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DOROTHEA TANNING
Between Lives - Works on Paper

Introduction by Sarah Wilson

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BETWEEN LIVES

'Changer la vie'

Rimbaud.

Dorothea Tanning is a painter of clairvoyance and illumination. Her self-portrait Birthday, of 1942 became the talisman of a new life, and provides the title of her recent autobiography. In Birthday, Dorothea, bare-breasted princess and witch, in torn silks turning to woodland prickles, stands on a threshold with her familiar, a winged lemur at her feet. Infinite passages of mirroring doorways recede behind her. 'Enter I did, the painted door' she said! Her new series of works on paper she has chosen to call Between Lives. As with Birthday, human destiny is transfigured by threshold experiences; the moment 'between lives' is notoriously the moment of greatest clairvoyance.

The forceful and disturbing Biker series, the softer watercolours, the collages, crisp, menacing and often humorous in this exhibition, seem to have little relationship with Dorothea's earliest surrealist works. Yet an underlying unity has shaped her oeuvre: a fascination for the Gothic, and a preoccupation with the feminine condition – matters by no means unrelated. As Mario Praz, author of the Romantic Agony, declared:

'Why ... should people have begun to feel the horrible fascination of dark forests and lugubrious caverns and cemeteries and thunderstorms?

The answer is: just because of its feminine character.'²

While André Breton composed the first Surrealist manifesto in 1924 in Paris, Dorothea Tanning aged 14, in Galesburg, Illinois, horrified by her provincial horizons, by provincial hellfire puritanism and by a spectral troupe of 'veiled figures gliding towards an altar in the forest' – a Boecklin chromolithograph on the dining-room wall – decided to look within herself for escape.

Employed at the Galesburg public library she was 'forever corrupted' (her own words) by the Gothic novelists, Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis – 'fevered seducers all', along with Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, Poe, Coleridge, Ernest Dowson and earlier heroes – Tristan, Cuculain and Roland. Dorothea reached to Chicago in 1930, studying at art school briefly. She felt 'more and more certain of an exceptional destiny', despite the fact that her Gothic dreams had faded. And aware that 'literary was a tag of opprobrium when attached to someone's painting', she wrestled with her own leanings while gradually discovering 'documents, catalogues, strange new books, reproductions, tracts even enigmatic postcards'.³

Surrealism arrived in America in 1931.⁴ The following year, André Breton, writing from Paris, made his first important statement in English: 'Surrealism

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow'. Here, the leader himself acknowledged surrealism's debt to the Gothic spirit, in particular:

Walpole of the Castle of Otranto, Mrs Radcliffe (whom Lautréamont calls the 'crazy spectre'); Monk Lewis looming large in Sade's Ideas on the novel^b

Through her interest in the irrational, its embodiment in the extremes of nineteenth century literature, and the current researches of F. B. Rhine, whose Extrasensory Preception was published in 1934, Dorothea Tanning was an open vessel for Surrealism.⁶ It was in New York that Alfred Barr's 'Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism' at the Museum of Modern Art hit society with its 'explosive foreignness' in December 1939. Here, Dorothea discovered the movement's amplitude in painting, and more importantly perhaps, its embrace of the marvellous in poetic and literary experience. Along with strange precursors of the fantastic, Hieronymus Bosch and Arcimboldo, Dorothea saw not only the works of European pioneers, such as De Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson and the incorrigible Salvador Dali, but became aware that American artists such as Man Ray, Calder, Joseph Cornell and David Hare were working in the same vein. Women were painting too, and it was at Marcel Duchamp's instigation that several female artists were chosen for a show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery in 1942. Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington, Frida Kahlo, Valentine Hugo, Jacqueline Lamba, Meret Oppenheim, Kay Sage, Gipsy Rose Lee and even artists such

as Louise Nevelson exhibited. Bringing the total from thirty to the magical prime number thirty one, was Dorothea Tanning, her being and choices confirmed, her life transformed by this new milieu. She was captivated by the heroes of the group rather than its heroines, the extraordinary men with their flamboyant pasts, their tense anxious present and the macabre games they played to while away this period of exile, linguistic as well as cultural: Exquisite Corpses, The Game of Truth, The Blindfold Game, The Game of Murder. 'Shipwrecked Surrealism' Dorothea called it.

A specifically Gothic branch of the movement was now emerging: the fibrous visions of Pavel Tchelitchew, the spookiness in root and tendril of Leonor Fini, Tanning's lost princesses. It complemented the 'macho' image of American Gothic of the 1940s, in which the pioneer spirit merged with the quest romance in horror films or skyscrapers and even the emerging abstractions of a Clyfford Still.

In post-Depression America, the retreat into fantasy as an escape from materialist values was abruptly jilted into awareness and guilt by the war: the spectacle of the destruction of life and culture in Europe. In 1943 Dorothea published a short story, Blind Date in the surrealist periodical VVV:
Today you have been born out of abysmal sorrow and knowledge, out of symbols, destructions, warnings, words, pestilence, instruments sacred and obscene, spasms, defilements; out of hates and holocausts, frenzy crimes, visions, scorpions, secretions, love and the devil'.

Two works in addition to Birthday were now created which would have repercussions for all her future oeuvre. Children's Games of 1942 gave birth to three decades of painting and sculpture: two button-booted, Alice-like girls, their finery in tatters, tear at flaming wallpaper from which burst forth Rapunzel-like cascades of hair and ripe, female bellies. These 'electric' girls whose 'turmoils of unassuageable desire have given rise to the inexplicable activities of the poltergeist', become the dreamy adolescents, and rampant maenads (Unhampered), of Dorothea's later pictures. She had begun painting the supernatural – the 'entrance of the mediums' which transformed Breton's 'pure psychic automatism' almost through biographical accident. The expression of disturbing, pubescent sexuality in Children's Games was courageous for Dorothea from Galesburg (a town where 'nothing ever happens except the wallpaper'). Her soft sculpture, Hôtel du Pavot, would realize the same scene in three dimensions in 1970. Cousins, 1971, a drawing in this show, is a study for a soft sculpture related to figures coming through the wall in Children's Games. In the sculpture, the drawn hair becomes fake fur, while contrasting forms and textures clinch in a Sacher-Masoch-like embrace.⁸

Mrs Radcliffe called today, of 1944, is the spiritual godmother of the present exhibition, Dorothea's third in London. It depicts a young girl, possibly the heroine Emily St. Aubert from Ann Radcliffe's novel The Mysteries of

Udolpho, 1794. She is seen from the back as a mere wisp of dress and hair, tiptoeing away from the gothic buttresses of a ruined chapel in whose arches float giant, severed tassels. The tassels recall the catalysts of the novel's action: the drawing aside of curtains, black palls, winding sheets and a picture veiled in black silk. The outsize inanimate tassels, like the helmet in Walpole's Castle of Otranto – the first appearance in the novel of the object as hero, according to Paul Eluard⁹ – are the precursors of the disruptions of scale in Tanning's 1980s collages. Mrs Radcliffe called again, 1988, is dominated by Dorothea's strong hand pressed against a pair of scissors, whose blades evoke all the force of a mythical Judith, a Deborah, the self-lacerating desires of a Lucrece possibly, but above all the powers of the heroine as artist:

'No arctic floes or vulva fire can make me forget my knife, my palette knife to be sure.'¹⁰

A white female figure on the right, appearing in a rent of sky against the black ground is echoed by the ectoplasmic flourish of tissue, floating out of the pictures to the left. Hotel, too, is a gothic collage; three arched windows are cut into frayed, fleecy stone. Bright rips, even a gash of red penetrate the crepuscular ground. With their photocopied greyness, the hands are already phantoms of the flesh. Similarly, the grey paper shading to white used in many of the collages evokes the celluloid origins of late

twentieth century Gothic: the television Frankensteins and werewolves. It also reminds Dorothea of the pain of bereavement.¹¹ The imagery of severance and of 'locking out' is central to these works. A giant hand holding a key, number 3075, in Hotel, recalls the Dorothea of 1976: 'My mind is a cave and its treasures are hidden in boxes and trunks with lost or rusty keys.'¹²

But into these collages she can now bring a poetic distancing and humour: the witches' familiars, cat, crow and troll-head of Beastly Weather leer in alarm from their tissue of crinkled cloud. As André Breton had prophesied on a 'mutoscope' girly postcard called Flaming youth sent to her in 1943, Dorothea, the 'fairy of tatters and tears' would make the thorn of time blossom with her gaze, and exorcise the greatest perils.¹³

Dorothea's ballet designs, for Night Shadow with Balanchine, 1946, The Witch, with John Cranko, (performed in Covent Garden) 1950, Bayou, again with Balanchine, 1952, and Will o' the Wisp with Ruthanna Boris, 1953, have all been lost, alas, and are not mentioned in Birthday. Yet they affected the paintings of the 1950s and 1960s which contained a greater sense of movement-both of materials, gauzes, veils, and of the body, contorted, bewitched and ecstatic. Dorothea became more confident as a woman and as a painter: 'She has passed through to the other side of the marriage veil as through a window pane, a looking glass'¹⁴ said the critic

Alain Jouffroy. The Alice-like 'femmes-enfants' are trans-figured to ripe, naked female bodies. Now the emphasis was on fecundity, the pains and pleasures of sexual experience. Moreover, lengthy periods in France had introduced Tanning to the contemporary 'informel' movement. The bodies she depicted became soft and indistinct, clothed not in rags and tatters but veils of paint. Forms merged with the ground; 'matière' became matrix, the womb of images: 'Invention is not created out of void but out of chaos' said Dorothea, quoting Mary Shelley, the creator of Frankenstein¹⁵. Dorothea, too created monsters; the violating father snatching the child in Death and the Maiden of 1954, became the giant monster-dog, Kachina, in whose arms a pale girl faints in a slow waltz Valse bleu, 1963. The drawing Musicality, 1988, in this exhibition evokes the long history of embraces with father, monster, or lover in Dorothea's work. Here the softfigures meld in musical harmony with the violin; one recalls the vision of soft sculptures that came to Dorothea upon listening to a four-track tape piece of 1967, composed and conducted by Stockhausen:

'Spinning among the unearthly sounds of Hymnen, were earthy even organic shapes that I would make, had to make, out of cloth and wool ... Fugacious they would be, and fragile, to please me their creator and survivor.'¹⁶

The linen of birth, death and of flagrant delight, the 'slashed ribbons' of individual lives, were now seamed, sewn up and stuffed into shape over bending armatures. Ouvre-Toi, a soft sculpture of 1970, paradoxically demands to be pierced, to explode. With a continuity typical of Dorothea's last two decades of work, the watercolour Fiesta, 1980 seems to represent this bursting. The blending inchoate forms, caressing and touching, give rise to homunculi, female, with biting orifices or sexless and troll-like. Another watercolour Double or Nothing, 1988, repeats the obsessive theme of birth versus infertility; the female orifice splayed open and askew gapes like that in Duchamp's Etant donnés. The dotted lines in these drawings and watercolours, another homage to Duchamp, track trajectories of possible escape while simultaneously referring to the closed, stitched seams in the sculptures. All Dorothea's work is metaphor:

'Poet and artist bursting the seams of their categories. Art as a metaphor for language.'¹⁷

Does the 'guardian angel, Marcel Duchamp, present yet elusive Marcel'¹⁸ hover over the cataclysmic Biker series?

Let us not forget his immortal ready-made of 1913, the first of his celibate machines, an anthropomorphic inversion of the bicycle wheel that elegantly omitted pedals or legs.¹⁹

It was Duchamp who began adding titles to his works which functioned as new poetic element, the equivalent in themselves of a colour or shape. Dorothea's punning titles, resonant with enigma, constitute an inner biography even more passionate, more revealing than Birthday, itself.

Between Lives. The title is autobiographical for Dorothea. Since returning to New York, after thirty five years in tandem, life has changed from 'love, a second skin' to 'an absolutely polished structure of skeletal simplicity'.²⁰ It is the contrast, the symphonic variations of skin and spoke, of silhouette and wheel, which give the Biker series its power and violence. The tragic bicycle crash she witnessed, which serves as catalyst for all these pictures, took place in 1978, but the motif is obsessive. Now the crash is reenacted in Down on Rivington, the poor slum streets of the Lower East Side, New York. Alternatively nowhere, everywhere: limbo.

The two figures in Worlds in Collision float like the eternal lovers, Paola and Francesca: 'Love led us to one death'; but the descent to the Inferno is more often the headlong precipitous rush of Reckless, or Hell Bent, whose falling angel seems borne up momentarily by the demonic brushwork of orange and blue. The figures for once, here, in Target and in Further Chaos are androgynous, even male. Splashes become marrow and blood in Traffic, its colours recalling Dorothea's lines 'Battle green, bloody geranium, rubbed bloody black, drop of old rain'²¹, while the carrier bag of

spilling out of the frame ironically refers again to potential human creativity, here wasted.

In the splendid Black Bikes the mangled machinery itself, handlebars bristling with ferocious animation, has no need for skin and bone to reenact the drama. The multiplied bicycle is chief protagonist, like the animated helmet in Walpole's Otranto. The large gouache Between Lives is without doubt the dominant work in the series. A soft, naked female body, with a vaster maternal presence behind her, appears bound to spoke-filled wheels which intersect at her flaming centre. With the voluptuousness of a martyr, the pale figure stretches over the instruments of her torture like Saint Catherine in the masterpieces of the past. The mauve tonalities, soft and visceral transfuse the atmosphere which hovers between crisis and reverie.²²

The bicycle itself, a machine which extends the body, is a symbol of the precarious balancing act of verticality, of civilisation. What is the symbolism of these crashed and ruined machines? Dorothea said of her naked bodies: 'They may be symbolic of violence, but also of the ferociousness of encounters, of the wonderful will of human beings to prove their ancestry over the forces of so-called civilisation'.²³

Critics (mostly male and French) who have attempted to trap Tanning's works in their own skeins poetry she has dismissed with characteristic curttness: 'In my case all is libido, nicely smothered'.²⁴ And as far as woman's

position today is concerned, her conclusions are pragmatic. There is 'nothing to be done short of revamping the whole human race'. The latest works like the collage Last Act, made of fleshy pink folded pleats, both open and closed, (curtains for the first act, of course, as well as the last), invite lengthy feminist interpretations. But Tanning abhors any segregationist tendencies which demand 'my solidarity, my admission of sisterhood', and which all too often elevate biology at the expense of quality.²⁵

If Dorothea Tanning is still a little pessimistic about the female condition – Mrs Radcliffe is Still calling, still hoping, (title of a new collage), she is optimistic about life itself. The crashed bikers triumph and transcend catastrophe, even as painting accelerates in a race with destiny: '... speeding life as of now. Fast arrangement of the atoms within the pigment molecule race to control tungstates and chromophores, only to impose them into personified mineral ideas – hers.'²⁶

SARAH WILSON, 1989

Footnotes:

1. Dorothea Tanning: Birthday, the Lapis Press, San Francisco, 1986, p 175.
2. Mario Praz, preface to Three Gothic Novels, Penguin English Library, London, 1968.
3. Dorothea Tanning, January 1989, text for publication in Peguod, autumn, 1989.
4. 'Newer Super-Realism' at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, was organised by Dorothea's future patron, Julien Levy, who then took the show to New York. See Surrealism in America, 1931-1947, Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Jersey, 1977.
5. Breton, Surrealist number of This Quarter, Paris, September, 1932, partially translated in André Breton, What is surrealism? Selected Writings, edited by Franklin Rosement, Pluto Press, London, 1978, p 84.
6. Rhine conducted experiments at Duke University in the 1930s. In Extrasensory Perception, he stated that: 'The need felt for a more definite knowledge of our place in nature is no mere academic one. Rather it seems to me the great fundamental question lying so tragically unrecognised behind our declining religious system, our floundering ethical orders and our unguided social philosophies.'
7. Robert Melville, the English critic, discussing Tanning's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, 1944, in 'The Snake on the Dining Room Table', View, May, 1946.
8. See René de Solier: 'Les Sculptures du Dorothea Tanning', XXE Siècle, vol XXXV, 1970, which illustrates the sculptures Cousins, Hôtel du Pavot, and others.
9. Mentioned by Patrick Waldberg in Dorothea Tanning, Casino Communal, Knokke le Zoute, June-August, 1967.

10. Dorothea Tanning, in XXe siècle, special Tanning number, 1977, translated in Dorothea Tanning, 10 recent paintings and a biography, Gimpel and Weizenhoffer, New York, 1979.
11. 'Day pales to evening. TV girls, TV races and barking guns, a variety of sounds, the sounds are the targets. Undulating TV hair to prove something, to prove that everything is undulating, smoke, fire, fields, lava, water, worms, women under men. Now the lamps are lit and he is drugged to sleep' Birthday, p 156.
12. Ibid, referring to the year 1976.
13. Postcard received in Sedona, 1943 and reproduced in XX siècle, Tanning number, 1977. Breton quotes Baudelaire:

Bien loin d'ici ...
 C'est la chambre de Dorothée
 La brise et l'eau chantent au loin
 Leur chanson de sanglots heurtée
 Pour bercer cette enfant gâtée

He continues: 'Vous, Dorothea qui êtes la fée des accrocs, vous recommencerez à faire fleurir de votre seul regard la ronce du temps et les plus grands perils seront conjurés.' In Arcane 17, 1945, Breton advocated a return to female values for all creative artists, 'the path leading to the Mothers in the very deepest depths'.

14. Alain Jouffroy: 'L'attentat de Dorothea Tanning' in XXe Siècle, special Tanning number, 1977.
15. Frankenstein was written in 1818. Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's Vindication of the rights of woman, 1792, was followed by Mrs Radcliffe's own plea for women's rights, the Female Advocate, in 1799, five years after her international success with the Mysteries of Udolpho.

16. Birthday, op. cit. p 145.
17. Dorothea Tanning, January 1989, as note 3.
18. Ibid.
19. Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel was contemporary with those art nouveau posters of the new woman in bicycling bloomers, legs astride the liberating saddle. It was not a coincidence.
20. Birthday, p 165.
21. Ibid.
22. In both drawings and paintings, interesting comparisons could be made with the work of Arshile Gorky, whom Dorothea met, and Roberto Matta (whose Psychological Morphologies and thin dripping paint inspired Gorky of course) particularly as regards the disposition of blank paper, and the smudging of passages of paint. One could invoke the adolescents of forms versus areas of Balthus, the anamorphoses of skin and membrane of Hans Bellmer in certain times and places. Of course these works have entirely different meanings and come from a different, male, vision. Dorothea is entirely right to dislike analogies which are all too often facile.
23. Interview with Alain Jouffroy, Paris, March, 1974, revised by Dorothea Tanning, March, 1988.
24. Ibid.
25. Dorothea wishes to remain aloof from bandwagons:
'Not only useless, I am an enemy in absentia. Blacklisted by clique and claue'
Birthday, p 176.
26. Dorothea Tanning, writing in 1983 about a new 'trompe l'oeil'. Curiously this passage intervenes in italics after 1944 in the biography written for Dorothea Tanning, Paintings, Stephen Mazoh gallery, New York, 1983.