

# Dorothea Tanning paints again, and speaks for herself

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Dorothea Tanning thought she would never paint again.

She was almost 87 in June of 1997. She had a stroke, and spent most of her time in bed. Then one day the renowned surrealist painter found herself in the back room she used as a studio in her New York City apartment. She'd already given up the large studio in another building, because she was throwing away \$25,500 in rent for a space she wasn't using.

"I looked at the table with all the paints and brushes and paint rags and canvases," Tanning remembers during a recent interview in the office of the Boston University Art Gallery. "The canvases I'd brought from Paris. Eight pristine canvases, already stretched, everything done by hand. I said, 'I can't do and let someone else paint on my canvases.'"

Dressed in a tweed jacket and knit cap, she's a slight woman with longish, straight salt-and-pepper hair and apricot-blonde eyes. No, she won't have coffee or tea, thank you, her attention is to concentrate on talking. "I had a vision of a manure flower," she says. "I said, 'I'll do that, and one of those canvases. Then more and more crept into my mind and I wanted to be painted. I could hardly finish one before I'd start the next one.'"

The flower paintings, huge, luminous, and sexual, came to make up another language of flowers. "Another language of flowers," she says, hangs, along with a miniature series of the last 30 years of Tanning's work at the BU Art Gallery through April 11. Poems by James Merrill, Rosanna Warren, Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin, John Ashberry, and others accompany the artworks.

The flowers were an aberration. "Painting had never come so easily. All the other pictures are very controlled and tidy, and not decided until late in the painting," she explains. "For 'Another Language of Flowers,' she painted 12 pieces in less than nine months.

Tanning had been painting all her life, and gained recognition in the 40s for figurative works painted with classical precision depicting "vulnerable narratives rife with hope and emotion. Birthday" (1942), the painting that marks her entry into the art world, depicts the artist having sex in a doublet fissioned with roots. A winged monkey squats at her feet. She holds ajar a door that



Photo by Peter Ross  
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revels a corridor of opened doors beyond her. "Birthday" followed on the heels of a 20-year-long explosion of surrealist painting, including a 1986 New York exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism," which Tanning attended.

"In surrealism, imagination, not logic, and dreams have a place in art," says Norma Steinberg, who teaches Modernist art at Northeastern University. "That's the surrealism gift to 20th-century art: If your arms don't end in hands, then so what?"

The lure of surrealism  
Surrealism spoke to the young artist. She saw her own work relate to the dream imagery and erotic heartbeat of paintings by Max Ernst and Jean Arp. She met Ernst in 1942, when he was creating an exhibition of work by women and married him in 1946.

As a painter, and a surrealist, was she influenced by Ernst?  
"Let me ask you something," Tanning says. "If you were interviewing Max Ernst, would you ask how he'd been influenced by Dorothea Tanning?"

She sniffs, having made her point, and answers the question that obviously follows. "Yes, my art influenced him. We're influenced by everything we see. I am influenced by my husband, but by 50 other artists as well. If you're not influenced, you



Dorothea Tanning, "Door 84" (1984).

for the insinuating juxtaposition of lines, and for the sensuality of color. It wasn't easy to be a woman in the company of surrealists. "So much surrealist art is misogynist," says Steinberg. "The male artist objectified women in every way. They cut off heads, arms, and legs, as if the torso was all they needed. And yet out of all that spring some women artists who are really fabulous."

Over the years, Tanning's style fractured and opened up. She left painting behind, but continued her love affair with the female figure, painting nudes like the ones at Boston University, twisting and writhing over feathery grounds. At BU, "Mean Frequency of Auroras" (1981) shows limbs falling as people wrestle and merge in the cusp of a new moon.

"Coming on with the meticulous images would have been a kind of freeze," Tanning points out. "There had to be other ways, more mobility, like experimenting time, and I began moving things around, stretching one area, considering another, more an effort of suggestion than statement."

The enigmas of the later paintings may not be as concretely defined as they are in "Birthday," but they evoke the same senses of sexuality, and what it is like to live in a woman's body. Love are the self-conscious, though provocative, symbols. The later paintings shed them

for the insinuating juxtaposition of lines, and for the sensuality of color. "Door 84" (1984), on view at BU, revisits the doorway theme set up in "Birthday." The edge of a door bisects a large canvas down the middle. The canvas flames with yellow and orange, and on either side a young woman props her foot against the door as if to hold it shut. "I do recall I had a dream about doors a long time ago, and those doors appeared in many canvases afterward," Tanning says. "It was a horrible dream. I opened it and it was another door right behind it. "And Door 84? By this time, the door is the victim," she continues. "Both people are pushing at that door. It's being pushed by both sides. Maybe it never should open. A chat with Dorothea Tanning is a maze of closed and opened doors. She will talk about Tanning the artist, but not Tanning the woman, which is an irony given how her paintings plumb the feminine consciousness. She doesn't like to be considered a woman artist. None-theless, John Stonberg, director of the BU Art Gallery and curator of the Tanning show, says that her femininity is infused in her imagery. "The psychosexual imagery in her work is different than in the work," Stonberg says. "With Tanning, you have two bodies becoming

one rather than one becoming the object of fetishist desire. It's no less charged, but it comes from a different point of view. She's participating in the erudite rather than gazing at the woman's body from afar."

Tanning's work has changed significantly over the years. She suggests that its evolution gets in the way of her achieving the kind of recognition she feels she deserves. "I wouldn't be happy to have been a Chagall and painted the same picture all my life. You have to take risks, meet a challenge," she declares. "Everything is a challenge. Otherwise, it becomes a commodity. Like making sweaters."

She pauses. "My art is not a commodity. At least we know that," she adds dryly. Stonberg and Steinberg believe Tanning's day will come. "She's not a commodity because she's only now coming into her own, in the same way that Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe had, once the women's movement picked them up," says Steinberg.

"She's a powerful artist who really came into her own after the death of her husband," Stonberg says. "She's produced a very important body of work, and not all in the early part of her history. I think she'll go down as one of a handful of interesting American surrealist painters."

Tanning, now 88, is a gifted writer, who these days spends more time with pen than with paintbrush, but she is a painter at heart. "Sometimes I thought I should have been a writer only," she reflects. "But then you become a slave to words. I think I'd rather be a slave to paint."

Paint is too sensuous to give up. "I should seduce you," she says of a painting. "It should give people who don't have much encouragement to go on." Her paintings at Boston University seduce. The more time you spend with a painting, be it one of the flowers (which Tanning has grounded with the lines and volumes of human figures; she can't seem to paint a picture void of human flesh) or any of the others, the more intricate, perplexing, and ravishing it becomes. "I wanted to make a painting you couldn't exhaust in the first viewing. You have to look every day of your life and see something different," Tanning says. What she is not painting now, she still has visions. "Louis Corinth, a German painter of about 1910 or 1920," she says. "I once saw a reproduction of his 'Nude Standing Nude.' The way he handled the body, it seemed so vibrant. "I'd had 20 more years. I'd go on painting work like 'Nude Standing Nude.' It's too bad, when you're so sure of something, and it won't happen."