

Dorothea Tanning

Beyond the Door, Another Invisible Door



DOROTHEA TANNING
Birthday, 1942
Oil paint on canvas
102.2 × 64.8 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art 125th Anniversary Acquisition.
Purchased with funds contributed by C. K. Williams II, 1999
1999-50-1

- DATES:** October 2, 2018 – January 7, 2019
- PLACE:** Sabatini Building, Floor 3
- ORGANIZATION:** Exhibition organized by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía with the support of The Destina Foundation and Museo Reina Sofía Foundation.
- CURATOR:** Alyce Mahon
- COORDINATION:** Beatriz Jordana
- TOUR EXHIBITION:** Tate Modern, Londres (February 26, 2018 – June 9, 2019)
- RELATED ACTIVITY:** Encounter with Dorothea Tanning. Pre-opening guided tour with Alyce Mahon. Tuesday, 2 October 2018 - 7pm / Sabatini Building, Floor 3.

Dorothea Tanning: Beyond the Door, Another Invisible Door presents the first major retrospective of American Surrealist artist Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012). Organized by the **Museo Reina Sofía** with the support of The Destina Foundation and Fundación Museo Reina Sofía, this exhibition gives new insight into Tanning's extraordinary career and vision after several years of research by curator **Alyce Mahon**.

In collaboration with:

The exhibition, which also has the collaboration of the Community of Madrid, includes over **150 art works created between 1930 and 1997** -many never seen before by the public- from private collections and institutions such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The show documents the range of media and formal expression used by Tanning: paintings, drawings, collages, fabric sculptures and a installation.

As a central figure in the international avant-garde, Dorothea Tanning believed in the power of art to create spaces, sensations, and ideas beyond the real. The door motif encapsulates this ambition and returns repeatedly in her oeuvre. It is the organizing concept of the exhibition whose title is adapted from an interview that Tanning did with French critic Alain Jouffroy in 1974, when she explained that her early art explored “this side” of the mirror or door, her later art went to the “other” side, offering a “perpetual vertigo” in which one door, whether visible or invisible, led to “another door”.

The door stands not simply as a threshold in Tanning’s art but as an invitation to venture beyond the real and to enter a world of dreams and fears. We witness a never-ending perspective which is not meant to alienate but seduce the spectator.

Divided into eight thematic sections, the exhibition opens with a delicate pencil self-portrait of 1936 and ends with a late self-portrait *Woman Artist, Nude, Standing* (1986). While her art was grounded in her life experiences, Tanning drew extensively on a wide range of literary sources - from the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Wimpole to the poems of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, as well as the debates of her Surrealist circle in the United States and France.

Drawing on these interests, Tanning teases out the symbolism of the door and its power to divide private and public space: in her paintings and sculptures bodies arch or battle against the door, break out of walls or revel in forbidden desires, reach for the half-open door or dive beyond its shadowy frame.

Dorothea Tanning: Beyond the Door, Another Invisible Door celebrates Dorothea Tanning’s unique and daring vision. She said of her own art practice, “You coax the picture out of its cage along with persona [...] You are merely the visitor, grandly invited: ‘Step in’.” This exhibition invites the viewer to also step into her world of hidden revelations



MAN RAY
Dorothea Tanning, c.1946
Photograph, new print (2018) 13.6 × 9 cm
The Skylark Foundation

The Self-Portrait

The first section presents the early works of Dorothea Tanning who grew up in the small town of Galesburg, Illinois, and then travelled in the 1930s to Chicago and New York to pursue a career as an artist. Tanning discovered Surrealism's "limitless expanse of POSSIBILITY" on viewing Alfred Barr's 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism* at MoMA, New York.

Soon she began to explore this very sense of limitless space and imagination in her own art. She sailed to Paris in 1939, hoping to meet Surrealists there, but with the outbreak of the war quickly returned to New York. She worked as a freelance illustrator for department stores including Macy's – a selection of which are on display.

Her self-portrait *Birthday* (1942) marked a clear Surrealist direction with its series of half open doors, leading the eye into the horizon line, the artist's bold stare, bare breasts and Shakespearian dress with its skirt of entwined bodies, and the bizarre magical creature at her feet who stands as a totem for creativity itself.

Max Ernst titled the painting when he saw it in Tanning's studio and chose it for Peggy Guggenheim's landmark *31 Women* exhibition of 1943 at the Art of the Century Gallery in New York. *Birthday* marked a cross roads in her private life as she began a relationship with Ernst and her 'birth' as a Surrealist artist.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Deirdre, 1940
Oil paint on canvas
53.5 × 43.3 cm
Private collection

She titled her autobiography of 1986 *Birthday* too (expanded in 2004 to a memoir titled *Between Lives*), in which she details her life with Ernst and "ruminations, souvenirs, anecdotes, conversations, flights, captures, voices, and futile opinions" in an open, intuitive writing style.

Tanning wrote and published short stories, novels and poems, developing ideas in numerous journals, and in the case of the short story *Abyss* (1947) developing it into a novel which would ultimately be published as *Chasm: A Weekend* in 2004, at the age of ninety-four. Writing served not simply as another form of self-portraiture but as a further means of exploring real and hallucinatory worlds.

Chess Games

The second section focuses on Tanning's relationship with Max Ernst, whom she married in 1946, in a joint wedding ceremony in Hollywood with Man Ray and Juliet Browner, and their wide circle of friends, which included Joseph Cornell, Leonor Fini and Konstanty Jeleński, Marcel and Teeney Duchamp, Julien Levy and Muriel Streeter, Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage.

The game of chess, described by Tanning as "something voluptuous, close to the bone", brings her art works, film



DOROTHEA TANNING
Endgame, 1944
Oil paint on canvas
43 × 43 cm
Harold (†) and Gertrud Parker Collection

In collaboration with:

collaborations, and correspondence together. Chess, is a game of skill and chance and Tanning and Ernst shared a passion for it. In 1944 Julien Levy organized an exhibition **The Imagery of Chess** in his New York gallery in which Tanning's painting **Endgame** (1944) was exhibited. In this work she places the Queen (represented by the white satin shoe) centre stage, destroying the Bishop (symbolized by the mitre) and, by extension, the Church and the moral codes it represents in society.

Portrait of Max in a Blue Boat (1947) also portrays chess as the go-between for the two artists-lovers. She and Ernst collaborated with Hans Richter on **Dreams that Money Can Buy** (1947) and **8 x 8: A Chess Sonata in 8 Movements** (1957) where we see Ernst strolling the streets of New York with a chess board on his back, searching for his Queen – Dorothea. They also appear in the first scenario exploring 'Desire' in **Dreams that Money Can Buy** (1947), which opens the next section.

The Femme-Enfant

The third section focuses on the *femme-enfant*, or child-woman in Tanning's paintings and writings. Comparable to Alice-in-Wonderland this girl inhabits a "world of perpetual astonishment". Tanning's prepubescent child brought a new dimension to Surrealism at a time when André Breton advised that war-torn society needed to look to the feminine for inspiration. It is the girl's erotic potential that wreaks havoc on bourgeois interiors and expectations.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, 1943
Oil paint on canvas
40 × 61 cm
Title: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund and the American Fund for the Tate Gallery 1967

This is exemplified in **Eine Kleine Nachtmusik** (1943) where girls with electrified hair and torn Victorian dresses are hypnotically led to a half-open door with an intriguing, flaming light beyond it. Like the writhing sunflower, the girls symbolize Nature's force, defying cultivation.

The element of Gothic terror continues in **The Guest Room** (1950-52) where again we find a nude girl standing against a door which serves as a portal to the dark world of dream and desire.

The door represents the threshold that separates childhood from adulthood, innocence from knowledge.

The Family Romance

The fourth section explores Tanning's subversion of the institution of the family and the moral codes it represents. The white table cloth takes on a subversive significance of its own in domestic scenes where the imagination distorts and expands the still-life genre.

The artist explained in 2000: "[Growing up in Galesburg, Illinois] There was a long dining room table that on Sunday, especially when the pastor came to dinner, got covered with, first, a pad and then the great gleaming white tablecloth. They



DOROTHEA TANNING
Maternity, 1946-1947
Oil paint on canvas 142 × 121 cm
Private collection

In collaboration with:

shook it out a laid it down, smoothing out the folds that made a gentle grid from end to end. The grid surely proved that order prevailed in this house.”

The father is staged at this orderly table in gargantuan terms in *Family Portrait* (1953-54). In *Some Roses and their Phantoms* (1952), *Poached Trout* (1952) and *The Philosophers* (1952) the home becomes the Surrealist space par excellence, its familiarity made strange.

The maternal figure is also portrayed in unconventional terms as witnessed in *Maternity* (1946-47) where a mother, child and pet dog stand before an apocalyptic landscape in which a phantasmic white creature, headless but bearing bulbous breasts and womb, is visible in the horizon behind an open door.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Tango Lives, 1977
Oil paint on canvas
130 x 97 cm
Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Tango Lives

Tanning’s costume and stage designs for the ballets of the Russian choreographer George Balanchine’s *Night Shadow* (1946), *The Witch* (1950), and *Bayou* (1952) are on display in the fifth section as well as oil paintings in which a new sense of movement emerges. In *Bonimenteurs/ Smooth talker* (1966) and *Même les Jeunes Filles/ Even the Young Girls* (1966)) we witness a new expressive fluidity in Tanning’s brushstrokes and a kineticism in her compositions.

Y en *Tango Lives* (1977), la obra que da título a la sala, el color comienza a dominar la línea en pinceladas sueltas donde dos cuerpos toman un tono barroco. En ella, un hombre y una mujer desnudos se fusionan para crear una figura expresiva, sus brazos y piernas se confunden con el espacio que los rodea, en alusión a las ilimitadas posibilidades del deseo y la imaginación.

Soft Bodies & Sculptures

In the mid-1960s Tanning turns to her sewing machine to make soft fabric sculptures. Erotic forms are twisted and turned in *By What Love* (1969), *Xmas* (1969) and *Etreinte* (1969), while *Emma* (1970) with its exposed pink flesh and disheveled lace skirt refers to Emma Bovary, the female protagonist in Gustave Flaubert’s notorious *Madame Bovary* (1856), a woman who escapes the boredom of married life through literature and clandestine affairs.

Presaging the soft sculptures of Louise Bourgeois and celebrating the hand-crafted rather than the found industrial object, here Tanning advanced the Surrealist object so that it took on a new haptic, fetishistic quality. The emphasis on softness also challenged the vogue for hard-edge Minimalism in the art world and the anonymity of burgeoning mass consumerism in western society.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Emma, 1970
Fabric, wool and lace
61 x 81.3 x 55.9 cm
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation - Commerce Bank, Trustees) 2006.27

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The Architectural Uncanny

Tanning's installation *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73) is the seventh section of the exhibition: an uncanny architectural space in which a banal hotel room becomes nightmarish and strange. Here we find "living materials becoming living sculptures, their life span something like ours" as the artist explained.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Chambre 202, Hôtel du Pavot [Room 202, Hôtel du Pavot], 1970-3
Wood, fabric, wool, wallpaper, carpet and light bulb
340.5 x 310 x 470 cm
Purchase, 1977. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle
AM 1977-204

The idea for living sculptures came to Tanning when she heard Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Hymnen* performed at the Maison de la Radio in Paris in 1969, inspiring her to craft a surreal installation in which fleshy female limbs break through the wallpaper alongside anthropomorphic furniture. Only a half open door with the number '202' on it appears to offer any escape but this too has a macabre significance – a popular song titled 'In Room 202', which told the tale of a gangster's wife, Kitty Kane, who poisoned herself in Room 202 in a local hotel in Chicago.

Near the installation are Tanning's monumental *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* (1979), whose black fetishistic form she described as "Not an image but bristling with images. And pins", and a documentary film about the artist by Peter Schamoni titled *Insomnia* (1978).

Dionysian Desires

The final section brings many themes of the exhibition together: the self-portrait, intimacy, movement, play with scale and space, and desire. Tanning consistently refused to be labelled a woman artist - stating in 1990: "You may be a woman and you may be an artist; but the one is a given and the other is you".

Her late self-portrait *Woman Artist, Nude Standing* (1985-87) exemplifies this stance as she rejects the traditional elongated nude in favour of a nude whom is almost armoured by her own bare flesh and crowned in a mantilla with flaming poppy red flower.

This explosive spirit is unleashed again in the bucolic bodies, immersed in white poppies in *On Avalon* (1987). Tanning's last works were a series of painting flowers produced in 1997-98, in which petals twist and fold like a lover as in *Crepuscula glacialia* (1997). Female desire is not merely visible but palpable to the spectator.



DOROTHEA TANNING
Woman Artist, Nude, Standing, 1985-1987
Oil paint on canvas
162 x 130 cm
The Destina Foundation, New York

In collaboration with:

Catalogue

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia has published the richly illustrated catalogue ***Dorothea Tanning: Beyond the Door, Another Invisible Door***, edited by Alyce Mahon, the show's curator, with essays by Mahon, Idoia Castro Murga and Ann Coxon, in addition to a selection of writings by Dorothea Tanning.

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