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## Dorothea Tanning: On The Threshold To A Darker Place

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Dorothea Tanning brazenly exposes the underbelly of motherhood, puberty, and child molestation. She simultaneously exalts frenzied states of madness. An archeologist of the human psyche, she carefully removes debris from areas within her unconscious, catalogs the shards of memory, fantasy, and prophecy, and then displays them in paintings that are alarmingly beautiful.

Tanning refers to herself as "ancient," confesses to having the experience of "multiple lives," and describes her descent into the unconscious as a "gulf between realities." She has been called a member of "a vague cult of women, regarded as sort of a tutelary oracle."<sup>1</sup> She is an American-born, self-taught painter and sculptor who joined the Surrealist circle that gathered in New York in the early 1940s. Despite little recognition in the United States, Dorothea Tanning is regarded as an artist of major significance in France.

Andreas Peter Georg Thaning (later Americanized to Tanning), a Swedish immigrant, met his wife Amanda while he was traveling west to become a cowboy. The young couple settled in the small town of Galesburg, Illinois, where their daughter Dorothea was born in 1910.

Amanda had wanted to be an actress and passed this enthusiasm on to her daughter, who received dramatic training as a child. Dorothea also liked to draw and at seven declared she was going to be not a Hollywood child star but a painter. However, exactly when her acting career ceased is unclear; her teenage years are logged as uneventful.<sup>2</sup> During her adolescence, she frequented the Galesburg library and read most of the books there. By the time she was a young adult she longed to leave her small hometown. However, her parents wanted her to become a teacher and she studied for two years at Knox College in Galesburg before leaving for Chicago to attend the Art Institute. She was then 20 years old.

Tanning quit the Art Institute after two weeks, stating that no one could teach her to be an artist. She spent the next two years educating herself in the museums of New York City, San Francisco and Chicago. During this self-styled apprenticeship she painted constantly, supporting herself as a puppet animator, an illustrator for the Chicago World's Fair, and as a stand-in at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Tanning worked hard at her painting and, in 1937, at the New York Museum of Modern Art's "Fantastic Art - Dada and Surrealism" exhibition, she discovered that other artists shared her vision. In 1939, she went to Paris to find the Surrealists. However, people were fleeing Paris, and most of the Surrealists had gone to New York. When war broke out, Tanning escaped to Sweden, to the home of her uncle. She later returned to New York and resumed her work as an illustrator.

In 1942, Max Ernst, who now was living in New York, saw her painting *Birthday* (Fig. 1) while he was organizing a Surrealist exhibition. He searched for Tanning, and the account of their meeting is vague and romanticized. Purportedly he found her at her illustration job and asked if she liked her work. When she replied that she hated it, Ernst is reported to have said: "Stop then. I've always lived off my paintings, I think I can do it for two."<sup>3</sup> Shortly afterwards Tanning met the people she had gone to Paris to find. She moved in with Ernst (who since 1941 had been married to Peggy Guggenheim). She joined in the group's "truth games" designed to alter states of consciousness in order to invoke imagery, worked on the Surrealist publication *VVV*, and participated in a Surrealist exhibition at Julian Levy Gallery in 1944.

When the war ended, while the majority of Surrealists returned to Paris (Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington had gone to Mexico), Dorothea and Max moved to Sedona, Arizona, where they were married in 1946. The formerly reclusive Dorothea blossomed after the marriage. Her work changed, too. Whereas her imagery had been private and introspective, she now became fascinated with animal spirits, particularly Max's Pekingese dog, Katchina.

Before moving to France (where she still lives) in 1952, the couple lived briefly in Hawaii, where Dorothea taught at the University of Hawaii. She experimented with sculpture and designed sets for the New York City Ballet. She also began exhibiting—in Paris, Berlin, Cologne, and New York. After a joint exhibition with Max in Washington, D.C., where her work was mistaken for his, Surrealist scholar Allain Bosquet presciently commented that "her existence as a painter [would] inevitably suffer from the fact that she is Max Ernst's wife."<sup>4</sup> Although Max certainly influenced her work, in only one painting—*Max in a Blue Boat* (1947)—is

his shadow obvious. Max appears in a blue sailboat with his alter ego, a bird named "Lop Lop," emerging from the sail. The boat recedes into the background where frenetic bird-like shapes swarm into a shimmering horizon. Ernst's method of automatic paint application—"oscillation"—which was to influence the Abstract Expressionists, is evident in this painting.

According to Dorothea, theirs was a caring relationship without problems when they were left to themselves. An aura of enchantment surrounded the public image of the couple, but little is known of their personal lives after the move to France. (Max died in 1976.) Tanning is reluctant to give interviews, especially to writers from women's or feminist publications. She continues to have one woman shows almost yearly in New York, Paris, and throughout Europe. Her last exhibition of paintings in New York was

held at Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer Gallery, October-November, 1979.

The paintings Tanning completed in the late 1940s and early 1950s center around a female figure. They contain symbolism similar to that identified in the work of other women Surrealists. This visual code, or visionary language, contains symbols or knowledge of the cult of the Great Goddess, the pagan religion that proclaims the image of woman (the archetype of the Great Mother) as the primary life source.<sup>5</sup>

Dorothea Tanning's imagery is linked not only in a simultaneous time frame with the work of Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington, Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo,<sup>6</sup> but, also shares their use of plants, animals, metamorphic beings and the female image, combining elements of nature with the human life cycle. Mythic creatures appear in environments where a vast energy seems to enliven objects that normally appear dormant. Images of flowers, eggs, and mirrors are called upon to represent and reflect the presence of the female archetype. Altered states of consciousness become interchangeable with reality.

Tanning's many painted images of adolescent girls may be either a response to the Surrealist ideal of the "femme enfant,"<sup>7</sup> or a personal interpretation of the female experience, or both. In any event, the works are testimonies to an inward searching, to a confrontation never touched upon by her male colleagues. Her subjects often lose their innocence within the realm of the painting.

In an interview, the artist described the depth of beauty and wonder she encountered on excursions into her private fantasy world:

It's a perpetual dizziness, my personal space is so sumptuously furnished. If you could only see it, there is such a plethora, and everything is in disorder. Everything is prodigious, obsession, doubled, multiplied and alive, all the colors of the rainbow. Everything is moving also behind the door, the doors that are invisible, there is another door. I suppose I'd have to say I live a double life, or a multiple life.<sup>8</sup>

Tanning also discussed her isolation as a child, which caused her to seek "another place":

Very young I felt myself to be a deer around dogs barking, and I created for myself another place.

It is this other place that I occupy since then. These are the places where I take the signs, those which don't come all on their own up to the surface where I pool these signs or symbols, which then inhabit my canvases or other materials.<sup>9</sup>

Although Tanning denies that her art is autobiographical, she does describe her work as "allegories of a dream state." However, since there are indications of the use of autobiographical material in her work, she seems to want to redefine "autobiographical":

No, there is nothing in my painting that corresponds to my physical life. There is a history of my dreams. In all cases the biography for me, if this is not a flagrant lie, is at best a deformed mirror. I say to myself I am



FIG. 1. Dorothea Tanning. *Birthday* (1942). Photo: J.J. Pauvert, Paris.

fulfilling my destiny or anti-destiny. Maybe I'm in the activity of crushing my destiny or maybe everything is a mistake and I'm fulfilling the destiny of someone else."<sup>10</sup>

In *Birthday* the subject appears to have returned from (or is just beginning) a tumultuous journey. Her hand rests on the handle of a door—one door in a hallway of doors beyond doors beyond doors. The door, a common image in Tanning's work (see note 8) suggests that her journey may be into the deep realms of her unconscious. She is barefoot, bare-breasted, and looks dishevelled and worn. Long, tangled roots hang from her skirt towards the ground. These tendrils of plant life suggest an intimate contact with the life processes of nature, for she has sprouted roots as metaphors for wisdom accrued. At her feet lies a small winged animal. Its wings are open, indicating flight, and roots extend from its tail. It, too, has undergone a journey. The presence of this monster-like creature attests to Tanning's knowledge on some level of life transformation within her own psyche, for the creature is in a state of life transformation; it is a composite of many animals. The animal may also suggest a fear that her dark side is monster-like. The once beautifully clothed woman stands exposed and unprotected. She, too, is in a process of transformation as the title of the painting suggests, and confronts the viewer with a startling intensity.

Tanning is one of the few artists to talk about the experiences of the unconscious, and offers her visions for examination:

One must be willing to travel or get involved in the labyrinth of the other or the elsewhere. The real dizziness is a state of spirit so profound that the gulf which is then opened to our eyes is so rich in treasures that one will just want to grab them madly. But coming to the surface after entering that gully, we realize with terrible despair that we have left the most beautiful jewels down there and that we can never find them again.<sup>11</sup>

She describes the probings into her psyche as a regression into an ancient time:

These bodies are symbolic of a kind of voluptuousness, also of the ferocity of a kind of contact, of the will of the being to prove one's ancientness and for reaching ancientness in the forces that are called civilized.<sup>12</sup>

In *Maternity* (1946),<sup>13</sup> Max's small Pekingese dog appears with the face of an infant. Tanning's frequent use of the dog image expresses her belief that the spirits of the animal world are, perhaps, more highly evolved than those of the human world. (This questioning of human spiritual and intellectual superiority led many Surrealists to adopt "alter ego" animal images, i.e., Ernst the bird "Lop Lop" and Carrington the white horse Tartarus.) In mythology, the dog is a companion of the goddess Diana, and in Tanning's *Maternity* it is a creature from another world. The dog sits at the feet of a woman holding an infant. She stands near an open door in a barren, desert-like landscape. Mother and child are dressed identically, although the mother's gown is torn and ragged across her distended belly. This image suggests again a wearing journey, perhaps a painful birth. The face of the child is sour; the mother's face seems tired,

almost vacant. As the child's feet disappear into the shreds of the mother's gown, mother and child become inseparable. They seem unaware of their companion; only the dog confronts the viewer. Another open doorway is positioned in the distant landscape; it frames an anthropomorphic

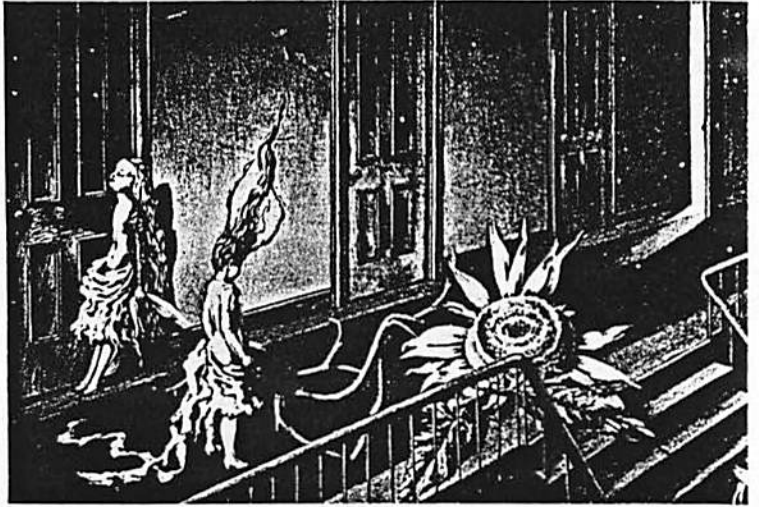


FIG. 2. Dorothea Tanning, *Night Music* (1946). Photo: J.J. Pauvert, Paris.



FIG. 3. Dorothea Tanning, *Chamber of Friends* (1950-52). Photo: J.J. Pauvert, Paris.



creature made of a series of sails, who stands isolated and waiting. Dark clouds trouble the horizon, perhaps indicating impending change.

A tormented energy rules in *Night Music* (1946; Fig. 2); the images suggest an initiation into puberty. In a long hallway at the top of a flight of stairs, two young girls encounter a sunflower. Symbolic of the sun, the season of summer and of fecundity, the sunflower is massive in scale and very much alive. The child resting against a door frame seems to have wrestled with the giant flower: pieces of the petals lie on the stairs, and she clutches some in her hands. Her small breasts are exposed as if some violent energy has torn open her blouse; she appears exhausted or mesmerized. While this child's face is exposed and lit, the other girl is viewed from the back, perhaps creating a symbol of the dark and light side of the feminine. The dress of the second child unravels onto the floor like the roots and tendrils in *Birthday*. Her hair, electric with energy, flies into the air, as if sucked into the circle of energy emanating from the center of the flower.

The stairs refer to the many levels of this world. The girls may be resting, having transcended one level of reality by climbing the stairs. The stairs could also represent the possibility of descent into an underworld. One of the many doors in the hallway is cracked open to emit a hot, yellow light. The light draws the viewer's attention and, along with the large fiery sunflower, contributes to a passion that pulsates throughout the painting.

In *Chamber of Friends* (1952; Fig. 3), two doors swing open to reveal a scene fraught with tension and pain. The turmoils of puberty and adolescence are addressed with extreme frankness. Crumpled bedsheets hover in the air; a midget dressed as a cowboy, his head wrapped in cloth (perhaps Tanning's father), smashes eggs with a hatchet. The eggs, symbolic of the child's sexuality or sexual violation, or of female fertility and vulnerability, or of the shattering of female power, scatter, cracked, on the floor. A pensive girl-child stands naked in the doorway, the image of her darker side, the part that cannot or will not see what is happening, stands as a blindfolded shadow behind the door. In bed lies a woman clutching a doll—perhaps the artist reclaiming her child-self, or her mother unwilling to confront the egg smasher. Omnipresent is the hooded figure of justice (an image from the mystical book, *The Tarot*) carrying a pair of scales. There is a strange mixture of oppression and mystery. By merging physical reality with the metaphysical energy that engulfs the room, Tanning has revealed an experience of sexual violence in literal and symbolic form simultaneously. Even though the room is crowded, there is again a hovering sense of isolation.

The sunflower appears again in *The Mirror* (1950). In this painting, three sunflowers represent the "triple goddess" or three phases of life: the young girl, the fertile woman, and the "crone or wise one." (This triple image may also represent the presence of the multiple realities.) As she gazes into her unconscious, symbolized by a sunflower mirror, the artist transforms herself into the sunflower. The imagery is simple yet complex. The artist has looked into herself, seen herself, and then looked deeper into other levels of her consciousness. She has said: "The first years I painted our side of the mirror. For me the mirror is a door, but I

think it has been awhile since I've gone through the other side."<sup>14</sup>

Dorothea Tanning remains somewhat of an enigma. There is a decreasing use of literary symbolism in her recent works. There remains, however, the merging of animal and human forms. Now the forms twist and turn and emerge from shadow into light as if enlivened by some invisible energy source. The paint quality is softer; there is less definition of form. She does not classify herself as a Surrealist, nor has she suggested any other title. Instead, she presents herself as a woman who has studied herself closely and then placed herself within the never ending science and cycle of nature:

Each of my paintings are steps marked on the same path. I don't see any cuts, any deviations. The same preoccupations are manifest since the beginning. Obsessions come to the surface as marks that can't be erased. My paintings, and lastly my sculptures, are part of the same research, with the same discoveries, the same storms, the same mad laughter, suffering and rebirth.<sup>15</sup>

Dorothea Tanning explores female nature. She takes the cycles of female evolution and reveals them as they really are—multilayered experiences of anxiety and joy, fraught with the female condition she covets, a "mad laughter." •

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1. Albert Skira, *Surrealism*. Patrick Waldberg, trans., (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing, 1962). 16.
2. Except for where indicated otherwise, the bulk of the following material is from Alain Jouffroy, *Dorothea Tanning* (Paris: National Contemporary Art Center, 1974), translation recorded by Nancy Angelo. There is no mention of "significant" activities of her adolescent years.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Allain Bosquet, *Dorothea Tanning* (Paris: J.J. Pauvert, 1976). 62.
5. See Gloria Orenstein, "Leonora Carrington's Visionary Art for the New Age," *Chrysalis* (No. 3), for detailed analysis of symbolism for the Great Goddess.
6. See Estella Lauter, "Leonor Fini," *WAJ* (Spring/Summer 1980), 44-49; and Janet Kaplan, "Remedios Varo," *WAJ* (Fall 1980/Winter 1981), 13-18.
7. A concept of female as woman-child revered by Surrealist Andre Breton. The image of "femme-enfant" portrayed women as childlike in purity and therefore possessors of pure wisdom. Images of woman as childlike or as an object were commonly used in art by male Surrealists. This was an oppressive and diminutive portrayal which also contributed to misogynist attitudes in art and art circles.
8. Jouffroy, Angelo trans.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. For reproductions, see Fine, *Women and Art*, 211, or Harris/Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, pl. 158.
14. Jouffroy.
15. *Ibid.*

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