

Dorothea Tanning at Zabriskie

Dorothea Tanning's new large-scale flower paintings are her most serene works to date, offering a refined lyricism that seems the culmination of her 60 years of art-making. Painted between June 1997 and April 1998, these lush, delicately toned flowers are pure products of the artist's imagination—fanciful breeds whose names have been provided by poets such as Harry Mathews, W.S. Merwin and John Ashbery. In Tanning's recently published book *Another Language of Flowers*, reproductions of the paintings are accompanied by short poems spun off from the works. The artist writes that she had been thinking about the notion of "the language of flowers, so dear to poets," and she was happy to rely on her own poet friends to translate her paintings' subtle messages.

The poems appropriately provide a kind of complementary pipeline to the fantastic interior realms where Tanning has always operated. The light, misty core at the center of the sprawling, deep blue petals of *Cloudstar* (titled by J.D. McClatchy) appears lit by an extraterrestrial source. The dark luscious center and amoeboid curves of *Dalliance* (titled by Richard Howard) hint at sensual longing.

Focusing on individual blossoms, Tanning depicts the flowers in softly modulated greens, blues and violets that pulse with reflected light. Although the works evoke paintings by such artists as Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Pelton, Tanning's close-up concentration makes her flora more fanciful in tone. While emotionally charged, these canvases seem less paeans to nature than flights of the artist's imagination. The paintings are accompanied by preliminary drawings that reveal their roots in freewheeling expression. The Twombly-like scribbblings in the

sketch for *Loveknot* (titled by Stephen Yenser) are resolved into a beautifully articulated painting of a flower with soft, irregularly textured petals of a drooping, yearning length.

Tanning's early, crisply drawn Surrealist paintings crackle with a psychological urgency that still feels completely contemporary. Her startling soft sculptures from the 1970s presage a host of later works by Louise Bourgeois, the Chapman Brothers and Mike Kelley. Where is the full-scale museum retrospective Tanning so clearly deserves?

—Michael Duncan

Dorothea Tanning: *Loveknot*, 1998, oil on canvas, 56 by 66 inches; at Zabriskie. (Review on p. 120.)

