself as the dumping site (or non-site, as the case may be) for all we discard and abandon. Godard referred to Weekend as “a film adrift in the cosmos, a film found on the scrap heap.” For all their catastrophe mixed with the most vibrant rainbows of color, these sentiments can also serve to describe the paintings of Tomory Dodge.