

Art in America

TOMORY DODGE

By Alina Cohen May 26, 2017 12:06pm



Since the mid-aughts, Los Angeles-based artist Tomory Dodge has been known for making abstract paintings defined by a kind of structured chaos. Some of them—such as the 2008 *Daisy Cutter* (titled after a weapon used in Vietnam and Afghanistan) and the 2009 *Dresden*—refer to violence and destruction wrought by his country. Yet no matter how dark the inspirations, Dodge's works all evince an alluring, sumptuous use of paint that veers toward the decorative. Fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi, speaking with the *New York Times*, recently said of a 2011 Dodge painting he owns, *Horrid Torrid Times*, “You look at that painting and go, oh my God, it’s the end of the world, but what a happy end of the world.”

One might have expected the eight new paintings in Dodge's recent exhibition at CRG to have amped up the apocalyptic quality, given that they were made in 2016 and 2017, when the sense of American doom has only increased. Yet the canvases offer less engagement with our moment than a lulling respite and distraction from it. Spiritual and existential concerns pervade the works, which are of a smaller, more intimate scale than those Dodge previously made and which display transfixing collagelike combinations of different styles and colors. Titles such as *Deep Sleep* and *Time and Distance* seem to suggest ways we can separate ourselves from the bleak world we currently inhabit.

Dodge's signature lush brushstrokes and scrapings crowd the canvases, as does pigmented mica, which creates luminous surfaces that change color according to the light and viewing angle. The technique is especially notable in *Trashing the Oasis* (2016), which manifests a creamy or seafoam green shimmer depending on where you stand. Perhaps the blank canvas was the oasis in question, with Dodge's obsessive and intensive mark-making serving as litter or detritus. If so, it is some attractive junk, like scrap metal turned poetic in a John Chamberlain sculpture. Structured in vibrant patches of color and pattern, such works might also demonstrate an interest in textiles.

While Dodge eschewed more obvious figuration, he nestled within his abstract forms bright dots with surrounding haloes that resemble stars far beyond our reach, in both distance and time. Usually painted in rows, they also evoke light bulbs on a marquee, a much kitschier and more mundane allusion. In certain works, the dots appear amid flat, dark-colored strips, the combination suggesting lengths of decorated adhesive tape holding the paintings together. The heavenly becomes conflated with the man-made, the majestic with the everyday.

A similar conjunction occurs in the paint itself. Sometimes it is rendered with complexity, layered and scraped in mystifying ways, and at other times applied in quick, obvious globs. Smudges appear on the canvases' sides, lest anyone forget the routine labor that formed each painting. Here we are reminded that work, too, is a way we can escape and even improve the world around us.