

# Dorothea Tanning

SELECTED PRESS

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Transformation and Dreams in Dorothea Tanning's Later Work

As Tanning took up midcentury painterly abstraction, key philosophical themes from her earlier phantasmal narrative paintings undergo transformations and reiterations.

TIM KEANE  
APRIL 10, 2022



Dorothea Tanning, New York. Photograph by Peter Ross, 1998 (© Peter Ross. Courtesy the Destina Foundation and Kasmin, New York)

*Doesn't the Paint Say it All?* — a rare retrospective of Dorothea Tanning's mid-career paintings, on view at Kasmin Gallery — showcases the American artist's abrupt break with the overtly figurative Surrealism of her earlier years.

Or so it seems on a first viewing. Looking more carefully, viewers familiar with Tanning's earlier iconic works may find these large, thickly painted semi-abstract/semi-figurative works — mostly spanning the mid-1950s through the 1980s — to share themes with the lissome dreamscapes and meticulously rendered fantasies of the 1940s and early 1950s that established Tanning's reputation, such as the widely exhibited, and even more widely reproduced, self-portrait "Birthday" (1942).

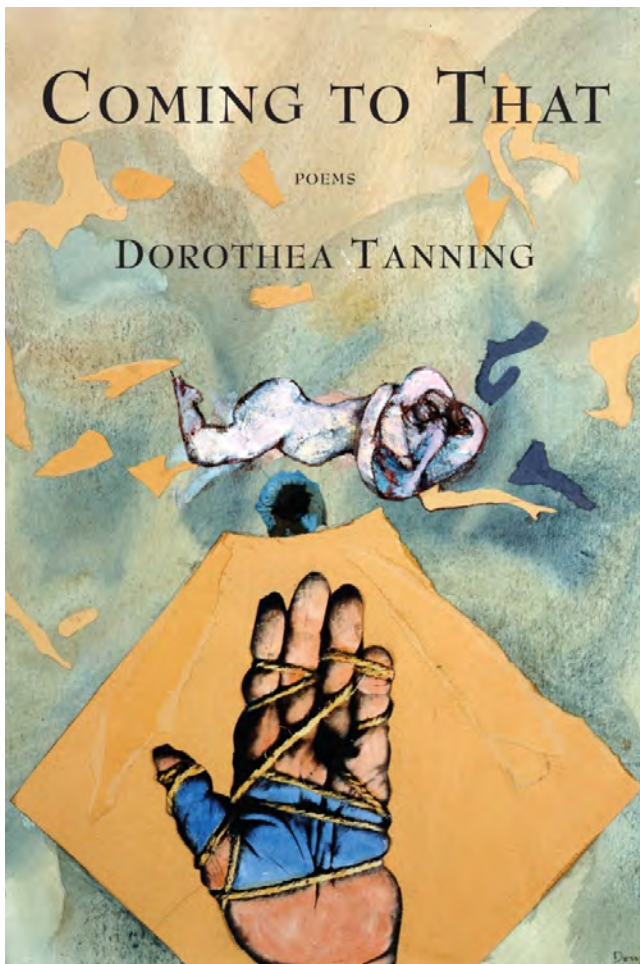


Dorothea Tanning, "Far From" (1964), oil on canvas, 69 x 79 inches (2022 the Destina Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Kasmin, New York. Photo by Diego Flores)

In that breakthrough self-portrait, the artist famously poses in an unbuttoned purple petticoat and tiered gown made from interlaced, pointy tree branches, welcoming an unseen visitor. She holds open a door that conducts the viewer's attention toward receding perspectives onto other doors. Near Tanning's bare feet on the wooden landing is a winged griffin, symbolizing the artist's home as a site for metamorphosis, that place where paint is a vehicle for fantasy even amid a threadbare workspace.

By contrast, and in keeping with the current exhibition's title — lifted from Tanning's remarks about her work — the paintings in *Doesn't the Paint Say It All?* refuse to tell stories in the manner of earlier pieces like *Birthday*. And yet the exhibition dramatizes how, as Tanning took up midcentury painterly abstraction (to sometimes mixed results), key philosophical themes from that earlier period undergo transformations and reiterations.

In "Far From" (1964), one of the most expansive and accomplished works in the show, Tanning obscures the figures' outlines by deploying gauzy washes of white paint to create a harmonious drama between embodied presences and buoyant formlessness. Like most of the lush large-scale works at Kasmin, "Far From" suggest fleshly human forms that appear in various glimpses and poses — white and pink limbs, buttocks, torsos — emerging, vanishing, and resurfacing, seen and hidden amid changeable light and shifting shadow. Often these anonymous forms tumble or intertwine within color fields that can be simultaneously inviting and exasperatingly opaque.



Left: Dorothea Tanning, *Coming to That*, Graywolf Press, 2011. Right: Dorothea Tanning, *A Table of Contents*, Graywolf Press, 2004 (both images courtesy of Graywolf Press)

But in both biographical and aesthetic terms, Tanning is no cagey obscurantist. In fact, she may be the most matter-of-fact fabulist in 20th-century American art and letters, one who believed in everyday stupefaction and lucid daydreaming, practices that also inform her considerable output in poetry. In “Waverly and a Place” from the poetry collection *A Table of Contents* (Graywolf Press, 2004) she frames her creative persona as a fluent latter-day Surrealist, still seizing the world’s manifold correspondences through language as well as imagery, as she writes of “The room—a cave,/an Alexandria before the flames—/bound in boundlessness, a tapestry/ of whispers.”

Born in 1910 in Galesburg, Illinois, Tanning took to voracious reading in local libraries and intermittently studied studio art at a number of Midwestern institutions. By the 1930s, she had settled in New York City, where she found work as a commercial illustrator, and she started to paint in earnest. There she met exiled Surrealist painters, including Max Ernst, whom she married; for 35 years, the couple moved between Paris studios and workspaces in Sedona, Arizona. After Ernst’s death in 1976, Tanning permanently resettled in Manhattan.

As her output in visual art continued to draw attention in international exhibitions, retrospectives, and monographs, often flying under the curatorial banner of Surrealism, within the United States Tanning was nearly as well known as a memoirist and poet, her verse appearing regularly in prizewinning annual collections like *Best American Poetry* and in magazines like *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker*. By the time of her death at 102 in 2012, she embodied a creative longevity probably unparalleled in recent American culture.



Installation view of *Dorothea Tanning: Doesn't the Paint Say It All?* at Kasmin, New York. Center: Dorothea Tanning, "Door 84" (1984), oil on canvas with found door, 63 3/4 x 104 x 5 1/4 inches (2022 the Destina Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Kasmin, New York. Photo by Diego Flores)

Tanning is not invisible within the decades-long turn into semi-abstraction represented by the often captivating works in *Doesn't the Paint Say it All?* In fact, this exhibition shows that as the artist adopts the anti-narrative strategies of painterly abstraction, several works can still be read as formalist or poetic counter-statements to the naïve portraiture and phantasmal narrative paintings that had put her on the Modernist map decades earlier.

One such autobiographical undercurrent informs the exhibition's centerpiece, a double portrait of the artist as a girl called "Door 84" (1984) — an ethereal yellow-and-pink diptych painted on a door. That repurposed wooden support operates on literal and figurative planes. The edge of the door protrudes vertically from picture plane, its latch facing out and two knobs facing the painted girls. This element serves as a midpoint boundary separating the twin portraits. In both, the girl wears only a slip. On the left, she is in dynamic, diagonal motion, stretched transversely across the picture plane, as if trying to break out of it. In the other portrait, she sits passively and languidly with her legs lazily extended, her body almost dissolving in surrounding yellows. The two figures' pink feet seem to press against one another — almost touch — at the unpainted band of gray (the door), which functions thematically even as it functions as the painter's canvas. The picture defines painting as a paradoxical doubling: art is a porous barrier and a dissembling mirror.

A certain unresolved stylistic tension between color-field abstractions and nude figuration informs "Door 84" and almost all the works in the show. There's a push-and-pull energy produced by the chromatic playfulness and the forceful semi-figuration. At their best, these works show how reality itself — exemplified by human flesh — is substantial and weighty yet also botanical and gossamer. Eroticized, intertwined bodies often look like overlapping rose petals; at other times, cloud-like whorls of seemingly pure color — pinks, greens, grays — dissolve to unveil delicately silhouetted human forms.



Dorothea Tanning, "Pour Gustave l'adoré" (1974), oil on canvas, 45 5/8 x 35 inches (2022 Dorothea Tanning / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Kasmin, New York. Photo by Diego Flores)

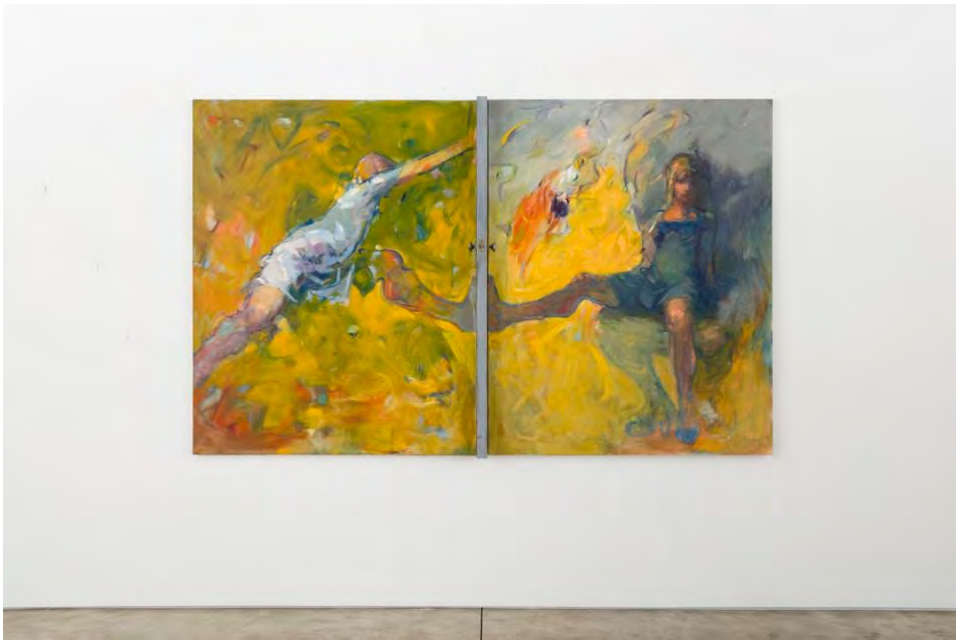
This mesmerizing shadow play finds its most beautiful realization in "Pour Gustave l'adoré" (1974), Tanning's homage to the French artist Gustave Doré. Its predominant chiaroscuro — built on various blacks and blues — gives way to a fiery and aqueous light partly revealing a half-fish, half-human creature. "Wonder," as poet Emily Dickinson famously reminds us, "is not precisely Knowing/And not precisely Knowing not." This principle defines Tanning's artistic and poetic oeuvres. In the poem "The Writer" an *ars poetica* in Tanning's collection *Coming to That* (Graywolf Press, 2011) the speaker shows how wonder infuses presence into absence and vice versa and, by doing that double duty, wonder becomes the generative principle for creativity itself:

I catch at images: toast crumbs, say,  
caught in mid-fall, explode on  
contact or ride missed trains.  
Nobody knows where the trains  
were going but everyone  
was missing them.

*Dorothea Tanning: Doesn't the Paint Say It All?* continues at Kasmin (509 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 16. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

## Dorothea Tanning Exhibition At Kasmin Reveals A Subversive, Prolific Genius Who Triumphs Over Art History

NATASHA GURAL  
MARCH 11, 2022



Dorothea Tanning, 'Door 84' (1984), oil on canvas with found door, 63 3/4 x 104 x 5 1/4 in. Installation View, Kasmin, New York..

A young woman in a loose, light-colored garment that could be an oversized T-shirt or a casual nightgown presses a foot and hand up against a door, her gaze obscured by the outstretched arm, as her other leg contorts in a lunge, the kneecap directed at the viewer. A young woman in a thigh-length blue-green dress props a foot on the other side of the door, as if at odds with but also connected by the central door. The figure on the right panel gazes at the viewer, head slightly bowed while the right side of her face fades into the ominous background. She's seated on what appears to be a hybrid claw-foot chair and monstrous human, its feet resembling high-heeled shoes or hooves.

Peering into the monumental diptych, we confront eyes, creatures, and fiercely expressive color and ferocious brushstrokes, all inviting our own interpretations. Doors are a recurring motif for Dorothea Tanning, opening multitudes of possibilities beyond the Surrealist symbol of a portal to the unconscious. Tanning's work is far too complex and layered to be contextualized within any one genre, through a contemporary or contemporaneous lens. Her work oscillates wildly within realms of the quotidian and otherworldly.

The origin of the door that simultaneously divides and joins the grappling women is debatable. It could be part of a real door that Tanning cut down and repurposed, or she may have created it to fit *Door 84* (1984), a transfixing monumental oil on canvas that commands us to pause and explore the verisimilitude of Tanning's themes and mastery.

On view through April 16 at Kasmin in New York's Chelsea, *Dorothea Tanning: Doesn't the Paint Say It All?* poses a crucial and overdue question that engages us in a fresh dialogue about her visual narratives. Tanning is not a woman artist, but an artist who is also a woman. She transcends Surrealism, her oeuvre borrowing from, subverting, and transforming myriad genres and art historical references. The choice to curate these masterpieces non-chronologically is clever and relevant, as it informs us how fluidly she wove in and out of her own singular styles, techniques, and compositions. Tanning's work certainly can be appreciated without knowledge of her fascinating life, and serves to educate viewers on the continuum of art history. Such an exhibition makes great strides to rewrite art history and to elevate Tanning to her rightful place in the canon, not bound by gender or the languorous categorization of her as simply a Surrealist.

Kasmin perspicaciously and ingeniously displays an array of canvases and works on paper spanning four decades between 1947 and 1987 to eloquently demonstrate how Tanning wrangled between figuration and abstraction throughout a body of visceral work that continues to inspire and bemuse us.



Dorothea Tanning, 'On Avalon' (1987), oil on canvas, 77 1/2 x 130 in. Installation View, Kasmin, New York.

Tanning wrote extensively about the circumstances and creative process that gave life to *On Avalon* (1987). In an excerpt published in Jean-Christophe Bailly's *Image Redux: The Art of Dorothea Tanning* (1995), Tanning recalls how "Somewhere around 1962 or 1963, in Paris, I was intrigued by a reproduction in one of those obscure art catalogues (sic) of a painting showing a field of flowers," and how "twenty-two years later, and in New York, those white visions were still haunting me."

"I began in 1984 to paint on a large canvas, in greens and whites, something I felt about those spirits, which may have been flowers but also novas, tears, omens, God knows what, contending or conniving with our own ancestral



shape in a place I'd give anything to know. During the painting of the picture, a matter of three years, it went through a number of transformations," Tanning wrote. "At times I thought it was finished, that I had done what I could. Once it was even photographed, friends gazed at it, a turbulent image from a feverish brush. And then it was attacked again, radically changed, its white icons whiter, its human reference clearer. Late in 1987 it was finished."

Exploring the scope, scale, and depth of *On Avalon* (1987) is a triumphant journey into an inimitable masterpiece. Tanning's visual language reaches its pinnacle, a vivacious crescendo that manifests as poetry in motion conveying ritualistic earth mother goddess prowess and ardor. The vigor of the mighty female form and the ascendancy of brushwork and color is enough to draw us away from the caterwaul of art history that subordinated Tanning as the "wife" of Max Ernst and a "woman painter" working alongside men like her chess opponent Marcel Duchamp.



Dorothea Tanning, 'Pour Gustave l'adoré' (1974), oil on canvas, 45 5/8 x 35 in. Courtesy of Kasmin.

"If you get married you're branded. We could have gone on, Max and I, all our lives without the tag. I never heard him use the word 'wife' in regard to me. He was very sorry about that wife thing. I'm very much against the arrangement of procreation, at least for humans. If I could have designed it, it would be a tossup who gets pregnant, the man or woman. Boy, that would end rape for one thing," Tanning, who was also a printmaker, sculptor, writer, and poet, wrote in *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2003).

Indulge and immerse yourself in the lush, primordial darkness of *Pour Gustave l'adoré* (1974), an homage to nineteenth-century French artist, printmaker, illustrator, painter, comics artist, caricaturist, and sculptor Gustave

Doré, who created illustrations for Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The eye is pulled to the lower canvas where a woman's leg morphs into what could be a crab or a mermaid's fins, emphasized by pelagic colors.

Transport yourself back to the decade of mischievous excess and decadence via *Pounding Strong* (1981). A cathode ray tube (CRT) television, and roller skates and headphones (which my 11-year-old son Michael Alexander astutely observed also hint at snails and a deep sea diving mask, respectively) mingle with torsos and limbs, recurring motifs in Tanning's work.



Dorothea Tanning, 'Pounding Strong' (1981), oil on canvas, 82 x 80 in. Courtesy of Kasmin.

The canvas vibrates and pulsates with the sound and emotion of an exuberant era, while referencing her earlier paintings and sculptures. To the lower right of the TV set we spy what looks like a limb from *Nue couchée* (1969–1970), a soft sculpture made of pink fabric.

We return to the impenetrable errieness of *Pour Gustave l'adoré* as we investigate *To Climb a Ladder* (1987) surrounding a tangle of limbs wrestling and wriggling toward the light. There's a painting within a painting in what appears to be a process of layering and cloaking more underlying flesh.

Embrace the range of profound reimaginings of Renaissance and Baroque art and self-referential motifs, symbols, and images that permeate Tanning's work to uncover obvious and shrouded manifestations of Katchina, the beloved

Lhasa Apso terrier shared with Ernst and various human forms including what appear to be babies bursting and intertwined with adults. Tanning, who never had children, regarded her artwork as her creative offspring, and sometimes that manifests through her visual language. From vascularity to fecundity, Tanning's figurative representation challenges us as much as her innovative, serpentine abstraction.

*Dorothea Tanning: Doesn't the Paint Say It All?* reveals a subversive, prolific genius who shall no longer be overshadowed by her male counterparts.



Dorothea Tanning, 'To Climb a Ladder' (1987), oil on canvas, 47 ¼ x 41 ¼ in. Courtesy of Kasmin.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

# A Dorothea Tanning exhibition reveals the urgency and timeliness of the surreal

Surrealist artists, especially women, are gaining renewed institutional and market traction

DANIEL CASSADY  
MARCH 8, 2022



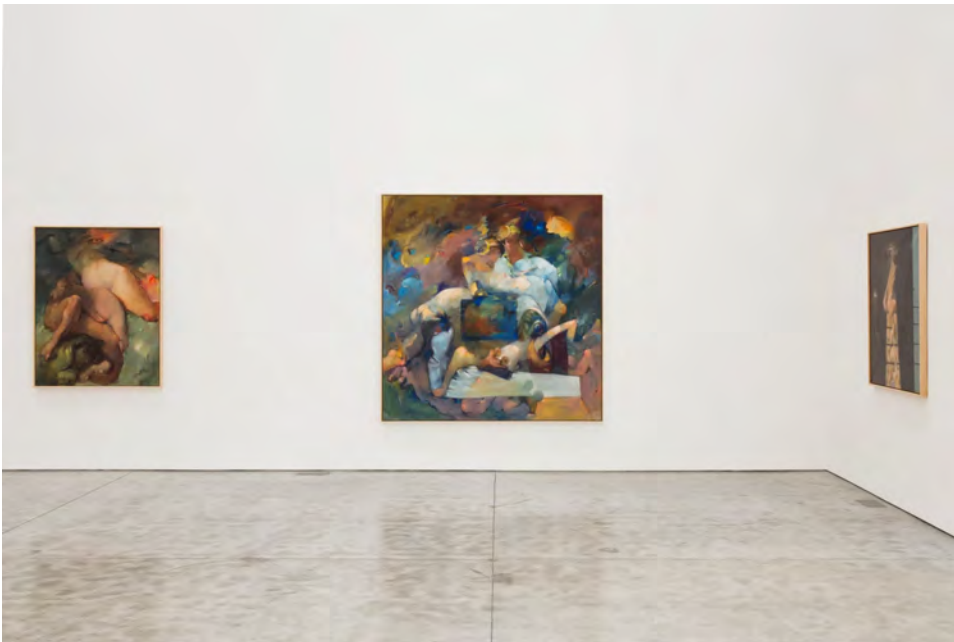
Dorothea Tanning, *Door 84* (1984) Courtesy of Kasmin, New York. All images © 2022 The Destina Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photography by Diego Flores.

Surrealism has been on the art world's mind recently, lurking around the collective consciousness of institutions, curators, gallerists and collectors with the gift of foresight. Arguably, New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art kicked off the trend last year when it opened the show *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (now on view at Tate Modern, until 29 August). The show demonstrates that, while the movement is generally thought to be tied to a specific time and place (like so many things, France in the 1920s), it grew far beyond its Western European roots and was embraced by revolutionary artists from Asia to Latin America and Africa.

That proliferation makes sense. Surrealism was, in part, a reaction to the First World War, an at-the-time unimaginable event filled with terrible new technology that prompted writers, poets and eventually artists to explore their unconscious for a more fantastic, innocent version of the world. The world now is similarly flooded with new technologies that we only think we understand and our collective blood pressure is uncomfortably high as terrible futures increasingly become not just possible but likely.

At Kasmin, an exhibition of works by the artist Dorothea Tanning makes clear through one person's practice how vital Surrealism and its dreamy offshoots are today, how vibrant a life can be and reductive it is to try to label an artist. The exhibition, which spans four decades and includes works on loan from both museums and private collections, features paintings and works on paper that follow Tanning's career from her Surrealist roots in the 1940s to her prescient work in the 1980s, which has the same spirit and aesthetic as some of today's most sought-after young artists and market darlings (Cecily Brown or Dominic Chambers come to mind) though they were made by a near-octogenarian.

"Though Tanning's early work can be categorised as Surrealist, most of her oeuvre was totally distinct in its visual language—dynamic, varied, and informed by her introspective observation of the great painters of the past. Evoking themes such as conflict, turmoil, love and the archetypes of mythology, Tanning's work takes the long view of history," says Emma Bowen, a director at the gallery. "She remains enormously influential to contemporary painters."



Dorothea Tanning, *Door 84* (1984) Courtesy of Kasmin, New York. All images © 2022 The Destina Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photography by Diego Flores.

In the gallery, one is surrounded by Tanning's swirling, deep-hued work. Some of the pictures push the limits of abstraction, with paint distributed on the canvases in such a way that the brush strokes could be floating in water or drifting on a light breeze, but there is always some hint at the figurative, an anchor that lets you know these images came from an earthly body. *Aux environs de Paris (Paris and Vicinity)* (1962, on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art) seems to exist only as thick black smoke with a smouldering red core in the lower half of the canvass, but within the fire is physical movement, a body reacting to its environment.

Later in her career Tanning's figurative took a more prominent role, but these figures always live within her fluid, cumulostratic reality. *Door 84* (1984), which was painted in New York City after the artist spent decades in France, fully embraces the figurative without leaving behind any of her Surrealist dreaminess and adds a tangible element of tension. Two figures, each on either side of a found door that protrudes from the centre of the work, push against the barrier, one with desperate force and the other with composed confidence. The picture evokes such force one would

be forgiven for thinking it was made in the pandemic era, both figures striving to make it through some kind of forced-upon stasis while surrounded by a squall of energetic yellows, reds and wispy greens.

The exhibition has been in motion for many years, spurred by Paul Kasmin's love of the work. It opens just shy of the two-year anniversary of the gallery founder's death, and is well timed. Works by the women of the Surrealist movement have increasingly taken the spotlight from Magritte, Dalí and company, earning their creators the curatorial and art market recognition they have been due for years. In November 2021, Frida Kahlo's *Diego y yo* sold for \$31m (\$34.9m with fees) at Sotheby's, smashing not only her record but the record for any Latin American artist.

The Surrealist artist Remedios Varo, too, has seen a sharp increase of attention with two works recently acquired by major institutions, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio. In the summer of 2020, Sotheby's set a new auction record for her work, when her enigmatic 1956 self-portrait *Armonía (Autorretrato sugerente)* doubled its high estimate to sell for \$6.1m (with fees). Works by Varo will also be included in the central exhibition of this year's Venice Biennale alongside pieces by fellow female Surrealists Tanning, Leonor Fini and Leonora Carrington.

In fact it was a book of fairy tales by Carrington that provided the title for the Biennale exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*. That titular billing follows a recent string of recognition for the British-Mexican artist, whose Mexico City home will be converted into a museum, it was announced last year. In 2018 and 2019, her paintings were acquired by major museums including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, SFMOMA and the National Galleries of Scotland.

And while many of the Surrealist works getting renewed attention are by female artists, Tanning vehemently rejected the idea of being labeled a "female painter" or a "woman artist". She believed there should be no distinction between artists and that gender is of no importance. Art, for her, was an examination of life, thought and what all that which lies beneath. "Art has always been the raft onto which we climb to save our sanity," she once said. "I don't see a different purpose for it now."

## Dorothea Tanning's Enigmatic Art Journeys Beyond Surrealism in a New Show at Kasmin

TESSA SOLOMON  
MARCH 9, 2022



Dorothea Tanning, *On Avalon*, 1987, oil on canvas. All Images: Courtesy Of Kasmin, New York. © 2022 The Destina Foundation / Artists Rights Society (Ars), New York. Photography By Diego Flores.

“Dorothea Tanning: Doesn’t the Paint Say It All?,” a show currently on view at New York’s Kasmin gallery, takes its name from the artist’s 1986 memoir, *Birthday*. When Tanning finished painting, she tried to articulate her process of art-marking. She made it sound like an ecstatic and humbling experience: “The beleaguered canvas is on the floor. Colors are merging... The tubes are in disorder, their caps lost, their labels smeared with wrong colors. Oh where is the red-orange, for it is at this moment the only color in the world and Dionysus the only deity.”

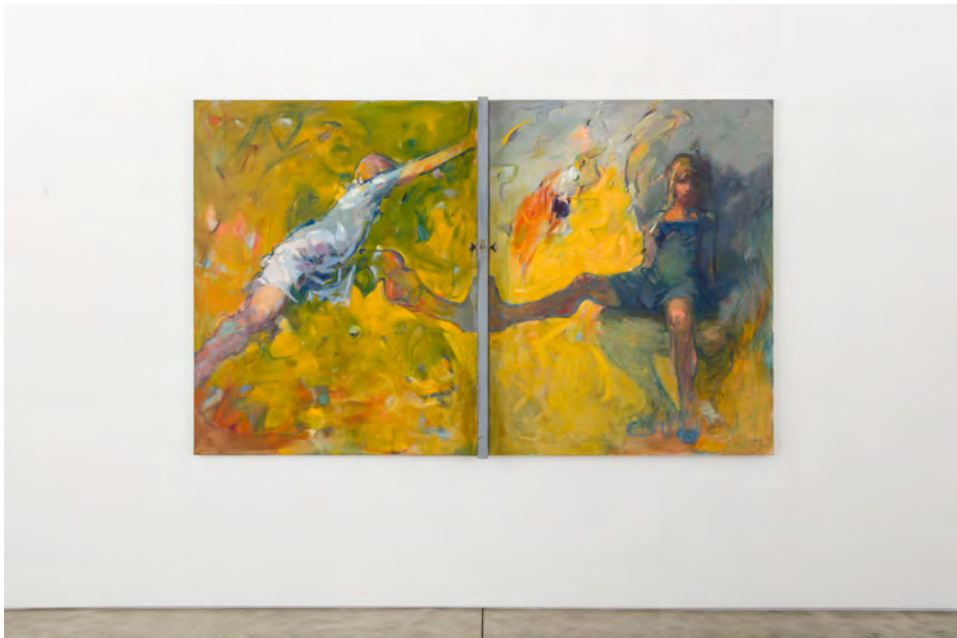
She may very well have been describing the paintings now on view at Kasmin. The exhibition features paintings from an undersung period of her oeuvre that saw Tanning leave behind the visual conventions of Surrealism. To see these semi-abstract paintings, dating from the late 1940s through the 1980s, is like peeking into the deepest depths of the REM cycle. Bodies bubble and churn, and reach toward—inside—each other. Tanning’s best-known works seem sited in reality, at least to some degree—you can tell they take place in domestic spheres. But here, there’s no discernible setting, just a prism of color and desire. They’re dreams you struggle to wake from, though their details slip away with a few blinks in the morning light.

“My dearest wish,” Tanning wrote, is “to make a trap with no exit at all either for you or for me.”

There have been Tanning retrospectives held abroad in the past few years, but this exhibition at Kasmin is the most comprehensive show of her work staged in the U.S. in decades. Though hardly on the scale of a retrospective held at a major museum (there are 19 works on view), the show offers an essential look at Tanning’s output, tracking her arc from her early enigmatic paintings through this intense period of fragmented light and form, to her final works, when she returned to figuration and even incorporated sculptural elements. Several significant pieces have returned to New York, where Tanning died in 2012, for the first time since their creation. Kasmin worked with the Destina Foundation, which manages Tanning’s estate, to put them on view.

One of the rarely seen works is *Door 84* (1984), a mixed-media painting installed across from the front entrance of the gallery. An actual door bifurcates the painting, and two female figures, one on either side, strain against the division. It’s a neat introduction to this assembly of Tanning works as representative of the tension between abstraction and figuration in her work.

By focusing on her late period, the show’s organizers, which includes Tanning’s niece, Mimi Johnson, aim to expand the understanding of Tanning’s art beyond her association with the émigré group of Surrealists that included her husband, the artist Max Ernst. (She was firm about refusing to let Ernst define her career. To paraphrase Tanning: “I had 30 years with Ernst, then I lived for 36 more.”) She was a poet, sculptor, and printmaker, and a great narrator of her own story.



Dorothea Tanning, *Door 84*, 1984, Oil on canvas with found door.

Born in 1910, Tanning began her art career in New York in 1936 after an electrifying visit to “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” a landmark survey held at the Museum of Modern Art. She chased the participating artists to Paris but, having discovered the lot had fled to America in fear of the war, soon sailed back to New York. Tanning had a brief, rebellious stint at art school in Chicago, but for the most part, she developed as an artist on her own. She supported herself as a freelance illustrator while painting in her Greenwich Village apartment and broke big in 1942 with the full-length self-portrait *Birthday*. (That painting is now held by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is not in the



Kasmin show.) Tanning, beautiful and charismatic, tapped into appealing themes early, depicting herself as an eerie, erotic woman attended by mysterious beasts. The picture was selected by Ernst (stopping in for a studio visit) for a show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. It is her most enduring self-portrait, but it marked her arrival as an artist; by departing from this grounded style, she captured a messier, more truthful female experience.

Almost every painting at Kasmin features the suggestion of nude bodies, but each radiates its own personhood, even the forms are barely held together by her brushstrokes. *Far From* (1964) stars a biomorphic shape caught amid a metamorphosis. It's a storm washing pairs of lovers away, many still wrapped in ribbons and legs. In *Philosophie en plein air* (*Fresh-air Philosophy*), 1969, the figures' passions collide like two opposing currents, pulling the sky and grass into its rotation. Here Tanning defies voyeurism by withholding the entire story but keeping the essence of its soul in a style reminiscent of Cubism.

Her stalwart Lhasa Apso appears throughout the show, its long, sleek fringe sometimes peeking out from beneath the bodily contortions. In *La Chienne et sa muse* (1964), Tanning appears as a fleshy arthropod while the inscrutable dog is recognizably itself, if oddly elongated. Tanning felt a deep affinity for animals, and found in her pets confidants and vessels for transformation, so that in paintings they are one: they wear the other's face and their bodies morph from human to canine and back. In the 1977 work *Portrait de famille*, one of her snub-nosed Pekingese dogs is the pedestal for a writhing trio of bodies, the topmost ascending in a red cloud. The strain in the dog's face is disquieting as it bows to the pressure.

There's a sinister edge to several of these later works, from a period when Tanning returned to New York after several decades living in France. A black-brown shadow blankets most of *Pour Gustave l'adoré* (1974), in which an incandescent amphibian limb emerges from the dark. The painting is named for the 19th-century French artist Gustave Doré, who illustrated exuberant fantasies for volumes, including Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Tanning was a vocal admirer of his.

The most recent works in the show are the paintings *On Avalon* and *To Climb a Ladder*, both from 1987. The monumental former occupies a huge back wall, but the latter is a more poignant goodbye. It's no scene on earth: a velvety black sea stretches to the horizon, where a small cluster of lights—a city, a portal?—sits. The top rung of the ladder meets a break in the sky, the entrance to freedom, and everyone wants in.

Figures and flesh are packed into each rung, stretching like taffy upward, a furious churn against those above and below. Where are they so desperate to reach? And if these are the same women who, only pictures ago, were entwined in ecstasy, is it a brawl or a revolution? To disagree with Tanning, the paint keeps some secrets.

## Dorothea Tanning review – a gorgeous trip through gothic nightmares

Her disturbing art is the climax of surrealism, but this exhibition also reveals Tanning's appetite for the gothic and its long history of female creativity

JONATHAN JONES  
FEBRUARY 26, 2019



Unholy glow ... Dorothea Tanning's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943). Photograph: Mark Heathcote and Samuel Cole/DACS, 2018

I'm looking into a seedy hotel room. The lights are low. Bodies are sprouting from cracks in the walls. A creature straight out of a Bosch vision of hell is creeping, or is it seeping, out of the fireplace. Worst of all, somehow, is a human(ish) leg emerging from an armchair and stretching across the room. All the monstrosities in Dorothea Tanning's 1970 installation *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot* are made of soft stuffed fabric that intensifies their uncanny effect. These stitched-together textiles bulging with mysterious innards are queasily corporeal. This life-sized room from a fleapit Paris hotel is infected with nameless terrors and depraved memories.

Perhaps they are memories of surrealism. For *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot* is surely the last great masterpiece of this movement founded by French poets after the first world war. Surrealism called for an art of the unconscious, inspired by Sigmund Freud's writings on dreams and sexuality. Dorothea Tanning, who was born in small-town Illinois in 1910, was one of a generation of US artists who fell in love with surrealism and, in her case, a surrealist – in 1946 she married Max Ernst. Tanning's late works are revealed as a sensational climax of the surrealist movement by Tate Modern's sensitive and fascinating reappraisal of her. But this gorgeous trip through 20th-century dreams and nightmares also shows that she was never simply a surrealist, let alone a mere follower of the movement's European founders. Something else pervades her imagination – an appetite for the gothic and its long history of female creativity.



Film set of the mind ... Dorothea Tanning's *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-1973). Photograph: DACS, 2018

"A Mrs Radcliffe Called Today", says the writing on a wall in her 1944 painting of the same title. It's a homage to Ann Radcliffe, the 18th-century gothic novelist who wrote *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Tanning's painting depicts a castle wall and a flying buttress. A ghost walks past the castle with fire for a head. Her disembodied hair seems to have rematerialised in an archway. Tanning was not the first surrealist to declare her love of gothic novels. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism* published in 1924, the movement's founder André Breton praises the "unforgettable intensity" of Matthew Lewis's 1796 novel *The Monk*. Yet there's a difference. Breton exhibited the ingrained prejudices of the male surrealists, men of their time, when he drooled that *The Monk's* heroine Mathilda is "less a character than a continual temptation". Tanning, as if to deliberately overturn this surrealist cult of great male perverts of the past resurrects Radcliffe, whose novels closely identified with the feelings and perceptions of women.

Tanning's art is full of haunted houses and sinister, inexplicable happenings that owe as much to gothic novels as they do to Breton or Ernst. In her 1943 painting *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, a door in a vast and echoing hotel is opening to reveal an unholy glow inside: the other rooms on the floor are grimly shut while two girls sleepwalk on the landing. One has hair flowing upward as if she's underwater. A giant sunflower has materialised. What horror lurks in the roomful of light? A premonition of the A-bomb? A furnace for corpses? It's 1943.

In her 1950-2 painting *The Guest Room*, a naked girl stands in an attitude of frozen alienation while a young woman lies in bed hugging a male doll. It's a very strange set-up, but what's most troubling is a short fat figure wearing cowboy boots and a blue head-covering that seems to conceal facial deformities or inhuman tubes under its folds.

A bit David Lynch, right? But decades ahead of the surrealist film-maker. Tanning spent much of her life in France, but this exhibition reveals her as a great American artist. Her feel for gothic is reminiscent of the stories of her contemporary US writers Carson McCullers and Shirley Jackson. These are paintings of nightmares remembered in tantalising fragments.

Then, in 1970, on that awful night in room 202 of the Hôtel du Pavot, those nightmares crawl off the canvas into our own, three-dimensional world. Her monsters swarm the walls and bulge out of the upholstery. It made perfect sense for Tanning to make the leap from painting to this pioneering masterpiece of installation art. The staircases and

doorways, cupboards and ruins that populate her early paintings find claustrophobia and unease in the structures that enclose us. That obsession with buildings haunts the entire gothic tradition, but for Tanning it is also an angry dissection of the “normal” bourgeois house and the prisoners it contains. In her 1954 canvas *Family Portrait*, a doll-like blonde wife is literally dwarfed by the colossal man of the house in his mirrored glasses.



Dorothea Tanning's *Verbe* (1966-1970). Photograph: DACS, 2018

If *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot* doesn't upset you at first, keep looking. It's an insidiously atmospheric real-life space – a film set of the mind. And it's just one of the revolutionary artworks Tanning created at a time when surrealism was supposedly old hat. Her sewn-together fabric sculptures that culminate in her freaky hotel room are the greatest things she ever made. *Reclining Nude*, created in 1969-70, is a pink body that twists and truncates in inexplicable, upsetting ways. *Embrace* (1969) is a soft toy from hell. A brown furry gorilla-like form is “embracing” – or assaulting – another mutant female nude.

Just to describe these sculptures is to recognise how contemporary they seem. There are clear connections between Don Juan's *Breakfast* (1972), in which pink flesh bubbles up out of a black beer stein, pressing at a buttoned seam, and the work of artists from Sarah Lucas to Cathy de Monchaux. Did I say *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot* is the final masterpiece of surrealism? Revise that. It's the door between surrealism's bad dreams and ours.

## Tanning Salon

This survey of Dorothea Tanning's career testifies to her lifelong commitment to Surrealism

ALICE SPAWLS

APRIL 2019



*Eine Klein Nachtmusik*, 1943, Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012), oil on canvas, 40.7 x 61 cm. Tate Collection

Dorothea Tanning first saw the work of the European Surrealists at 'Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism', an exhibition organised by Alfred Barr at MoMA in 1936. Her enthusiasm for their work - wholly new to American eyes - led her to France three years later, aged 29, with letters of introduction to Picasso, Max Ernst and others. Her trip was cut short by the outbreak of war in September, but on her return to New York, where most of the Surrealists soon fled, Tanning began to incorporate what she had seen into her own work: strange and fantastic scenes with otherworldly protagonists, sometimes taking off from, and deconstructing, the commercial art she was making for companies such as Macy's department store. It was through the art director of Macy's that Tanning was introduced to Julien Levy, whose gallery was showing the work of the emigre Surrealists. Levy advised Ernst, then married to Peggy Guggenheim, that Guggenheim might consider including Tanning in her exhibition of women artists.

The show '31 Women' opened at the Art of This Century gallery in 1943 with two works by Tanning: *Birthday*, perhaps her first successful Surrealist work, and *Children's Games* (both 1942). *Birthday* shows Tanning in dishevelled, archaic dress - perhaps Elizabethan - breasts bared, her skirt covered with a mantle of twigs or roots, some of them shaped like bodies. She stands with one hand on an open door that leads on to other open doors and still more open doors, while at her feet sits a mysterious furred and winged creature. It is an accomplished painting and an ambiguous one. Tanning's pensive gaze, her hands clutching door handle and falling skirt, the series of ever-

opening doors: all seem to indicate that we are witnessing a woman on the verge of some transgression - or protecting herself from one. It is a very different work from its sister painting in Surrealist self-declaration, Leonora Carrington's *Self-Portrait* of c. 1937-38 (which Tanning likely saw in New York), in which Carrington faces the viewer combatively, wild-haired, confident and androgynous, accompanied by her hyena familiar.

For both artists Surrealism was a means of escaping the rigidity and stifling religiosity of their childhood homes. Tanning, who was brought up the child of Lutheran Swedish immigrants in the small town of Galesburg, Illinois, later said that there 'nothing happened but the wallpaper'. It is not a surprise, then, to see in *Children's Games* two girls ripping the grey paper from the walls - exposing body parts of adult women beneath - while a third girl lies half out of view, collapsed, only her feet and a strip of wallpaper visible in the bottom corner of the canvas (Tanning was one of three sisters). Pubescent angst and reverie is also the subject of the famous work *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943), acquired by the Tate in 1997, which shows two young girls in the corridor of a hotel. One leans against a doorframe, eyes closed and blouse undone, while the other contemplates a gigantic sunflower lying on the floor. Have the girls somehow conjured or engorged this monstrous bloom? The hair of the second girl, which rises upright into the air, suggests some power transmitted between them, a surge of fertile electricity, while the yellow light coming from an open door at the end of the corridor (the motif of the open window or light at the end of the tunnel recurs in her early work) is here at once hopeful and trepidatious.



*Self-Portrait*, 1944, Dorothea Tanning, oil on canvas, 61 x 76.2 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Tanning saw herself as on the cusp of something - a self-portrait from 1944 shows her looking out to a distant hill or citadel, a tiny figure in a vast and rocky landscape. In 1946 she married Ernst and the couple moved to Sedona in Arizona, where she painted in a 'two-hundred-square-foot (about) rectangular space, where the temperature hovered around ninety degrees and sometimes made me cry'. Of the paintings from this period included in the Tate Modern retrospective - the first major exhibition of her work for 25 years, previously at the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid - it is *Maternity* (1946-47) that stands out. A woman, dressed in white, holds her child in a desert landscape. Both wear

expressions of extreme consternation, and are swaddled in a white fabric that makes the image more monastic than Madonna-like. Their suffering - which has been read as an indictment of motherhood by the childless Tanning - is made grotesque by the smiling, human-faced Pekingese beside them.

Like many Surrealists, Tanning seems to have seen painting as a means to an end in her early work, and it is in their more graphic aspects that her paintings are most successful visually. She had a great feeling for form, for folds and angles, cloth and clouds, often sharpening the edges of her drapery until it looked like crenulated rock. In *The Guest Room* (1950-52), the curtain that so often frames portraits inertly here takes on a life of its own, not only rising up above the scene but breaking through the open door to swirl over the head of the young nude protagonist. Tanning's delight in this vaporous quality became the major force in her work in the late 1950s and '60s, by which time she and Ernst were living in France; it led to a series of amorphous paintings in which figures and forms appear and disappear in a melee of shape and colour. They are not the most successful works at Tate Modern, which has perhaps been too dutiful in giving us the full sweep of Tanning's uneven career (she died in 2012, aged 101).

But there are revelations to be had in her later work, particularly in the 'soft sculptures' that she felt compelled to make after hearing Stockhausen's *Hymnen* in 1969. Here, in work prefiguring Louise Bourgeois' later turn to similar forms, Tanning sewed and stuffed humanoid shapes in cotton and tweed, filling them with wool cardings, tennis balls - anything that came to hand. *Nue Couchée* (1969-70) begins as the supine back of some Venus - buttocks, hips, spine - but the waist opens out into three limb-like protrusions, folding and crossing each other. Most unsettling of all is *Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot* (1970-73), inspired in part by a song about the suicide of a gangster's wife ('In room two hundred and two / The walls keep talking to you'). The installation - a room with wooden floor and dark-patterned wallpaper - is inhabited by fabric forms that emerge from the furniture and break through the walls, echoing and fully realising the motif of *Children's Games* 30 years earlier. In these works we see a thoroughly modern Tanning, whose openness to the new allowed her to maintain her allegiance to Surrealism in its deeper sense, as - in her own words - an 'effort to plumb our deepest subconscious to find out about ourselves'.

# Art in America

## Dorothea Tanning

MARK VAN PROYEN

APRIL 29, 2013



Dorothea Tanning: *Dogs of Cythera*, 1963, oil on canvas, 77½ by 117 inches; at Wendi Norris.

“Birthday” is the word that haunts the life and career of Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012). Not only is it the title of her 1986 memoir about her 34 years of marriage to Max Ernst and the life that they shared in Paris (1956-1979) and Sedona, Ariz. (1946-1956), it is also the title of the centerpiece painting from her first solo exhibition at New York’s Julian Levy gallery in 1946. That 1942 painting (recently acquired by the Philadelphia Museum in celebration of the artist’s centenary) is an allegorical self-portrait that shows the artist in front of a series of open doors regressing in a bare interior, establishing a thematic template for much of her subsequent work. Even though she gradually moved away from Surrealist-inspired imagery, in favor of lushly painted reveries occurring in quasi-abstract baroque spaces, Tanning’s main focus remained constant: the attempt to give dramatic form to the moment when consciousness emerges from an undifferentiated state of nature.

This observation was confirmed by the 30 works dating from 1960 to 1979 on view in this exhibition. The majority were oil paintings, mostly large. There were also some still-life drawings in pristine graphite, complemented by two fabric-covered sculptures. The earliest painting, a small untitled work (1960), set the tone for the show. It features lyrically painted fragments of contorted figures enacting some sort of physical combat amid a sumptuous orange and yellow ground, wryly alluding to classical themes such as the abduction of Persephone or the combat between Antaeus and Hercules. A similar wrestling match appears in the 40-inch-tall soft sculpture titled *Étreinte* (Embrace, 1969), showing two intertwined headless figures with short, stubby limbs, one covered in pink flannel and the other in brown fake fur.



In *Pour Gustave l'adoré* (For Gustave with Love, 1974), we see only the foreshortened legs and lower torso of a female figure who seems to be struggling against some unseen entity pulling her into a dark void. Similar in painterly spirit is *Family Portrait* (1977), where a tumult of full-figured, female forms cascade from upper left to lower right. These are clearly indebted to Peter Paul Rubens's *Maria de' Medici* paintings permanently installed at the Louvre. But in Tanning's version, the figures have monstrously thick legs and undersized forearms, and their bodies undergo transformations as they move through space, with feet becoming pawlike or heads disappearing into clouds—except for one disembodied head at the bottom of the canvas, set deep in a murky shadow.

The large *Dogs of Cythera* (1963) was the clear choice for showstopper. Although it depicts several fragments of foreshortened figures floating about in indistinct ether, it was the most abstract work on view, and forms a compelling argument against the false dichotomy of figuration and abstraction.

# The New York Times

## Dorothea Tanning, Surrealist Painter, Dies at 101

GRACE GLUECK  
FEBRUARY 1, 2012



Dorothea Tanning at home in New York in 2002. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Dorothea Tanning, a leading Surrealist painter of the 1930s whose path had led her from the small town of Galesburg, Ill., to a whirlwind life in the international art world, died on Tuesday at her home in Manhattan. She was 101.

Her death was confirmed by Mimi Johnson, a niece.

Married for 30 years to the Surrealist painter and sculptor Max Ernst, Ms. Tanning became well known in her own right for her vivid renderings of dream imagery. Much later in life, after she had reached 80, she gained a different

kind of attention when she began to concentrate on writing, producing a novel, an autobiography and poems that appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Yale Review* and *The Paris Review*.

As a Surrealist artist, Ms. Tanning mined her unconscious, producing disturbing images like “Maternity” (1946), showing a troubled mother, her long gown ripped to rags at the belly, holding a fretful baby. At her feet lies a poodle with a child’s face.

Like other Surrealist painters, she was meticulous in her attention to details and in building up surfaces with carefully muted brushstrokes.

But in the mid-1950s Ms. Tanning broke from the mirrorlike precision of narrative Surrealism to take up what she called her “prism” paintings, later renamed “Insomnias.” These are enigmatic canvases in which bodies and body parts, barely discernible visages and biomorphic forms float in dream spaces generated by fractured planes and diaphanous scrimms.

Her versatility extended to sculpture. In 1969 she experimented with soft figures that she made on an old Singer sewing machine. She used a group of them in “Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202” (1970-1973), in which the figures breached the papered walls of a simulated hotel room, an early example of the now widespread practice of installation art.

Among her other achievements were ballet designs for George Balanchine, etchings for illustrated books, and the design of a house for herself and Ernst in the south of France.

Dorothea Margaret Tanning was born on Aug. 25, 1910, to middle-class parents in Galesburg, “a place where you sat on the davenport and waited to grow up,” as she put it in her autobiography, “Between Lives: An Artist and Her World” (2001).

She reached adulthood endowed with good looks and ambition, but to the chagrin of her parents, who feared she would become “bohemian,” she aspired to a life in art. And she made one, although she was largely self-educated in the field, leaving art school in Chicago to study informally on her own by roaming the Art Institute there.

Known as Dottie Tanning in Galesburg (home also of the poet Carl Sandburg, a friend of her Swedish-born father’s), she reclaimed her birth name, Dorothea, and began honing her talent for meeting interesting and important people.

In 1936 Ms. Tanning moved to New York, where she supported herself with illustrating jobs. Bowled over by the now legendary show “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” mounted by the Museum of Modern Art in 1936-37, she realized she had found her future. In 1939 she struck out for Paris, armed with letters of introduction to several prominent artists, among them Ernst, only to find that most had fled the country, which was on the brink of war. The Surrealists almost all decamped to the United States.

Back in New York she finally met Ernst, at a party in 1942. Shortly thereafter he dropped by her studio seeking candidates for an exhibition of art by women of the Surrealist movement that he was organizing for Peggy Guggenheim’s new gallery, “Art of This Century.” Ms. Tanning’s not-quite-finished self-portrait with bare breasts, “Birthday,” happened to be on her easel. Ernst stayed for a game of chess, and within a week he had moved into her apartment.

She not only won a place in the show — which included work by Louise Nevelson and Gypsy Rose Lee — but in 1946 she also became Ernst’s wife, replacing Peggy Guggenheim. They were married in a double ceremony in Hollywood with the painter, photographer and filmmaker Man Ray and his companion, Juliet Browner.



Dorothea Tanning's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" (1943). Credit The Dorothea Tanning Collection & Archive/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Ms. Tanning’s first solo show was in 1944 at the Surrealist-oriented Julien Levy Gallery in New York. By then she and Ernst were in and out of Sedona, the desert hamlet in Arizona where they had built a rough-hewn three-room house.

In Sedona, at a time before it became a popular destination, they confronted lizards, scorpions and snakes and basked in the town’s “landscape of wild fantasy,” as she wrote in her autobiography. They also played hosts to visitors like Balanchine, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Marcel Duchamp, Pavel Tchelitchew and Dylan Thomas.

They moved to France in 1957 when McCarthy-era legislation denied citizenship to Ernst, who was German, because he had been abroad for more than a year. They divided their time between Paris and Huismes, a town in the Loire Valley. They later moved to Seillans, a hilltop village in Provence.

During the 1960s and '70s Ms. Tanning showed regularly at the Alexandre Iolas Gallery in New York and in cities across Europe. Her current dealer is the Kent Gallery in New York.

Ernst died in 1976, and she returned to the United States in the late '70s. An accomplished poet, a collection of her verse, “A Table of Content,” appeared in 2004. Last September, 34 of her poems were published by Graywolf Press in an acclaimed book titled “Coming to That.”

In 1994 Ms. Tanning gave the Academy of American Poets an endowment establishing the Wallace Stevens award, which gives \$100,000 to an outstanding American poet each year.

Though she had begun concentrating on writing, her art remained in the public eye. In 2009, her current dealer, Douglas Walla, mounted “We’re All in It Together,” a show of works by Ms. Tanning and Surrealist compatriots she chose. Her work is in a current show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art titled “In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States.”

Besides Ms. Johnson, she is survived by two other nieces and a nephew.

Asked in 2002 by Salon to sum up the impact of her work, Ms. Tanning replied modestly, “I’d be satisfied with having suggested that there is more than meets the eye.”

## Isn't It Surreal?

Dorothea Tanning at the Drawing Center

JOHANNA LENANDER  
APRIL 26, 2010



Dorothea Tanning

Dorothea Tanning, the last of the Surrealists, has always been something of a fashion plate. A long-limbed beauty and a piquant dresser, Tanning scoured vintage shops and played dress-up with extravagant 19th-century pieces. Her eclectic style sense is celebrated in the 1942 self-portrait “Birthday” in which the bare-breasted artist sports an Elizabethan-style jacket, a draped skirt and what appears to be the entire root system of a very large tree.

An exhibition at the Drawing Center of Tanning’s sketches of ballet costumes for the choreographer George Balanchine makes you think that it’s too bad she never tried her hand at fashion design. While clearly steeped in 1940s surrealism, the designs also have a strangely contemporary quality. Clingy witch’s dresses have a raw and revealing aesthetic that wouldn’t look out of place on Alexander Wang’s runway, while a fantastical ship headdress paired with a magnificent crinoline bring to mind the work of Philip Treacy and John Galiano.

“These drawings feature ideas and themes that she was exploring throughout her entire practice,” says assistant curator Rachel Liebowitz, who worked on the show with the Drawing Center assistant curator Joanna Kleinberg. “They really give you an understanding of what she aimed to do.”



Dorothea Tanning

Tanning, whose 100th birthday is Aug. 25, arrived in New York at age 22 with \$25 and a dream of being an artist. She quickly fell in with the eccentric — and fiendishly chic — surrealist crowd that included the likes of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte and Max Ernst, whom she eventually married. Another friend was Balanchine, who was so impressed with Tanning’s sense of sartorial drama that he asked her to collaborate on his ballets.

“The costume sketches and her early paintings show a recurrent theme of fabric and drapery, which developed into soft cloth sculptures later in her practice,” Kleinberg says.

Tanning was not directly involved in the exhibition, but gave the curators her blessing and the occasional suggestion. (She resides in the West Village in a crimson and periwinkle apartment filled with Surrealist art.) In recent interviews she displays a sharp wit and the kind of seen-it-all laser-beam intelligence.

“I can only say that if a work doesn’t make being sane and alive not only possible but wonderful, well, move on to the next picture,” she told salon.com in 2002.

The work displayed at the Drawing Center is certainly worthy of lingering.

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

Dorothea Tanning - Insomnias 1955-65

GRACE GLUECK  
NOVEMBER 25, 2005

Now in her 95th year, Dorothea Tanning has successfully turned her attention from painting to writing poetry. But her paintings keep reasserting themselves, and this show covers 10 years in the 1950's and 60's after a decisive split from the narrative Surrealist figuration she had long practiced. A growing impatience with the movement urged her to "break out." Her new imagery may have been stimulated partly by the play of intense sunlight on rocky formations in the vast desert around Sedona, Ariz., where she and the painter Max Ernst settled shortly before their marriage in 1946.

A significant work of the period is "Insomnias" (1957), whose diaphanous scrim and fractured planes generate dream spaces that can't be easily fathomed, but in which bodies, body parts and biomorphic suggestions can be teased out like pieces of a rebus. A sleeping child, closely attended by a small dog, is the most readable image, but others -- barely discernible visages, limbs and biomorphic forms -- float in this anticomposition. The still surreal handling of space and subject matter in "Insomnias" brings to mind the painter Pavel Tchelitchew.

More abstract is "Tamerlan (Tamerlane)" (1959), in which a fiery glow spreads diagonally over the left of the canvas to collide with a translucently white drift rife with ghostly, deliberately unresolved forms. A later canvas, "Far From" (1964), puts distorted, delicately colored fragments of human, animal, vegetable and more unrecognizable organisms in a milky swim of nuanced white. What is most interesting about these works is their thrust to evoke the indefinable, and their poetic handling of color.



## Self Inventions

### Life and Letters

JANE KRAMER  
MAY 3, 2004

In the summer of 1928, when the poet and painter Dorothea Tanning was eighteen and inching her way out of Galesburg, Illinois--a town of twenty-seven thousand Christian souls, twenty-four churches, and a public library where, under cover of a part-time job, she had lost herself to the siren song of Art, to Monk Lewis and Mrs. Radcliffe and Laurence Sterne and all the other writers whose catalogue numbers the librarian had flagged with a small red cross, for "immoral"--she used her savings to rent a cabin in the woods, about an hour from town, on a lake with the memorable name of Bracken. She told her family that she wanted to be alone, a sentiment that did not resonate in Galesburg. (" 'Alone' can be unhappy, but it's not bad for you," she likes to say.) And, indeed, no sooner had she settled into the cabin and laid out pad, pencils, crayons, and watercolors on the deal table than the visits from home started. Her two sisters, sent by their mother to make sure she ate, arrived with a pecan pie. Her three best friends, perhaps suspecting a boy, arrived--their curiosity, as she wrote in a memoir sixty years later, floating around the cabin in "a positively miasmal drift, a heady effluvium that mingled with the reek of crushed verdure and lake water." Finally, the boy arrived, tennis racquet in hand and, apparently, so aroused by the sight of four camp beds, lined up chastely in the cabin's one room, that he was struck speechless. Tanning says she sent them all packing.

This is a very Tanning story. Her biographers cite it as the moment when Dottie Tanning, of Galesburg, became Dorothea Tanning--"that moment when, linked to youth's innermost thrust, a life allies itself with an imperative and inevitable force," the French critic Jean-Christophe Bailly put it, in a particularly steamy essay on Tanning's "leap" into a future "guided by art's conscious hand." But what really makes it a Tanning story is less the solemnity of her resolve than its crafty charm. Dottie Tanning, at eighteen, was already so brilliantly and exotically and unflinchingly American in her impulse to self-invention that, with only a slight adjustment to the miasmal drift, she could have been Daisy Miller, setting out on a treacherous Rome night for the Colosseum. At ninety-three, Tanning is still working on what, by any standards, has been a gallant and glamorous life, revisiting it here and there to make it more enticing. "A piece of art," one of her friends describes her, in a tone somewhere between exasperation and awe. "In process." She would be pleased. The epigraph for her first collection of poems--it's called "A Table of Content" and comes out in June--reads, "It's hard to be always the same person." (She thinks it's from "somewhere in Montaigne.") The critic John Russell has referred to "the several selves of Dorothea Tanning," and the poet W. S. Merwin puts it this way: "She goes out of the room, comes back, and she's someone else--and after a few hours I think, Phew, that'll do for a while!" Keeping her friends off balance is what keeps Tanning on her toes, which isn't a bad place, at any age, to be.

The poet Richard Howard, whom Tanning counts as one of her closest friends (and intends to make her literary executor), says, "Like Marianne Moore, she is a woman of studied originality." She wants to get it right for posterity. The collector Helen Heekin, who is so solicitous of Tanning that she sends her toffee-chip ice cream, FedEx priority, from Graeter's, in Cincinnati, likes to say that, given the chance, Tanning would be breaking into museums in the middle of the night--into the Tate Modern, say, where her famous 1970 pink wool sculpture "Reclining Nude" sits in a

big Plexiglas box in the "subversive objects" gallery, or into the Philadelphia Museum, which is rumored to have paid close to a million dollars last year for her 1942 Surrealist self-portrait "Birthday"--to add a stitch or adjust a hairdo. Tanning herself admits to "fiddling" so anxiously with her poetry that she will fax an editor in the middle of the night to change a word in a poem she's already pulled from publication five times--and, if the editor complains, will withdraw it completely, for its "safety," as if the poem were in danger of being humiliated, or kidnapped. Tanning has even been said to have revised her waistline in a snapshot. So I was not surprised to discover, in a box of photographs labelled "1910s and 1920s," in her Tribeca studio, a certain revision of her solitude: a lovely picture of the artist sitting on a camp cot in a cabin on one of the Galesburg lakes, nude to the hips, back to the camera, and arms raised as if she'd just been caught, unaware, in the act of slipping off her shirt. I've known her for twenty-five years, but I wouldn't dream of asking who took it. Maybe she did.

Dorothea Tanning is sometimes called the oldest living Surrealist painter, though, as she says, "it's been half a century since I played at Surrealism for ten or twelve years" and then moved on to something else, something "less obvious" and "more contemplative and reflective and experimental." ("I wanted to make the most Surrealist paintings I could, and I did, and now I've had fifty more years of painting" is a remark she makes to someone almost daily.) Tanning completed her last oil in 1997 and her last big drawing (more accurately, a watercolor with collage) in 1999, and now devotes herself entirely to writing. She prefers the description "emerging poet." "Oldest living emerging poet," she will say when she's among friends, lifting a glass--champagne is served at Tanning's from five to seven, when "Jeopardy" starts--and flashing a ravishing smile. The smile, like Surrealism, is not something you allude to lightly. Tanning is still so sensitive to the prejudices, real and imagined, she suffered as "a pretty girl who 'also' painted" that she keeps a folder marked "Sass, etc." (cross-referenced with one marked "Dorothea's letters: some of them, see Sass"), the better to enjoy her most withering replies to the art critics and, in many cases, the admirers who have at one time or another referred to her with words like ravishing. Never mind that her beauty is as indisputable as her talent: wide blue eyes, perfect red moue of a mouth, skin the color of white French peaches. Or that she was never oblivious of her appeal. (At sixty-four, she was talking to Andy Warhol about her Frederick's of Hollywood target panties; at eighty-four, she was asking friends if she was good for a few more years of bare arms.) Or that, even now, her entrances are so beguiling that she commands a room just by walking through the door, her straw-gray hair pulled into a bunch over each ear and fastened with floppy red bows, her Greek sailor's cap set at a perky angle, and her lace-edged, double-lawn, perfectly starched and ironed white schoolgirl collar peeking out from under a black peajacket. There are certain things you do not call Dorothea Tanning--not if you love her and want to stay in her good graces--and "ravishing" and "Surrealist" are the least of them. You do not call her a woman artist. ("I am an artist," she says, crossly.) You do not call her a feminist. ("Disgusting!") And, most important, you do not call her Max Ernst's widow. Not, at any rate, by way of describing who she is or anything she has accomplished. She can name the people who have made that mistake (and often does).

When Ernst died, in 1976, they'd been married for nearly thirty years and living abroad, in France, for most of them. Tanning came "home" to New York in 1981, and it was here, sixteen years later, that she declared herself an emerging poet, formally retiring from painting with a spectacular curtain call: a burst of energy and obsession that lasted the better part of eight months and was responsible for twelve outsized, hauntingly erotic flower paintings. "My foray into imaginative botany," she once called it. She was inspired in equal parts by the botany and by her chance discovery of a roll of choice Lefevre-Foinet canvases, the last from an order she had placed in Paris two decades earlier. "I said, 'Hell, I'm not letting anybody else use my canvases,'" she explains. When she ran out of canvases, that was that. The book from the exhibition of those paintings, "Another Language of Flowers," was her way of announcing the transformation; each of the pictures was accompanied by a poem, or a fragment, by a writer she knew and admired--starting with three lines from "Declaration Day," by her friend James Merrill, who had died

three years earlier. Merrill had been a kind of mentor. "Such incomparable charm, the incarnation of poetry itself," she told me. "I was a vulgar fan, and he liked me, and I wrote a poem or two, and he said, 'Oh, no! This isn't France! You can always use the same word twice.' "

By then, the most important people in her life were poets. Mainly, they were new friends--Howard and Merwin and J. D. McClatchy and Harry Mathews and Anthony Hecht and Adrienne Rich. They had come to replace the artists in her old circle, many of whom had been dead for years, and to her mind they formed a much more amiable and gratifying circle, one that belonged entirely to her. She had bought a Mac, hired a computer tutor, bid on a nineteenth-century oak lectern, on eBay, for her Webster's Second ("Two hundred dollars for the lectern, and then I had to pay all over again to ship it from Virginia!"), and clicked into 28-point type so that she could actually see what she was writing. And she wrote and wrote, three or four hours every day.

Within a year of her flowers show, Tanning, at eighty-nine, was publishing in McClatchy's Yale Review ("My first serious published poem"). A year later, she was chosen for the anthology "Best American Poetry 2000." By last year, she was everywhere: Poetry, Parnassus, The Paris Review, The New Yorker. This month, just a few weeks before her collection comes out, she will celebrate the paperback publication of her 2001 memoir, "Between Lives," and, in July, the publication of her novel, "Chasm"--a book that she's called a "romance" but is perhaps more accurately described as a high-goth S & M fantasy. "Chasm" is set in a castle in the California desert, and it involves a chatelain of murky European origin who pursues his own fantasies in a laboratory outfitted in steel and leather; his preternaturally innocent granddaughter; and his collection of insane servants and Hollywood house guests, some of whom die quite gruesomely. It also bears a strong resemblance to "Abyss," the novella that Tanning published privately in the nineteen-seventies. Tanning does not usually own up to "Abyss," perhaps suspecting that her dress rehearsals as a writer belie her image as "emerging." ("Between Lives," for example, is her second memoir in fifteen years.) But she may be right to disclaim it, because her writing seems to get better--wittier and more elegant and precise--every day. "Chasm" is fresher than "Abyss." At any rate, it's more lurid and direct. "Between Lives" is much richer than her first memoir, "Birthday." And, as for the poetry, it's almost impossible to connect the mannered voice of the few short poems she wrote, in French, in the early seventies--twelve of them for a rare edition of her color etchings called "En Chair et en Or"--with anything she's writing now; the voice today is so surprising and original, and the ache in it is so spare. In "Destinations," salmon leap into the mouths of bears waiting at the top of a waterfall, and she remembers "my own headlong leaps and dives / when I thought there would be no mouths to receive me." In "Secret," she remembers an August day when the trees in the park enfolded her "in a green intimacy so trustworthy I told / them my secret: 'It's my birthday.' " "I have such a long life to remember," she says sometimes. "You find beautiful words in memory." A friend told me, "Dorothea's sly. The words weren't there yesterday."

Tanning can do a huge number of practical things extremely well, as one would expect of a woman confined for her first eighteen years to a modest household in a small town in the middle of America early in the twentieth century. Her father was Swedish. He worked at the post office, voted (in the absence of an alternative less liberal) Republican, suffered a pang when Adolf Hitler turned out nasty, and paid his dues to the arts with an occasional Sunday spent in the company of his old neighbor Carl Sandburg. Her mother was a cushiony "quilt of maternal love," whose idea of a transporting evening was the Tanning girls singing "Whispering Hope" to Galesburg's assembled matrons, or reciting what Dorothea calls "my little uplifting poems about poor people in places like New York." Her mother was also a solid rock of the Lutheran Church, whose opinion on seeing Chartres for the first time, in the late fifties, was "Well, we have many beautiful churches in Galesburg."

"It was a life unsweetened by culture," Richard Howard says. Tanning nevertheless learned everything her parents had to teach her. She could cook, sew, paint a room, upholster a couch, and plant a garden, and she could do business, keep accounts, and run a large, disciplined household and make it pleasing--though not, perhaps, pleasing in a Galesburg way. (Max Ernst's niece Henrike Pretzell, who visits Tanning from Cologne twice a year, says that in France every day began with breakfast in bed and that the flowers in Dorothea's hair at dinner were "so fresh you could see the dew on them.") While Tanning makes no great claim for Galesburg cuisine, she does say that she knocked 'em dead in Paris with her mother's baked beans. In New York, she serves soupe au pistou, "chicken thingies," salad, and good French cheese. She is both generous and thrifty. Her fridge is lined with old bottles of champagne, corked with supermarket stoppers. Her jelly beans are timeless. Her balsamic vinegar looks ready to walk away. "She's terrifically avant-garde and bohemian, yet--I hate to say this--she's got a lot of good Midwestern values, and she's full of womanly virtues," Helen Heekin, from Cincinnati, says. Among Tanning's treasures is a Singer console from the era when good home sewing machines had knee pedals and were framed in brass and sunk into mahogany tables. On the bed in the guest room, where she keeps the machine, is an old black dress--a confection of silky ruched panne velvet, French, from the look of it--which she has cut in half and occasionally talks about remodelling. There's no doubt that she could do it, if her eyes were stronger. Over the years, she has stitched together dozens of "soft" sculptures on that Singer: the bursting corseted mug called "Don Juan's Breakfast"; the giant pincushion, sucking up pins like an imploding anteatr; the torsos breaking through old wallpaper; the tangle of tweed limbs emerging from the fabric of sofas and chairs, like Michelangelos from their stone.

Tanning has built two famous houses--one in the desert near Sedona, Arizona, where she and Ernst tried living when they first married, and one in Seillans, in the South of France, where they lived from the mid-sixties up to the year he died--and she has restored four, as well as an assortment of studios and apartments, including the sprawling seven-room apartment she lives in now, in a safe and, to her mind, stimulatingly respectable building on Fifth Avenue, a few blocks north of Washington Square. (It holds a small treasure trove of Tannings and Ernsts, along with her favorite pieces from Ernst's notable collection of primitive art.) She has worked on her rooms as she would a poem or a painting, scooping out space and patching it back together in ways that suited her, creating a tiny turquoise-and-yellow "fax room," with a fur doorknob and a folding chair; converting what must have been a maid's room into a poet's warren, where she is "undistracted by views" and "can touch everything" in two steps on her walker. (Tanning has broken both hips in the past few years; every time she gets on the bathroom scale, she subtracts "five pounds of titanium.") "Every object in this apartment is something I've chosen or kept, and it's where I put it," she told me one day toward Thanksgiving when we were in her kitchen polishing off the last of a pumpkin pie she'd made for Halloween. She was talking about her cookbooks, but it could have been anything in the apartment. The "dirty Greek postcard" (sent with a sweet note by the late Sadruddin Khan, the uncle of the Aga Khan and, at the time, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and his wife, Catherine) goes on a shelf just to the left of the computer monitor, next to the photograph of the pensive chimp (from the archives of a Congo expedition that ended in 1915) and the billet-doux from Leonor Fini ("Je te pense tous les jours"). The platter of belts, "my little homage" to a lost waistline, sits on the dining-room sideboard. The outrageously lifelike dog (from a fancy toy store, courtesy of herself) squats on the bidet in the master bathroom, under the niche with the small Ernst bronze and the two red, tasselled bottles of Opium, her favorite perfume. After a few visits, you notice if something is moved or changed. It disturbs the tranquillity.

"The Tanning effect," I've heard this called. It means that once Tanning has found a place for something, however odd or unlikely, it settles into a kind of domesticity, of a piece with the Scalandre plaid curtains and the white lace window panels--the last lace panels from the brocanteur on the Rue du Bac who used to find them for her--and the old armoire, from a Provencal kitchen, where she keeps her plates. Her seven rooms on Fifth Avenue are a mise en

scene. (She has designed ballets for George Balanchine and John Cranko, an experience she disliked intensely. "Group activity is not my thing," she told me, adding that she found the dancers so irritating and vain that once, during a fitting, she stuck a pin into the crotch of a male dancer, just to prove that it was padded.) And yet the effect is so artless that after a few visits you forget that you're being led by the nose into autobiographical realms that, at the end of the day, are more High Dada than Surrealist--which is to say, more conscious than uncensored. You get used to the little manipulations (the yellowing "notice of proposition," tacked lopsided onto a bathroom wall, from which you learn of Tanning's nomination as a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres; the typewritten message, tucked under the glass top of her coffee table, in which you are strongly advised against putting your pistachio shells back into the bowl with the pistachios), and to the witty touches (the low French armchair that she has covered in leopard-print velvet and, with the addition of a long fat tail, turned into the sculpture "Primitive Seating") and the sleights of hand (the big striped beach umbrella opened over the dining-room table, so she can dine al fresco, the way she did in France). It's only when you bring someone who's never been before--when you see that person slip under a spell that's the spell of art and also the strong spell of housewifery--that you remember how astonishing her world is. She says, "I think of myself as a pretty girl, protected by imagination."

On Saturdays, Tanning likes to bring people to her studio--which until March was on the third floor of a big industrial building on Hudson Street that's about to be converted into expensive condominium lofts. (The new one is a few blocks away, on Varick Street.) The studio held the bulk of her unsold work, along with a substantial archive assembled, over two years in the late nineties, by a talented young art historian and curator named Pam Johnson. Johnson, who is devoted to Tanning, still works at the studio on Saturdays. "A movable feast" is how she describes the past few months of packing and unpacking. She is part of a support system of women whom Tanning refers to as "my girls," and occasionally "my poor girls," and dotes on as shamelessly as she bosses them around. Her "poetry girl" is the young poet Brenda Shaughnessy, who comes to the apartment two afternoons a week for what Tanning describes as "the difficult letters and the boring ones." (Shaughnessy named her first book after Tanning's painting "Interior with Sudden Joy.") The "exercise girl," who comes on three other afternoons, is a downtown physical therapist named Eileen Kelly. The top girl, and Tanning's family protegee--the oldest of her three nieces--is Mimi Johnson, a well-known avant-garde arts manager who started the American branch of Art Services; worked for John Cage until his death, in 1992; and has been married to the composer Robert Ashley for nearly thirty years. Mimi is always on call. She does all the bookkeeping now, chops the vegetables for the pistou, summons the doctor in emergencies--Tanning will not consider having a companion, at least not so long as her housekeeper "comes in early enough to do the breakfast in bed"--and finds it admirably if typically "audacious" for her aunt, whom she views tenderly, but with a dose of filial realism, to be "emerging" as a poet in her mid-nineties. Mimi likes to say that she and Tanning are alike in that they both love France and are "profoundly not French," though Dorothea has "more makeup, fancier jewels, prettier dresses, and wouldn't dream of throwing a raincoat over a nightgown and rushing out to buy a bottle of milk." Not that Tanning drinks milk.

The last time I visited the Hudson Street studio, Pam Johnson got out a fat loose-leaf binder with some of Tanning's clippings, including the reviews of one Surrealism show I'd seen at the Guggenheim in 1999 and another, "Surrealism: Desire Unbound," at the Metropolitan three years later. The binder must have weighed fifteen pounds. The list of exhibitions alone ran to more than thirty pages. But the fact remained that, with the exception of one print retrospective, in 1992, at the New York Public Library, and a focus exhibit of twenty paintings and sculptures, covering nearly sixty years, at the Philadelphia Museum in 2000, there has not been a retrospective of Tanning's work or even a major museum show devoted exclusively to her in the United States. The French had their big Tanning retrospective at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, in Paris, in 1974. The Swedes had theirs at the Malmo Konsthall, in the spring of 1993. The British had one at the Camden Arts Center, in London, that fall. The

Beaubourg today has a room devoted to Tanning. The Tate owns six pieces. The Met, which will mount a Max Ernst retrospective in 2005, has no Tannings in its collection; the Modern owns only a few lithographs and etchings (though this may change now that Ann Temkin, the curator who brought Tanning into Philadelphia's collection, has taken a job at moma). Tanning says, "I get mad just thinking about it."

Surrealism was always something of an acquired taste in America--a little too European, a little too subversive and sexually unsettling--despite the fact that almost all the prominent Surrealist artists lived and worked here during the war years. The movement was often fatally identified with the didacticism of its theorists, in particular the French writer Andre Breton, whom the best Surrealists far surpassed and, by all accounts, found tedious. "Breton was like a pope," Tanning says. "He saw something and turned it into something much less unconventional. He didn't know painting. He said he hated music. In the beginning, none of the Surrealists would admit to liking music, because the boss hated it!" The artists found a much better impresario in the American dealer Julien Levy, a restless aesthete and intellectual with a rich father and an uncanny eye who turned their exile into an ongoing salon, introducing them to New York and introducing Tanning to Max Ernst.

Tanning moved to New York for the first time in 1935, after a stint at Knox College and a few weeks at the Art Institute of Chicago, and she arrived with a taste for adventure that eventually took her to Paris on the eve of the Occupation. But by the time she met Ernst, in the spring of 1942, she had acquired a job (drawing ads at Macy's) as well as a husband, Homer Shannon--a reporter with a drinking problem who had already put her through eight spectacularly unhappy years. Unhappiness is not something Tanning likes discussing. ("Her creativity is not wasted in remorse," her friend Heekin says.) Tanning prefers to say that the best thing Shannon ever did for her was to join the Navy, six years into the relationship, and ship out--which gave her "a wonderful opportunity to be alone" in New York and paint, and to meet Max Ernst. Their first encounter took place at a party at Levy's. Tanning arrived wearing a turquoise blouse with large, ravelling holes torn fetchingly across the chest. The look was more Dogpatch than perhaps Ernst was used to, but to a Francophile German Surrealist old enough to have been off carousing with Tristan Tzara when Tanning was a schoolgirl tying bells to the buckles on her galoshes, it must have been pure exotica. (There is a picture of the blouse, with eyelet pasties tacked more or less over the holes, in Tanning's studio, in the box of photographs marked "1940s.")

The Surrealists loved women. They made a cult of beautiful women. But as a group they were not what you would call great husband material. Max Ernst was a remarkably handsome man and a notable philanderer. In Paris, in the twenties and thirties, he had run through Caresse Crosby, Leonora Carrington, and so many other women within his small if exceptionally open circle, and was possibly so exhausted by them all, that when he wanted to end an affair with his friend Paul Eluard's wife, Gala, he offered to sail to Saigon to return her. In New York, eleven months into a marriage with Peggy Guggenheim--who had brought him out of wartime Europe--he was looking around again. "If it hadn't been me, it would have been another pretty girl" is how Tanning explains what happened.

Toward Christmas, Ernst drove to Tanning's walkup, on East Fifty-eighth Street. He wanted to choose a painting for a show his wife was planning at her gallery, Art of This Century. (The show, "31 Women," opened in January of 1943.) Tanning had propped the lusciously topless and as yet unfinished self-portrait "Birthday" on her easel and fixed her hair. In her poem "Time Flew (2 hrs. 10 min.)," she remembers the words that "fell on the rug" unsaid that day. ("It was a day that determined my whole life," she told me, "and to say it in sixteen lines instead of a book--well, I consider that a kind of triumph.") Ernst stayed, they played chess, and the next time he came with a suitcase. They married in 1946. "I realized that I should only have had thirty women," Guggenheim wrote afterward. Tanning remained unfazed. When her famously reluctant Lhasa Apso lost her virtue--to a friend's dog, on

a dictionary, on the rug, in the middle of a Surrealist Sunday-evening soiree, shocking Andre Breton--and started producing litters, she sold two of the puppies to Guggenheim and made a nice profit.

Ernst gave Tanning a whirlwind life, though for years it was arguably his life. She inherited his friends. In America, there was Duchamp and Magritte and Calder and Matta and Man Ray and Lee Miller and Roland Penrose. In France, she added Arp and Cioran and Aragon and Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan. The Ernsts were rarely alone, even during the year they spent camped in a cabin in the desert, building their Sedona house--"living like savages," Tanning says, hammering all day, cooking outside over black rocks, battling scorpions and rattlers and tarantulas and, eventually, a couple of curious and friendly neighbors who wanted to bring them pies. (Ernst made a sign that said "Please don't feed the artists," and Tanning vetoed the sign--which seems to have pretty much defined their roles.) At one time or another, nearly every important Dadaist and Surrealist on this side of the Atlantic stayed with the Ernsts in Sedona, hoping for a fruitful frontier experience and, perhaps, some of Dorothea's rock-baked chicken paillard. Sedona was a credential, as much a salon in its way as Julien Levy's New York gallery. (Hans Richter came for a month and shot a long segment of his chess movie "8 by 8." Tanning, who was in it, got story credit.) So much marvellous art came out of vacations in that patch of Arizona desert that Doug Walla--the dealer who first showed Tanning's paintings when she returned to New York from France--says you could put together a landmark exhibit of Surrealism from the late forties and early fifties and call it "The Sedona Years." Not that there was much money for Surrealist art floating around America during those years. It was in Europe that people who could still afford to collect seemed to covet a Matta or a Magritte or a Man Ray or a Max Ernst, which is one reason Ernst thought about moving back. Tanning says that when she and Max rented their first Paris studios--this was the fifties, and the idea then was more a commute than a relocation--"people met us with open arms and money came rolling in." It was a lasting welcome. She describes it by saying that she has known four French Presidents and sat to the right of three of them at table, and that the only one who wasn't "a honey" was Francois Mitterrand, who invited her to dinner at the Elysee and never addressed a word to her. ("Such bad taste!" she told me.) Georges Pompidou's wife, Claude, kept a Tanning above her bed. Valery Giscard d'Estaing helped her out of "a little tax harassment." Jacques Chirac, whom she met when he was the mayor of Paris, was so eager to begin their evening that he ran into the reception room at the Hotel de Ville with his shirt unbuttoned, carrying his tie. Tanning says that she and her husband lived simply, but in short order they were living simply on two floors of an eighteenth-century hotel particulier on the Rue de Lille that had once been rented by Harry and Caresse Crosby. ("Just a little studio, over an apartment," Tanning described it to me.) When she prowled the flea market for furniture, it was women like the vicomtesse Marie Laure de Noailles who pointed her to the best stalls.

Still, it was Ernst's world. Tanning's friend Sondra Peterson, an American who lived in Paris for many years with the art collector and publisher Daniel Filipacchi, says that when Surrealists got together it was always a terrible competition, with each man "fighting to be the center of attention," and the women listening. There was never any question of a child. Tanning apparently didn't want one, and Ernst, with a grown son--Jimmy--by his first wife, wasn't much of a father to the one he did have. (He eventually tried to disinherit Jimmy, which wasn't permitted under French law, and since his death, relations between Tanning and Jimmy Ernst's family have been pretty much confined to their lawyers.)

"You can't give birth to more than Dorothea did," another friend of Tanning's told me. "She produced their life, down to the last detail." Henrike Pretzell describes the marriage this way: in the evening, Max and Dorothea would emerge from their studios and join their guests; Max would sit there "like a frozen stone," and Dorothea would pour the champagne and be charming and beautiful and witty and "in charge of the communication" until Max thawed. Henrike remembers Tanning saying, "Max is already on his pedestal. I need a pedestal of my own." She

remembers Tanning being angry because "people approached her like a tunnel to go through to get to Max." She remembers the look on her face, at a Berlin opening, when a collector stopped in front of one of her paintings and asked who painted it--it was so lovely--and Tanning said "Me!" and the man said, "Oh, do you paint, too?" She remembers repetitions of that scene, and Tanning's nerves, which were already fragile, shattering after Ernst died and she became, officially, the widow and keeper of the flame--and of the Max Ernsts.

In a way, Tanning survived as Ernst's muse by becoming her own muse. Her subject has almost always been women--increasingly attenuated or abstracted but at the same time almost cannibalized by their own insistent, irresistible flesh. A reviewer for *Vogue* once described Tanning as "reconfiguring female anatomy in delirious nudes," and she often quotes that phrase, adding that "very rarely did I paint delirious male anatomy." She says there is "maybe" a nude male body at the bottom of the tangle of melting limbs in "Family Portrait," a painting that hangs on her dining-room wall, but that's the only one she admits to. Her "most extravagant purchase ever"--a large Gustave Dore oil, bought four years ago at an art fair for about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and now covering a wall of the room where she watches "Jeopardy" and entertains--consists of (by my count) twenty-five water nymphs languishing around a large rock. "I would say the female nude has always been more appealing," she said dryly, when I first admired the picture. In 1987, she finished what I now think of as the analogue to those languid nymphs--a ten-foot canvas that has pride of place in her studio and, she tells visitors, is "my best painting." She calls it "On Avalon." It's a luminous work, with circles--"flowers or novae, I don't know what they are, something"--bursting into white light and soft, pale torsos drifting past them. "My icons" is how she describes the bodies. "My women. They have to be there."

For a long time, feminist art historians could make as little of Tanning's work, with its thick, sensuous female forms, as she made of their austere political preoccupations. It was partly a matter of generation, partly a matter of what weapons were available. Today's feminists like her better, but she does not like them. It is a point of stubborn and possibly senseless pride to Tanning that she will not lend paintings to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, let alone become a member. ("You wouldn't say 'men's museum,' " she told me, and she was right about that.) She will not participate in any show of women artists. (She sends a much revised, all-purpose rejection letter: "As I do not participate in any art project dealing with only one of the sexes, I hereby ask you to refrain from including any work in your book/exhibition. My position on this subject is clear and unalterable.") She won't even acknowledge having been included in any show of women artists since Peggy Guggenheim's "31 Women"--an exhibit too well documented to ignore--though I know of at least eight such shows, the last as recent as 2000. Her disclaimers are legendary. Some years ago, when the Surrealist-literature scholar Mary Ann Caws asked permission to include an essay about Tanning in a book called "Surrealism and Women," Tanning refused, with a statement that began, "If you lose a loved one does it matter if it is a brother or a sister?" She lambasted a French publisher about a book he'd sent because the author referred to her as an "epouse": "Here I'm known as an artist and a writer of some renown. . . . Max is not listed as the epoux of Dorothea Tanning." She ended an excoriating letter to a filmmaker who was planning a movie about her--he had made the mistake of calling her "charming"--with the words: "So now you know me and the sort of problem you would be dealing with if there were such a thing as coercion to force me, the subject. I think you will rather give it up. . . . With my warmest thoughts, Dorothea." She was as dismissive of the editor who wanted to include her in a dictionary of women artists as she was of the professor from the women's caucus of the College Art Association who tried to give her an award that had previously gone to Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Nevelson, Lee Krasner, and Louise Bourgeois; and of the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art who requested the loan of a painting called "Maternity"; and even of the girl who was studying Tanning's work for a college honors project and had had the poor taste to quote from Robert Graves.



Tanning, of course, is a born feminist, whatever her denials. Ann Temkin, at the Modern, who has been reading Tanning since the first memoir, says that as a young woman what interested her most about Tanning was in fact "the biography, the self-invention, the life-as-art. She's not exactly a role model--who could follow her?--but I found her sort of fantastic. We were all looking for examples of women who were independent and brave, and Surrealism was the movement that had launched those women." (I never found the letter she wrote to Robert Coates, who described Guggenheim's "31 Women" in this magazine as "thirty-one ladies" who've cooked up a spicy "mess of paintings, collages, constructions, and so on" for a show with "a slightly giggly air." But I'm certain she sent one.) Inconsistency, in any case, was never something that concerned Tanning. Her own writing is infused with references to Ernst. She has dedicated poems to him ("Collage") and written poems about things he said ("Occupied Musical Chairs"). And though she often claims never to have made a painting for him--he made something for her every year, with a "D" worked into the composition, and she has them all--paintings like "Max in a Blue Boat," from 1947, were obviously meant for him, and were never sold. There are big photographs of Ernst all over the apartment. She often stops to admire him, telling friends how beautiful he was--what a beautiful man he was. Once, this winter, she confessed to having begun "Chasm" sixty years ago, "for Max." She told this story: She and Max were taking a trip through the desert, and, hoping to amuse him, she began to make up stories, jotting them down in a notebook she always carried. Every night, she would read aloud to him--the best parts, whatever was diverting and sexy and "unusual"--and of course he was hooked, listening. He kept asking, "What happens next?" And she kept saying, "Tomorrow!" Like Scheherazade.

A few years into her career as a poet, Tanning sold six or seven fairly valuable Ernsts and used the money to endow a prize through the Academy of American Poets. She says that she wanted to do something for poetry, to give back some of the pleasure that poetry had given her. It seemed to her then that poets were purer than other people--purer certainly than the artists she'd known. And, unlike those artists, some were actually strapped for cash. Her prize, awarded every year to an American poet, amounts to the most generous poetry prize in the world. (It began at a hundred thousand dollars and is now up to a hundred and fifty thousand.) W. S. Merwin got the first Tanning Prize, James Tate the second, and Adrienne Rich the third. Then, at her insistence, the name was changed to the Wallace Stevens Award. When I asked her why, she said, "I didn't want people thinking I decide. I didn't want them to have to like my poems." (In fact, the decision rests with a group of poets chosen by the academy's board of chancellors and staff.) She told McClatchy that she didn't want people thinking she was rich, either, and McClatchy is still amazed that she ever assumed no one would guess her secret. Amazed, maybe, but not surprised. One of the things he likes so much about Tanning and about her poetry is that "at the heart of everything there is this disconnect" between the Midwestern naivete and the "absolutely uncensored imagination." He calls her Lolita--"the wide-eyed voice of a ferocious, fanged wisdom"--and says that she uses language the way she once used paint, with memories, or dreams of memories, coming in and out of focus and the artist "grabbing at the shadow."

McClatchy used to help Tanning edit her poetry. (They're still arguing about a poem that ended with the word "aubergine." "I kept telling her that 'aubergine' is not the right kind of word to end a poem with," McClatchy says, but Tanning held out for several drafts, because, as she says, "I fell in love with 'aubergine,' with the sheen, the wicked color, the 'O' of it.") Now Richard Howard has taken over the lion's share of the editing. They have a routine. Tanning will send him a poem. He'll make some suggestions--"a lot of notes on the page"--and send them back. Then he and Tanning get together and discuss them, and Tanning will or will not change something. "She's modest--sometimes she'll tell me, 'I'll take as much as I can bear,' or, 'I know what you want, but I don't know how to make that happen,'" Howard says. "But she's a real professional. Sometimes she goes too fast and too far for me, and I don't get it. She'll say, 'Well, I don't tell stories the same way you do, Richard. Your work is too intellectual.' But, like Stevens, she gets it."

Tanning savors her poems, and loves trying them out on friends. She won't give public readings; she says she has a horror of readings, perhaps because of all those evenings when she was forced to stand in her mother's parlor, reciting to the large, baleful, corseted women of Galesburg. "I was trained to do that, but I can tell you I died every time," she claims. Not surprisingly, she is quite a good performer. She will read you a poem, pulling it out from a pile of copies, holding the paper at arm's length and squinting through a big magnifying glass. "Listen to this! How about this line! Isn't this good?" And if you say yes she breaks into a grin so wide that she has to stop, and shake her head, and repeat it. When I asked Tanning how she wrote her poems, she said, "Well, sometimes an idea keeps rolling around in your head, or a pair of words, but you don't really know what it is. It has to emerge. My poem 'No Palms' is such a poem. We were on our trip though the desert. We passed a town called Twentynine Palms. We drove on, and finally we came to a gas station and a little cabin behind it and a sign--one of those official blue-and-white signs of a California town--that said, 'No Palms. Population 3.' For a long time, those were the words in my head: 'no palms.' Fifty years later, I wrote the poem." She told me how sorry she was "for all the young poets who have to keep looking 'inside' for themselves. I won't say old age is a global message. But it's given me plenty of material."

Dorothea Tanning was an art-world legend. Then she became a poet.

# The New York Times

## Surrealist Views From A Real Live One

LINDA YABLONSKY  
MARCH 24, 2002



"Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," 1943, is one of two paintings by Dorothea Tanning in the Metropolitan Museum's show "Surrealism: Desire Unbound."

Dorothea Tanning was a fashion illustrator at Macy's when, in the winter of 1942, the art dealer Julien Levy paid her a visit. She was thrilled. If you were a Surrealist in New York at that time, his Madison Avenue gallery was absolutely the place to be. Its roster included Ms. Tanning's future husband, Max Ernst, as well as Magritte, Man Ray, Salvador Dali, Alberto Giacometti and Joseph Cornell. "Vision, that's what it's all about," she says. "Vision. Not fashion."

And time. Two of the three paintings that Levy saw in her studio that day, "Birthday" and "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," are once again hanging side by side in "Surrealism: Desire Unbound" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and on a recent afternoon Ms. Tanning headed out to see the show.

That was enough to make this a special, even historic occasion. At 91, Ms. Tanning is one of only three surviving members of the art movement that the French writer André Breton founded with several friends in Paris in the 1920's. (Roberto Matta and Leonora Carrington are the others.) And she seldom leaves the lower Fifth Avenue apartment that even she calls "fabulous."

The same might be said of Ms. Tanning. She is actually rather frail, though that is well disguised by her erect posture and almost unlined complexion. In conversation, she can be feisty, even salty, and at times quite coquettish. "From the neck up I'm young and strong," she declares. "But the rest of me is a hundred!"

Nonetheless, she works out, gently, with a personal trainer two days a week and has lived alone since 1979, when she returned to New York after almost 30 years in France with Ernst, who died in 1976. She has had a notable career in painting, drawing and sculpture but stopped making art in 1998, when she no longer had the physical strength for it. Even to continue drawing, she says, would be to "grind out things I've already done."

Instead, she writes poetry on her new Macintosh, on which she is also learning to use the Internet. Her poems have appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Boston Review* and *Poetry*. Last summer, she published a memoir, "Between Lives."

During the ride to the Met, she expresses reservations about "Desire Unbound," which originated at the Tate Modern in London. "Rainy Day Canapé," a libidinous love seat of flesh-colored tweed that Ms. Tanning made along with several other fabric sculptures in the 1960's, was included in the Tate show but is not at the Met. The Met's smaller galleries couldn't hold all the works from London and so those made after 1959, the year of the last official Surrealist exhibition in Paris, were excluded. Ms. Tanning was crushed when she received the news from William S. Lieberman, the longtime Met curator who installed the show in New York. Though they have been friends for 50 years, she is not sure what she will do if she runs into him.

Ms. Tanning also objects to the exhibition's emphasis on the sexual in Surrealist art, not for prurient reasons -- her own work is blatantly suggestive, she admits -- but because, she says, "the word 'desire' has to do with more than raw sex." A word she likes better is transgression. "There you have Breton in a nutshell: transgression!" she exclaims. She then describes the Surrealist games he invented as "opportunities for groping." She also says they were fun.

During the two hours it takes to see the show, Ms. Tanning will prove to be both Surrealism's poet and its scourge, beginning with Salvador Dali's "Venus With Drawers," a modified plaster bust of the love goddess as a cabinet, with grungy white pompon pulls attached to the drawers incorporated into its torso.

"I never saw it with those pompons," she says, puzzled. "They're supposed to be real drawer pulls." She considers whether her memory is playing tricks. "No," she says, her voice emphatic. "This is not the one I saw. That was more effective as a vision, as a transformation of the sculpture. This is more like a decoration."

The museum has provided her with a wheelchair, but she abandons it in the first gallery, a room of paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, which leave her in awed silence. "This is so beautiful," she says of "Spring," a mysterious 1914 canvas by the man she calls "the quintessential father" of Surrealism.

Ms. Tanning grows tense at the sudden appearance of Mr. Lieberman. "Well, look who's here!" she says, smiling nervously. "It all looks beautiful, Bill. So far."

Mr. Lieberman, 78, is rolling around in a wheelchair of his own, just to have a place to sit down. She grills him about the Dali. He remembers the piece differently, too, and does not know where this version came from. "It's not very good," he concedes, an opinion he will later give to several other items in the show. "One can always think of other things that might have been in," he says, sounding wistful.

Relieved at his exit, Ms. Tanning turns to the starkly painted reclining goddess in de Chirico's "Ariadne." "What is more wonderful than the female body?" she asks. "That's the most important and the most wonderful and the most mysterious and extraordinary thing that I know." She expresses similar reverence for early canvases by Ernst, which she studies lovingly. She has never seen them except in reproduction. "Max and I never, never talked about art, I swear," she says. "That would have been awful."

She also admires "Bride," a 1913 painting by Marcel Duchamp, whom she knew well. "Where is desire in this painting?" she asks. "The desire is simply for something beautiful! Certain shapes could conceivably bring to your subconscious mind some relation to sexuality, but it's so subtle that it's that much more insidious."

She blanches at a contorted female figure with a bloody steak for a heart in André Masson's 1939 painting "Gradiva." "Masson was a very wonderful, cultivated man who was always very much involved with sexuality," Ms. Tanning says. "He wasn't just a Surrealist but an all-around enlightened person, but I wish he had not painted this picture."

Why not? She thinks it unoriginal, "undesirable." More to her taste is another Masson, "Ariadne's Thread," with its sultry tangle of Miró-esque doodles in painted sand. She is stunned by three Miró canvases. "Gorgeous," she murmurs. She doesn't particularly regard Miró as a Surrealist, even though he was adopted by the movement.

Ms. Tanning recounts the story of Miró's initiation into the Surrealist group. Several members invaded the studio where Miró was painting and involved him in one of their games. "They had a rope," she says. "And they decided to hang him, because he was an innocent. It was just one of those funny, crazy things they did." Ms. Tanning shakes her head. "They were probably drunk when they put the noose around his neck and pulled the cord. According to Max, Miró put his arms up just in time."

"Miró was very sweet," she continues. "He was not one of those people like Duchamp or Breton or Masson, who read a lot of books. I don't think Miró read books. He just painted! He painted what came out of him and it was joy!"

A moment later, Mr. Lieberman returns, proffering a box of chocolate truffles -- a peace offering of sorts that Ms. Tanning readily accepts. He nods in agreement as she makes an apt connection between Dali's luminescent "Meditation on a Harp" and the work of Maxfield Parrish. "He could have been a Dali if he had the same quality of imagination," Ms. Tanning says. "Or Dali could have been Maxfield Parrish if he didn't."

As she continues on foot, with Mr. Lieberman trailing in his wheelchair, she calls out to a few photographs as if to old friends. "There's Lee Miller! And Dora Maar!" She shields her eyes from "The Rape," a painting by Magritte that reconfigures a woman's face with breasts and a pubis. "It's porn! It's ugly. To me, it is exactly the contrary of desire. If you hated a woman, that is the way you would paint her."

Though she has special admiration for Giacometti's famous "praying mantis" sculpture, "Woman With Her Throat Cut," she has equal distaste for the fetishistic photographs and drawings of Hans Bellmer. "They speak to me with saliva," she says.



"Tragic Table," a 1969 cloth sculpture by Dorothea Tanning, is on view at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Finally she comes to her own two paintings. As she takes in "Birthday," a bare-breasted self-portrait, her lapis-blue eyes sparkle anew. "Isn't it just the best picture in the show!" She laughs, only half-joking, but bristles when she sees the sculptures that actually did make it into the exhibition.

"That's Giacometti having a bad dream," she says of "The Impossible III" by the Brazilian sculptor known as Maria, then heads straight for a nearly abstract painting by Matta. "To me he is one of our most wonderful modern painters who does not have the place he deserves," Ms. Tanning says, looking again at the painting, "I Shame Myself/I Ascend." "That is desire on a grand scale."

Mr. Lieberman calls her attention to a text panel at the end of the show that features a quote from her memoir. "So Dorothea," he says, "you have the last word after all." She is delighted and pronounces the whole experience "heavenly." She's far from done, however.

In the car on the way back downtown, she expresses regret that so many of the Surrealists are represented by what she considers secondary works. But she adds: "There's enough of greatness in there that there will always be something rewarding for someone who likes to look at beautiful things and wonderful paintings. Surrealism is a piece of history, and it has stained the consciousness of everyone."

# ARTFORUM

## Dorothea Tanning

Philadelphia Museum of Art

RICHARD HOWARD  
APRIL 2001



Dorothea Tanning, *Rainy Day Canapé*, 1970, sofa, tweed, wool, Ping-Pong balls, and cardboard, 32 ½ x 68 ½ x 43 ½ in.

Last year the Philadelphia Museum of Art purchased Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday*, 1942, an early self-portrait in which the bare-breasted, bramble-skirted heroine, accompanied by an apparently benevolent minidragon (first of the animal demiurges so often inhabiting the artist's future paintings), stands with her hand on the knob of a white door in an infinite regress of half-open portals. This acquisition has now been celebrated by curator Ann Temkin with a small show of paintings, objects, and drawings from Tanning's long career, "a hidden treasure of modern art," concluding with one of the dozen "imaginary flower portraits" painted in the artist's eighty-eighth year.

Pictures from the '40s and '50s crystallize (surely the right verb for this mordantly illusionist work—"big bare rooms," as Tanning describes *Interior with Sudden Joy*, 1951, "with white frozen figures, like Sodom and Gomorrah") a series of awesome and alarming visions. Even this limited show presents extraordinary evidence of mastery across the genres: a *landscape* of planetary upheaval, rather like the mountains behind *Mona Lisa*, here confronted by, instead of backing, the subject (the painter herself, tiny against what she calls the "placid monuments" of Sedona,

Arizona); a *still life* of necromantic roses haunting the linen-covered tabletop where their crisped phantoms have died, or at least eternally decayed; and a *figure study* with all the properties (cushions, books, canine familiars, unspecifiable instruments of sexual insubordination), though the real interior personnel must be the creepy girls in white satin, as released from complicity as they are from constraint.



Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday*, 1942, oil on canvas, 40 ½ x 25 ½ in.

But it is in the next decade that Tanning's painting comes into its own *as painting*, not just as accurately envisioned wonders and horrors. *Insomnias*, 1957, begins the sequence, and I think it is one of her grandest achievements. "I wanted to lead the eye into spaces that hid, revealed, transformed all at once," the artist reports, and the big brushy phantasmagoria sets the stage for most of the canvases to follow, "as if it had appeared between dreaming and waking." What she has done is to discover not the polymorphous perversity of human figures but the occasional and orgiastic upsurge of light as it has its way with the adulterous mélange of bodies no longer confined to gender or even genitality. Unpredictably, we are presented with opalescence and the retreat from it into garish shadows as Tanning interrogates herself: "Isn't that the artist's best joy, to control light?" That there should be light at all in these intrauterine fantasies is the eerie contention of the artist's major work.

Of course there is no room in a show of this size for any register of "development," of "metamorphosis." Temkin has had to rely on high points, yet one of the great satisfactions of Tanning's career, beyond individual triumphs, is the evidence of endless reconnaissance, the search for a replenishing plastic vocabulary of ecstasy and dismay: The figuration seethes into orgy or apocalypse, the action is evenhandedly of the alcove and the abattoir, and remarkably enough, such energies pursue the artist to the end with *Heartless*, 1980, about which Tanning confesses that "the need to say blue and orange that would turn them into conversations about light and memory . . . became, of all



things, the kneeling figure, perhaps my mother cradling—me?—while, yes, go on, her lonely sister says—*heartless*.” The paintings resolve Walter Benjamin’s furious dilemma about history—how to afford a narrative in the conditions of an image, an image in terms of narrative; even in these few instances, the continuing life is encountered.

The mortal word “surrealism,” brandished so fatuously in this artist’s biography, has some concomitance in Tanning’s astounding paroxysms of erotic furniture, one example of which, *Rainy-Day Canapé*, 1970, brought the little show to its knees (as well as to every other portion of the tweed-and-stuffing anatomy). The notion that there are a considerable number of these terrifying objects in the world, variously disposed to what the French call a final *jouissance meublée*, makes the need for a Tanning retrospective all the more urgent—for now, this one instance must whet the . . . whistle.

Later this year Norton is publishing Tanning’s memoir, *Between Lives*, and Turtle Point is bringing out her fictional work *Chasm*; her poems continue to appear in several literary magazines. All well and good for the nonagenarian painter, but it is her paintings in a generous retrospect that would be good for *us*, rendered avid by Philadelphia’s brilliant tribute.

# Art in America

## The Oldest Living Surrealist Tells (Almost) All

MICHELLE FALKENSTEIN  
SEPTEMBER 2001



Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday*, 1942, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art

"I'm an old has-been to a lot of people," says Dorothea Tanning, 91, folding her hands over her knees. "But I'm still alive in every way."

Tanning, best known as a Surrealist artist, has worked steadily her entire life, making paintings and sculpture, writing poetry and fiction, designing costumes and stage sets for Balanchine, even drawing plans for a house and having it built in the South of France. "That's what a motivated life is," she says. "It's creative in every sense."

Beginning on the sixth of this month, Manhattan's Zabriskie Gallery will have a small survey of Tanning's drawings, collages, and soft sculptures on view through October 13. Farther downtown, La Maison Française of New York University will feature a selection of her drawings, watercolors, and gouaches that runs through the end of September.

Tanning offers details of the projects and people who have defined her motivated life in the recently released *Between Lives: An Artist and Her Work* (W.W. Norton & Company). She describes the book as an expanded version of her earlier memoir, *Birthday* (Lapis Press, 1987). "*Birthday* was a kind of love story, mostly about my life with Max Ernst, because I was mourning his loss," says Tanning, who met the Surrealist painter in 1942, when he came to her New York studio to look at her work. She married him four years later in Beverly Hills, in a double wedding with Man Ray and Juliette Browner. "But," she adds, "you can't mourn someone forever, can you?" In the years after the publication of *Birthday*, Tanning says she realized that there were many people in her life whose stories she hadn't shared, including Joseph Cornell, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Arp, John Cage, and André Breton. There was the time, for instance, when Marcel Duchamp painted a mustache and goatee on a dime-store reproduction of the Mona Lisa that Ernst had been given as a mock prize at a party. On another occasion, Virgil Thomson pleaded with her to jab him with an elbow whenever he dozed off during a cello concert that he was reviewing for the *New York Herald Tribune*. The thought that such incidents might not otherwise be recounted led Tanning to write *Between Lives*. "I vowed not to make it a name-dropper," she says. "But the people deserved to be mentioned in this adventure which is my life."

There would have been two books this year, if not for Tanning's decision to stop the publication of her first novel, *Chasm*, an enigmatic tale set at a desert ranch, because she didn't approve of Turtle Point Press's marketing copy. She particularly disliked a description of her as "one of a small group of major women artists who worked in the Surrealist milieu," along with references to Ernst, she says, which she felt were unnecessary. "He was part of my life for 35 years," she explains, sitting in her lower Manhattan apartment wearing a colorful checkered sweater and pink lipstick. "But I've had 55 others." Ernst died in 1976.

The feisty and trim Tanning continues to work every day, though mostly on her poetry. The apartment, where she has lived since returning to the United States in 1978, after 28 years in France, is filled with works by her, Ernst, and numerous other artists, along with tribal masks and sculpture. A 19th-century bust by Carrier-Belleuse that Tanning draped in strands of colorful plastic beads and a chair she upholstered in leopard-patterned fabric and to which she attached a long tail are among the oddities that speak for Tanning's playful and inventive nature.

Tanning says she had as much an affinity for writing as for visual art while growing up in Galesburg, Illinois. "When I was very young, there was a moment when I was seriously trying to decide what to do," she recalls. "My talent for drawing came faster and easier—and it provided me with a living." Early on, Tanning supported herself as a commercial artist, producing fashion drawings for Macy's, among other projects, before devoting herself full-time to fine art. In the late 1940s, Manhattan gallerist Julien Lévy represented her work. Today, her art is handled, for the most part, by New York dealer John Cavaliero, who says that her early pictures regularly "sell for over \$300,000."

Four years ago, when she was 87, Tanning decided to use the fine, large Lefebvre-Foinet canvases that she had brought back from France when she returned to New York. "I thought, I am not going to die and let someone else paint on these beautiful canvases!" Tanning says emphatically. She created a series of imaginary flowers—12 in eight months. "I don't know how it happened," she says. "I usually chose more challenging subjects."

Upon seeing the new canvases, hazy compositions that border on abstraction, the poet W. S. Merwin suggested that each should have a poem. Then, as now, most of Tanning's friends were poets. Merwin's idea became the basis of a book called *Another Language of Flowers* (George Brazillier, 1998). It includes reproductions of all the paintings and 12 short poems by such poets as Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery, and, of course, Merwin. Tanning's own poetry has appeared in such literary journals as *The Paris Review* and *Partisan Review*, and one of her poems, "No Palms," was included in *The Best American Poetry* of 2000 (Scribner).



Dorothea Tanning, *A Mrs. Radcliffe Called Today*, 1944, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Outside of a few images, Tanning's work is not well known in the United States. Her first solo show at an American institution opened last November, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The exhibition, "Birthday and Beyond," celebrated the museum's purchase of *Birthday* (1942), a self-portrait of the artist in exotic dress that is widely considered an icon of Surrealism, and showcased 19 of her other works. "The idea for the show was really prompted by our worry that people would think that Dorothea Tanning had made on great painting," says Ann Temkin, curator of modern and contemporary art and one of the show's co-organizers. "We wanted to provide a welcome for the painting that made it clear that Tanning had six decades of painting, sculpture, and writing."

"Tanning is an interesting artist who has been overlooked in many ways—except for her relationship with Max Ernst," says Sidra Stich, curator of "Anxious Vision," a traveling exhibition of Surrealist art organized by the Berkeley Art Museum in 1990. "Some of her early work has a character all its own and warrants particular attention." As an example, Stich points to *Children's Games*, completed in 1942. It depicts two young girls tearing wallpaper off the

walls in a hallway, with one revealing what appears to be a vaginal opening, the other an anal one. The pubescent legs of one girl poke into the picture at the lower left; in the background, a de Chirico–like doorway reveals a cloud-filled landscape and two small hills. “The piece is so incredibly strong, even though it measures only 11 by 7 inches,” says Stich.

Robert Waddell, curator of prints at the New York Public Library, co-organized “Dorothea Tanning: Hail Delirium!” in 1992, after Tanning and 12 other donors gave nearly 130 works on paper to the library. “Her work as a printmaker had no been celebrated in this country as it had in France,” Waddell notes. “The wonderful thing about Tanning is her appreciation for the accident. There’s a wonderful element of chance and spontaneity, and her colors just glow.” When she thinks about the art world now, Tanning says, she senses among the public nostalgia for painting that is more ambiguous with regard to its meaning, a quality she finds essential to great art. Of today’s art, she says, “It doesn’t allow for imagination or poetry.”

Art should console people for living, Tanning believes. “If it doesn’t cheer us up, then why look at it?” she wonders. “It should make us feel good about life, or at least make us think about the big questions, the things that people don’t want to ask themselves anymore.”

# ARTFORUM

## Dorothea Tanning

Kent Fine Art

JUDE SCHWENDENWEIN  
NOVEMBER 1998

Dorothea Tanning's paintings present visual impressions, sensations, and visions that defy strict categorization. Her evocative, mysterious images hearken back to a primordial consciousness that is sometimes translated into recognizable pictorial idioms. This show features some of Tanning's best work from the years 1961 to 1987, work that is consistently daring and haunting. Her latest pieces are as fresh and lucid as ever, executed with fluid linework and intuitive coloration.

One essential reason for Tanning's constancy is her belief in the supremacy of imagination over logic. By exploring her own imagination as it relates to a collective human understanding, she has been able to approach each picture with a sense of inquisitiveness. Tanning's clarity of vision comes across because of her excellence of craft. Aspects of her refined draftsmanship from the '40s and '50s reappear in *Notes For An Apocalypse*, 1977, and *A Family Portrait*, 1977. Many of her paintings feature exquisite brushwork, from the soft ethereality of *To The Rescue*, 1965, to the wildly lyrical expressiveness of *On Avalon*, 1984–87. These works are like excerpted narratives built from glimmers of submerged dreams, traumas, absorbed stimuli, and dimming recollections. Elsewhere, Tanning depicts corpulent human nudes either as lushly defined, sensuous forms, or as somewhat immaterial shells; they are often faceless, their individual identities torn asunder from a psychological base. In this otherworldly state, the figures are left to float as disengaged personas in ambiguous, often claustrophobic spaces. Portions of nude females are faintly discernible in *Pounding Strong*, 1981, caught in positions of kneeling, bending, clutching, and writhing around the spectral tracing of a mysterious box, perhaps a large portable radio or TV; with its smoky, earthen tones and eruptions of bright colors, the painting conveys a strong sense of human striving for liberation from a suffocating environment.

Of the many emotions that resonate within Tanning's highly personal terrain, melancholy is the most pervasive. This state reaches the point of saturation in *Sylvia*, 1987. The canvas is almost completely black, with only an isolated slice of light visible in the upper half of the picture, revealing two pointed ellipses reaching out to touch a portion of piano keys. Smears of grayish paint emanate from the top and bottom of this light shaft and merge into the silky blackness that dominates this unreal world. In a completely different vein is the exuberant *Door 84*, 1984. The elongated canvas is abruptly divided by the sculptural element of a vertical-door fragment, complete with knobs. On either side of the door, two women push against the imposed barrier that evenly divides them, as if they represented two aspects of one personality. The figure on the left exerts more effort, while the woman on the right casually props her leg and foot firmly against the border. The picture unleashes an unfettered energy, with its swirling, scattering strokes of fiery yellow and misty green, and could serve as a pointed metaphor for the struggle to gain entry into a spiritual realm.

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

Dorothea Tanning

ROBERTA SMITH  
JULY 3, 1992



Dorothea Tanning's "Voyeurs" on display at the New York Public Library.

At 82, Dorothea Tanning may qualify as the grande dame of Surrealism. She is the widow of Max Ernst, one of the movement's leading lights. For most of the 30 years they were married, as well as the 16 since Ernst's death, she has assiduously given the Surrealist vocabulary a feminine — and increasingly feminist — slant.

"Hail, Delirium!" Ms. Tanning's retrospective of nearly 100 fabulously refined, frequently (if subtly) ribald prints and illustrated books is a quiet eye-opener. In her emphasis on the human body and sexuality and in her penchant for mixing styles, her achievement has many echoes in the work of younger artists.

Ms. Tanning is not strongly original in the formal sense. In fact, she has been influenced by so many Surrealists that this exhibition, which includes works dated from 1950 to the present, sometimes seems to be a review of the entire movement. The third image of "The Seven Spectral Perils," a set of lithographs that illustrate some poems by Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues, has playful shapes and dotted lines that one expects from Joan Miro. The fourth image is dominated by floating orbs circled with lines, like Saturn, that suggest Matta at his most abstract.

Yet throughout her career Ms. Tanning has managed to make a wide range of Surrealist devices very much her own. In both of the "Perils" images, for example, the artist introduces the fragmented, rather realistic motif of a curious young girl who seems to be exploring images' components, creating an unexpected collage of different spaces and narratives. But specific images aside, Ms. Tanning has taken possession of Surrealism primarily through a distinctive delicacy of line, surface texture and color that seems especially well-suited to print making and that is often riveting to look at.

In certain images, the mix of influences, colors and drawing styles is so unexpected that it becomes its own form of originality. In the first etching for "Personne" (or "Nobody"), a book by Lena Leclercq, Ms. Tanning conjures a

woman undergoing a kind of stylistic identity crisis. Her feet start out in Picasso-like Cubism; her dark, hauntingly anxious face, floating above the horizon, speaks of Odilon Redon, while scribbling lines in yellow and blue suggest a Jackson Pollock-like automatism. The image is anchored, however, by a motif that seems both indelibly Surrealist and rather unprecedented: a large eye shape in the vicinity of the figure's shoulders with two pink pupils suggesting breasts.

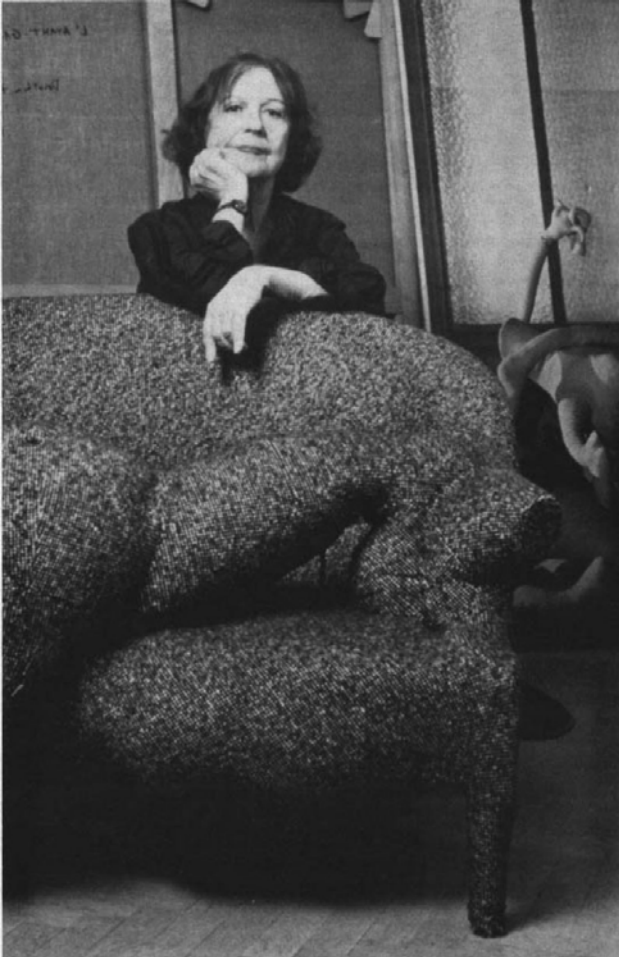
Ms. Tanning's involvement with the body culminates in the 1960's and 70's in a number of honey-toned prints that display what the artist calls a "cheerful carnality." In these works, indistinct figures cavort and entangle, engaging in unspecified acts of love, or perhaps violence. These works have something of the extreme abandon of Japanese erotica, yet in their abstract fleshiness they seem to give body — quite literally — to the automatist drawing of Surrealism. They come full circle to Ms. Tanning's artistic roots and give them new life.



# BOMB

## Dorothea Tanning by Carlo McCormick

OCTOBER 1, 1990



Dorothea Tanning. ©1990 WOVE.

Prior to my meeting with Dorothea Tanning, I had been advised that Dorothea doesn't always get along with members of the press very well. To be honest, during this interview, that seemed impossible to me. The person I encountered, hardly fit my conception of a "difficult" artist. Dorothea Tanning, 80-years-young, has a spirited strength, an enthusiastic *joie de vivre*, and an extremely sharp mind. There are a few things that Tanning cannot stand being subjected to: one is people who only want to talk to her about her recently deceased husband, the painter Max Ernst, and the other is people who want to use her life and art as fodder for some feminist agenda. And yes, she is certainly one of the most important American artists of this century.

*Now the doors are all open, the air is mother-of-pearl, and you know the way to tame a tiger. It will not elude you today for you have grabbed a brush, you have dipped it almost at random, so high is your rage, into the amalgam of color, formless on a docile palette.*

*As you drag lines like ropes across one brink of reality after another, annihilating the world you made yesterday and hated today, a new world heaves into sight. Again, the event progresses without the benefit of hours.*

*The application of color to a support, something to talk about when it's all over, now holds you in thrall. The act is your accomplice. So are the tools, beakers, bottles, knives, glues, solubles, insolubles, tubes, plasters, cans; there is no end ...*

—Dorothea Tanning

**Carlo McCormick** In the '40s, the Surrealists came to New York, a city that is both surreal and very subjective. In retrospect, that displacement seems to have been destined. Can one say that the character of New York suited and even inspired the Surrealist vision?

**Dorothea Tanning** I do think that chance had a lot to do with it. World War II sent the Surrealists over here, at a time when American art and American culture were in the doldrums, and it was like a shot in the arm. They absolutely amazed everyone and their influence has been long-lasting—like a stain, like an inoculation. Lots and lots of art that's being made today, is, if not Surrealist, Dada. It's very hard to say how much New York affected the Surrealists. Although New York was a stimulus, you couldn't say that New York influenced the Surrealists. They were already developed when they came here. They were not young people, you see, they were people who were totally committed to a way of life and to a way of thinking. Then they all scattered after the War: when they could go back to France, they did. Some stayed on. And those, you could say, it did influence. For example, Yves Tanguy came and he never left. Max, of course, stayed a long time, Seligman stayed, Matta stayed for years. So that they were influenced to the extent that they liked being here.

**CM** In your work of the '40s and '50s, the iconography is charged with details which seem autobiographical.

**DT** When I look at those paintings, I like them, but I feel they're the work of a very young person, even naive, someone who lives almost solely in her imagination. And someone who doesn't think as much about the techniques of painting as about what's being painted. How to say it was determined by trance, not chance. That was something people did in those days. Today technique is everything.

**CM** It's funny hearing you say that because your early paintings are all so meticulous and perfectly finished. Later, when you started bringing in more painterly, temperamental elements, people were shocked.

**DT** Any true artist is going to explore the medium as long as he can draw breath. It would be grotesque to paint the same way, over and over all your life. It's a kind of freeze. The fact that I'm not doing it is nothing to be sorry about.

**CM** There's a quote of yours—"masterpiece, disasterpiece." That was a perfect way to describe the brooding violence that runs through your work. Where is that psychosexual aggressiveness coming from?

**DT** That's a good question. I wish I knew. I don't know where it comes from. It's just the way I am and the way I've thought all my life. I did a lot of reading. I've always been drawn towards esoteric phenomena: the illogical, the inexpressible, the impossible. Anything that is ordinary and frequent is uninteresting to me, so I have to go in a solitary and risky direction. If it strikes you as being enigmatic, well, I suppose that's what I wanted it to do.

**CM** As your work progresses, using even more distortion and blurring and disembodiment of the forms, it seems to become more, rather than less real, as an experience.

**DT** So it does. I look back on those early paintings as history. They are not really what I am now, or want, but it was a way to begin.

**CM** Yes, there was an immediacy, an intensity.

**DT** That's what I tried for, the elusive moment. And it's the same today, the same preoccupations. For instance, hardly anyone today paints the human form: it's frowned upon for some reason. Too close, maybe, too frank. There used to be an expression: too hot to handle. I don't see why one shouldn't be absolutely fascinated with the human form, there are so many reasons to be. Besides, we are all living in human bodies, we go through life in this wonderful envelope. Why not acknowledge that and try to say something about it? So what I try to say about it is *transformation*.



Dorothea Tanning, *Off Time On Time*, 1948, oil on canvas, 14 × 22 inches. Courtesy of Kent Fine Art.

**CM** What effect would you say the passing years have had on your perceptions of the human form in terms of its frailty? You've always seemed to have a sense of mortality.

**DT** None, really. You don't have to be old and wise to be aware of our dilemma. The shadow of mortality, well, I've always had it for a sort of companion. But I'm glad you ask the question, because my work is generally perceived as erotic, period. You see, when I paint drifting nudes, it's a statement about being human. Some people think it's a statement about being sexy. It's an obsession of the whole, not so cultural, establishment, that almost everything we do which is inexplicable must be reduced to sexuality, and that's absurd. It's certainly very strong—I would never say it wasn't—but, after all, there are other yearnings, with names like glory, incandescence, and love and knowledge. I like to think that you feel some of this when you look at my pictures.

**CM** Recently, your art has a kind of self-expressiveness that I don't think is part of the Surrealist idea of how art should be made. Your work of the last few years is more deliberate and more meditative. And while the imagery may have Surrealist roots ...

**DT** Listen. If it wasn't known that I had been a Surrealist, I don't think it would be evident in what I'm doing now. But I'm branded as a Surrealist. *Tant pis.*

**CM** I'm sorry I used the word so often.

**DT** Well, no, you haven't used it nearly as much as the media does. The fact is, I do hold to the essential tenets and ideas of Surrealism, and I've gone along with it. Everyone should not only respect, but explore their subconscious, which is, after all, what the Surrealists were determined to do—to enrich life that way. But, it disgusts me to be lumped in with all of these so-called Surrealist painters. Such a terrible misunderstanding.

**CM** Do you think, in retrospect, that's too easy or clever a pose?

**DT** What a question! For some, yes. But not for its serious adherents. Surrealism as a philosophy, as a way of thinking and living, is not simple. But certain artists who hooked on to it were. It seemed so easy to them. They came to Paris. From Romania, Armenia, Italy, Spain, Tenerife, Czechoslovakia. From England, too, and Switzerland and Germany. Curiously, there were few Americans around in my time, Man Ray, one of the greats.

**CM** A number of the earliest promoters of Surrealism in America, such as the critic, Henri Peyri, have said that Surrealism only had real value as a literary movement, and that its art was, at best, second-rate.

**DT** In a way, that's right. People talk about Surrealism as an art movement, like Abstract Expressionism or Impressionism. Surrealism is a philosophical movement.

**CM** More like Existentialism.

**DT** Well, exactly. Or even earlier than that, with Hegel, and then there was Freud, and then there's Darwin. These are philosophical ideals and ideas. Maurice Nadot wrote a book, *Histoire de Surrealism*. Nadot said from the moment that Breton adopted the category of artist—in other words, that dates the abortion of the Surrealist movement. Surrealism went down the drain, when these artists jumped on. And, as a matter of fact, it's true. Surrealism—Breton's definition of Surrealism—was pure psychic automatism by which we propose to reveal by speech, by writing, by any and all other means the real workings of thought. What happened was that the “all other means” jumped in, the artists. They squeezed in like an ethnic infiltration, till they had taken over the movement. Now if you mention Surrealism to anyone in the street, anyone at all across the country, they think you're talking about pictures.

**CM** If you look at advertising over the last 30 years, you could say that Surrealism totally changed Madison Avenue.

**DT** That's what I mean when I say that it infiltrated into the entire American life. Advertising was the first. If you look at magazines that came out around 1945, it's almost comical. The advertisements all look like Dalí.

**CM** Yes, a little Dalí, a little Magritte.

**DT** And Magritte is still really big in advertising ... let's talk about something else.



Dorthea Tanning, *No Problem*, 1988, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 32 × 33 inches. Courtesy of Kent Fine Art.

**CM** O.K., I don't know if you'll be sensitive about this, but ... as a woman artist ...

**DT** Oh, no!

**CM** I figured you'd be really sick of that. People have wanted to put women artists, who had been ignored by history, back into it, and the only way they could do it for a while was to talk about you as a woman artist. And so—but I got your reaction, it is pretty horrendous, isn't it?

**DT** Yes.

**CM** That type of labeling.

**DT** I have nothing to say. I've written statements by the dozens, I've written savage letters to all kinds of earnest people who wish to include me in this category, and I just can't talk about it anymore. I'm not against women, far from it. I'm against these confused people, doing that.

**CM** Do you think the women involved with developing the movement got a fair deal from Surrealism?

**DT** It's a blurry question. Anyway, I wish you wouldn't harp on that word, "women." Women artists. There is no such thing—or person. It's just as much a contradiction in terms as "man artist" or "elephant artist." You may be a woman and you may be an artist; but the one is a given and the other is you.

**CM** Maybe in those earlier years, artists were more solitary, private in their working habits. When you think of a movement, you imagine everyone sitting around together at a table talking about their pictures or whatever they're doing. Was it that way in your milieu?

**DT** I don't think so. In any case, I never seemed to be surrounded by artists talking about art. I was a loner, am a loner, good Lord, it's the only way I can imagine working. And then when I hooked up with Max Ernst, he was clearly the only person I needed and, I assure you, we never, never talked art. Never. We had a lot of fun and talked about all kinds of things, and showed each other new work, rather formally, with serious, but brief, comments. But we didn't talk about craft.

**CM** That sort of shop talk is deadly.



Dorothea Tanning, *Interior with Sudden Joy*, 1951, oil on canvas, 61 × 91 inches. Courtesy of Nessui Ertegun.

**CM** Was that a tough thing for you, being married to Max Ernst?

**DT** I think I just answered that question, what more can I add? I had no problem. When we started life together, two painters, it seemed like good idea. After all, what he fell for in the beginning was my painting. I came after!

**CM** Yes, I've heard that story, there was one painting in particular ...

**DT** *Birthday*.

**CM** Even though I took classes on modern art, I never saw your paintings until I got out of school. I find that a shameful omission.

**DT** Well, to this day, most people have not seen my paintings. You know that, don't you?

**CM** A lot of people I know are big fans of yours, actually. You've got a big cult following.

**DT** A cult figure? Pretty hidden, actually. Because no museum has come forward to have a retrospective of mine.

**CM** Really?

**DT** No! No, I've been waiting for this. I'm going to be 80-years-old next week.

**CM** Congratulations.

**DT** Well, for what?

**CM** Just living up to 80 is great.

**DT** People say, "Dorothea, you made it." I begin to feel so fragile. So *menaced*. It's as though they're preparing my funeral. All those flowers. You made it, so what's left to do? I don't feel that I made it to anything. Lots of people live to be 80. I intend to push on to 90. Living is so amusing.

**CM** Have there been retrospectives of your work?

**DT** Yes, in 1974 in Paris. At CNAC, that was Centre Nationale d'Art Contemporain. In '77, it became the Centre Pompidou. Also there was a Tanning retrospective in Belgium at Knokke-le Zoute in 1977. None here so far!

**CM** It keeps you fighting.

**DT** No, I don't care. Oh, for a little while, I was puzzled. I had thought it would be nice. Now I don't even think about it. It's got nothing to do with me.

**CM** No, that's not why you create in the first place, is it?

**DT** Of course not. If that's your goal, then you're in another world completely. And it shows, in the work, I mean. Trashy. Do you go to galleries a lot?

**CM** Well, it's part of my job as a writer. But to be honest, I don't visit galleries nearly as much as I used to, or should—you get burned out.

**DT** I guess you do, in your position. I haven't seen any exhibitions in ... well, I would say, the last ten years. Just a couple of the museum greats: Degas and so on. It's terrible. I suppose I should feel guilty. Mostly, I look out of my windows here from the studio and see amazing things, the sort of things that you'd never see in an art gallery.

**CM** That brings us back to the first question about New York being so unreal and subjective ...

**DT** Well, violent. My painting called *Pounding strong* was begun by looking out the window at these crazy kids careening down Fifth Avenue on roller skates, wearing earphones, and carrying their powerful radios. They are like archangels. I wouldn't be too surprised if they took to the air. I'm coming to terms with something which is more just generally human—archangels aside ...



Dorthea Tanning, *Mean Frequency (of Auroras)*, 1981, oil on canvas, 45¾ x 35 inches. Courtesy of Heekin Cincinnati.

**CM** Tell me how you started painting. Did you go to art classes?

**DT** Yes. I thought you had to go to art school. It would be a kind of initiation like being baptized—in paint. It was in Chicago and I signed up at a school called the Chicago Academy of Fine Art. What a scam! They would take your money for your “tuition,” and then you sat and drew in a stuffy little room. But they did at least hire a nude model, so I was able to draw from the model. We had as a teacher, a local artist. And in those days, those local artists were overwhelmed by the glory of Picasso, so they all painted more or less like Picasso. The period they admired—and emulated—was his “Rose Period,” where he scrunched the figures way, way down. He, in turn, was influenced by primitive art, especially African, where the figures are chunky and rugged and shamanistic, with powerful torsos and short bent legs and savage faces. Well, you can imagine how all that operated on those Chicago painters at that moment in art history. For the local annual show, my teacher would have his works prominently front and center, his Picassoid slashes, because he was a *well-known* artist around there. Anyway, to go back to the class, there I was



drawing what I thought was the model, and every time he'd come around to my little board, he'd shake his head and pass on. All the other students around were scrunching these figures down like crazy. So a couple of weeks later—after all, I *had* paid the tuition—I was so fed up, I came in there, and I took my charcoal and scrunched that figure down to a peanut. He stopped and looked at my blackened paper and said, “Now, you’ve made some progress! This is amazing! Very good!” Whereupon I threw down my charcoal and left, and that was the end of my art-school training. Those teachers wanted you to paint like they did. It fed their egos to think that they had influenced younger artists.

**CM** Later, with Max, did you feel overwhelmed?

**DT** No, I don't feel this at all. In fact, I've had an amazing life all together. Why, how could acceptance as an artist, that is a meaningful or memorable artist, rival the rich colorful life I've had so far—I should say patchwork quilt—that was Galesburg, Illinois where I grew up, in cities and countries. In studios and houses with Max, not only a great man, but a wonderfully gentle and loving companion. So I'd say no. A serene, emphatic no, I have no regrets.

# ARTFORUM

## Dorothea Tanning

Stephen Mazoh & Co., Inc.

DONALD KUSPIT  
JANUARY 1984



Dorothea Tanning, *Mean Frequency (of Auroras)*, 1981, oil on canvas, 46 x 35 in.

These are grand, weird, sinister, absurd images, painted with the same ambition that gave Michelangelo his claim to *terribilità*, but in a lower, peculiarly more frightening and volatile key. Dorothea Tanning was Max Ernst's wife, famous from a photograph of herself with Ernst—she looking splendidly uncensored, hypererotically charged in a world in which everything was sexualized, he like a preternaturally calm imp. In these paintings she is heir to the Surrealist magic, the keeper of its uncompromising flame. Still urgently in pursuit of the marvelous, she comes up with pictures that are so purely fantasy that they can be read as allegorical personifications of the unconscious itself. It is as though Tanning were deliberately showing us that Surrealism can never be stamped out, even by misunderstanding.

Tanning's paintings show the Surrealist essence as through a glass darkly, from an "eternal feminine" perspective. These are images of a faded yet still perverse and violent Venus, alone or with demonic cupids, obsessively in love with herself. Bronzino would have painted them had he been a Surrealist. The pictures articulate what Heinz Kohut calls the "archaic grandiosity" of the "narcissistic self." Case studies of the primitive female image deliriously asserting its timeless rights, these are "borderline" works, reminding us openly that painting is a delusional activity performed with inadequate means, its message uncertain and apt to be misread. With tireless vigor, Tanning explores a lasting Surrealist concern—the wavering line between fiction and delusion, and between painting as such and painting as the instrument for involuntarily unconscious imagery, however voluntarily elaborated. She asserts that painting is always a kind of dream work.

In the chronology she wrote for this show's catalogue, Tanning shows she knows exactly what she is about: "She has been around for some time, firmly planted somewhere between the immediate past and a hazy future, between the inner eye and the other side of the door, between what was painted yesterday and what will be painted tomorrow." The work's amorphous quality bespeaks the "hazy future," death, "the other side of the door"; under the threat of the unknown, Tanning's "inner eye" perceives "lusty emblems" in an environment showing "a quite exuberant attachment to the curved line and the arcane." "Heedless of modes and mores," Tanning gives us a "pendulum of appearances" that "swings free of gravity," "its maenads . . . propelled into that space we call *outer*, so intimately paired with *inner*." For these maenads, the erotic and the arcane fuse in a single act in which the power of life seems limitless. Their bodies conduct that power despite their fading form; indeed, their tendency to formlessness seems to allow it to flow more freely and strongly. The dissolution of the body, its loss of eroticism, preoccupies these paintings, but they show the erotic frozen for its greatest adventure yet, its transformation of eros into pure soul.

The Venus of these paintings is an aging beauty, still concerned with the exercise of her powers of enchantment but now masking them in myth. Nakedness is blurred, but it is still there, still trusted, in the mind's eye. Outwardly it no longer signals the consciously ideal, but it still has power over the unconscious. Tanning's devilish maenads are in a long line, unbroken from the dancing maenads of Greek antiquity to Cézanne's stolid yet insecure figures, and still not ended. Surrealism here is an Ovidian dream of the metamorphosis of the female image, which in part may be what feminism is about; Tanning's rearticulation of female eroticism confronting the power of death is trenchant for the current time.