

The New Criterion

Art

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Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On “John Dubrow: Paintings” at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, “Wayne Thiebaud: The Figure” at Allan Stone Gallery, “Gregory Crewdson” at Luhring Augustine, and “Lois Dodd: Landscapes and Structures, a Survey Exhibition” at Alexandre Gallery.

Art is work, of course, but just how should the work of art-making be done? Dada, pop art, and minimalism placed the premium on conception. The labor that went into the planning and reception of art went hand in hand with the relative effortlessness of execution. Artists traded in their traditional role as craftsmen to take on the guises of architects, designers, promoters, and businessmen. Meanwhile the manufacturing of art was contracted out to studio assistants and union-men.

The purity of such pre-programmed systems continues to influence the art world today, if the dominance of contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Takashi Murakami is any indication. In this climate, the paintings of John Dubrow are therefore even more remarkable for the obvious effort that goes into their execution. Worked and worked over again in the studio, often over a period of months and years, Dubrow’s canvases willingly show the heavy-lifting that marked their production.

Born in 1958 in Salem, Massachusetts, Dubrow studied at the Camberwell School of Art in London. He followed this up at the San Francisco Art Institute, under the instruction of Bruce McGaw and Julius Hatofsky, before launching his career in New York in the 1980s. Dubrow has always been an effortful painter. With a representational style that had no need for cleverness or cliché, he approaches every image as if it was his first, seeing it fresh and throwing whatever he can at understanding it.

In the 1990s, as he set his sights on more ambitious subject matter, his work became more populated and complex. In 1997–98, Dubrow was tapped for a premiere spot in the Port Authority’s World Views project, which awarded empty office space in the World Trade Center to artists-in-residence. Ominously, a 1998 *New York Times* story on this initiative reported that the higher floors of the Twin Towers were available to artists because they were “avoided by some tenants who recall how workers stranded by the 1993 bombing had to hike down hundreds of stairs.” Dubrow painted from the 85th floor.

The paintings that Dubrow produced through the Trade Center project are not merely records from a doomed building. They are monuments to a singular vision that seemed to take every brick and stone of the city and press them into canvas. Dubrow’s work from this period earned accolades from critics including Hilton Kramer, Roger Kimball, Mario Naves, Daniel Kunitz, and Jed Perl.

Soon after his Trade Center residency, Dubrow travelled to Israel. Here he painted scenes that appeared to be built up with the very sand of the Holy Land. These images were among the most resolved and accomplished of his career, but the accretion of matter on the surface of his work was also starting to become a burden. The process was getting in the way of the product.

It is a pleasure to report, then, that sometime in the early part of this decade, Dubrow started to strip his canvases down. The work of addition turned into the task of revision and clarification. It was a bold and at times destabilizing move, perhaps something of a painter's mid-life crisis. Dubrow sought to find a new balance in his work. He simplified and abstracted the patterns of his compositions. He took his work down to the bare minimum of recognition, then built it up, then stripped it down again, adding a figure, taking it away, at times dashing the composition to pieces until the image could be built back up again to some resolution.

The early results of these efforts were uneven, but through this process Dubrow began to experiment with the power of form and color as he worked to remove the weight of detail. Whether Dubrow would eventually find a new balance for these forces has now been answered at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, where his latest work represents nothing less than a breakthrough.[\[1\]](#)

At seventy-two by eighty-six inches, the epic *Composition (Midday)* (2007–08) forms the centerpiece of the show. An urban park scene of pedestrians, benches, trees, and buildings may be familiar terrain for Dubrow. But what we find here is something altogether different from the crenulation of detail we could expect in previous work. Fields of shapes invade the space. In the foreground, the light filtering to the pavement is transformed into pools and daubs of gray paint. A building on the left is nearly reduced into a Mondrian-like abstraction, a power-chord with blocks of orange and brown overhanging and framing a seated figure. What we might understand to be a street lamp similarly divides a tan building on the right in two while also echoing additional gray horizontal and vertical markings in the center of the composition.

But it is color as much as form that sets this work apart. Dubrow has never struck me as a colorist, but his command of the primary power of color is evident throughout this painting. He works in a limited palette that finds the same fields of color repeated in different parts of his canvas employed for very different purposes. The tan of the building is the same as the tan light illuminating a leg, a foot, a neck, and an ear in figures in the foreground. The spots of sunlight on the pavement—some of the most solid and frontal shapes of the compositions, built up with the palette knife—are also found in a building peeking through a tree.

Shocks of red are reflected across the canvas. Grays are repeated in rhythm. Pieces of Dubrow's puzzle reach out to one another and reference one another. Bookstein is always supremely skilled at hanging its shows, and the connections one can make here are uncanny: colors and shapes are repeated across the paintings. The orange we see accenting *Composition* also appears as the jacket in *Charlotte*.

Over half of the paintings on view at Bookstein are portraits. These quiet, domestic scenes serve as a counterbalance to Dubrow's riotous landscapes, which obliterate individuality. Two of the portraits feature familiar faces in the Bookstein gallery: *Lori* (2008), the owner, and *Christina* (2008), who works at the front desk.

These portraits lead up to the masterpiece of the exhibition. Tucked away in the gallery's exhibition cubicle, *Central Park II* (2007–08) may not be as ambitious as *Composition*, or as large, but it strikes me as even more resonant. The painting is built from only five or so colors. The shape of the white sky echoes the leaves of the trees. The light on the grass forms a solid pool that is only divided by the shadow of a tree. Small figures can be seen reclining and twisting in space, surrounded by an overwhelming sense of verdure. If there was ever a painting for the current season, this is it.

How often does an artist exhibit at the same gallery for his entire career? Wayne Thiebaud, born in 1920, has been showing at Allan Stone since 1962. That makes the exhibition of his figures now on view at Allan Stone his twenty-third solo show at the

gallery[2]

In the current show, the majority of the paintings are Thiebaud's iconic portraits from the 1960s. These figures, as Thiebaud himself describes it, are "like seeing a stranger in some place like an air terminal for the first time. You look at him, you notice his shoes, his suit, the pin in his lapel, but you don't have any particular feelings about him."

Thiebaud approaches his subjects in much the same way he painted his still lifes. Flat and bold, with a halo of off-color highlights surrounding them, these figures have the same richness of texture and sense of volume that you find in his images of cakes and pies, for which Thiebaud is best known. Like the still lifes, these figures also occupy a theatrical space. They are rotating in their own dessert carousel, sugary slices of life on display. Whether this sounds appealing depends on whether you like your portraiture savory or sweet. Thiebaud serves up his art in saccharine spoonfuls that can certainly become too much of a treat.

This is not to suggest that Thiebaud's formal abilities are ever anything to disregard. I have often taken the off-colors in his compositions—the reds, blues, and greens tracing out an Ingres-like line around his figures—as a reference to the lighting of the theatrical stage. In her catalogue essay, Karen Tsujimoto explains how Thiebaud worked by illuminating his subjects in powerful floodlights. He then closely observed and recorded the halation surrounding them—one of many tricks of the eye.

In his paintings, Thiebaud's hyper-observations contrast with the general idealization of his subject matter. He observes figures in a real, illuminated space but also transforms them into plastic vessels, volumes of perfect forms. At Allan Stone, you can see this distillation in the curves of *Girl with Mirror* (1965), the perfect hair of *Nude, Back View* (1969), the boxy suit of *Standing Man* (1964), the folds in the dress of *Girl with Blue Shoes* (1968), and the black cap-toe shoes of *Man Reading* (1963).

With only a handful of works here for sale, however, none of them paintings, the purpose of Allan Stone's current show is to draw attention to Thiebaud's draftsmanship. Thiebaud studied the nude throughout his career, beginning in the mid-1960s, and made precise, academic drawings of his models. The mundane veracity of these observations signals Thiebaud's skills as a draftsman. They also speak to the transformation he put his figures through in paint. These unidealized drawings are often far removed from what we might consider iconic Thiebaud, and anything but sweet.

Gregory Crewdson, born in 1962, is an artist for our age, with a curriculum vitae that already fills a binder and a coveted academic appointment at Yale. His three-year cycle of photographic pieces called *Beneath the Roses*, set in an unnamed town in rust-belt America but shot largely in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is now presented to us in a book by Harry N. Abrams due out May 1 and concurrent exhibitions at White Cube in London, Gagosian in Beverly Hills, California, and Luhring Augustine here in New York.[3]

As a photographer who employs a movie-size crew to set up his shots on location, Crewdson is himself a type of conceptual artist. The concept extends to the reception and distribution of his work, which, like much conceptual art, demands and occupies an impressive economy of scale. Crewdson's photographs, shot with a super-sensitive eight-by-ten camera, are ideally suited for the marketplace. The photographs are massive and designed to fill up real estate, whether in the showroom or the home. The ease of reproduction allows for multiple points of purchase—book, auction house, art fair, and international gallery. As the press release for the Luhring Augustine show tells us, "The archival ink jet prints presented in this exhibition were made with the generous support of Epson America."

Photographs are printed in editions of ten. Each print averages \$100,000, so that a single shot may gross \$1 million, not including residuals. The uniformity in size and number allows for easy tracking on online auction databases, as multiple sales of identical items serve to drive up price.

There is little nuance in Crewdson's shots. The plot lines of his images all fall under the category of epiphany in small-town America. While Crewdson aims for Hopperesque solemnity, he delivers his revelations with all the camp of an "arty" Hollywood movie where suddenly frogs fall from the sky, Aimee Mann plays in the background, and either John C. Reilly or Philip Seymour Hoffman breaks down in tears.

At Luhring Augustine, a godly luminescence showers down on a boy beneath a bridge. Beams of light shine on figures sitting on rusty swingsets, on pregnant, naked women wandering the streets in winter, on couples in far-off and forgotten apartments, on bathers in trash-strewn rivers, and on the drivers of late-model sedans. (Crewdson likes to bring along a 1970s Chevrolet Caprice for his shoots.)

Crewdson may believe that his work represents a combination of Edward Hopper and David Lynch, resonant with the particularly American affection for individualism along with the fear of isolation. His photographs are, however, something else entirely. Crewdson's work is little more than cinematic sentimentality combined with high-gloss and high-priced schlock. To me it already seems like the art of yesterday.

In an art world that goes for luxury over value, the spare work of Lois Dodd always comes as relief. An exhibition of her "Landscapes and Structures" is now on view at Alexandre Gallery[4] Dodd's thrift is reminiscent of Milton Avery, who could stretch his pigments with the greatest economy. Dodd certainly owes a debt to Avery in work such as *Laundry Shed, Apple Tree* (1980), an oil on masonite that interprets a landscape of house, trees, and field as a jigsaw puzzle of green, red, pink, and brown pieces. Born in Montclair, New Jersey in 1927, Dodd divides her time between New York, Maine, and the Delaware Water Gap. Scenes from the latter two locations make up the subject matter for the current show, where Dodd brings her trademark frugality

to the shingles, trees, grass, and snow of her surroundings.

If there is a drawback to her work, it is that her paintings of small summer cottages and simple rural life indulge in too much Downeast nostalgia. Dodd's Maine landscapes at times seem too immune from the encroachments of modern life. Far more interesting are her winter scenes from Vail. Her paintings of a tunnel cutting through the hillside come off as a mystical vision as well as a real-time reminder of the industrial manipulation of the landscape. These are Dodd's most bizarre—and her most rewarding—paintings in the show.

Notes

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1. 2. "*John Dubrow: Paintings*" opened at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York, on April 17 and remains on view through May 24, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. "*Wayne Thiebaud: The Figure*" opened at Allan Stone Gallery, New York, on April 10 and remains on view through May 30, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
4. "*Gregory Crewdson*" opened at Luhring Augustine, New York, on April 5 and remains on view through May 3, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
5. "*Lois Dodd: Landscapes and Structures, a Survey Exhibition*" opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on April 10 and remains on view through May 29, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

James Panero is the Managing Editor of *The New Criterion*.

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