

Dorothea Tanning: Go girl!

Dorothea Tanning is waiting as you enter the major retrospective of her work now on at Tate Modern. Defiantly bare-breasted above a seaweed skirt, the artist herself gazes out of *Birthday* (1942) half humorously, half quizzically. Behind her, doors open onto a succession of yet more doors while crouched at her feet is a strange nightmarish creature. The challenge of the painting is clear – follow me on a journey into the dark recesses of the human psyche.

This is the first painting that Max Ernst, the great German surrealist, saw when he visited Tanning's studio in New York. It was his suggestion too that the painting should be titled *Birthday* to mark Tanning's awakening as a surrealist. After this first meeting, they fell in love, divorced their spouses, married, and settled into life together as one of the art world's most prominent couples, both major surrealist painters in their own right.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) *Birthday* 1942 Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, US) © DACS, 2019

So far, so conventional – it's the tale of a small-town girl who married well. But as this excellent show reveals, to see Tanning's works through the lens of her marriage to Ernst is a mistake. Instead we are taken through the many twists and turns of her 70-year career – Tanning died in 2012 aged 101 – that long outlived surrealism as a movement.

In fact, the early surrealist paintings alongside *Birthday* are uneven and not especially convincing. Tanning borrows too easily from other surrealists – echoes of Dali, de Chirico and Ernst himself are everywhere. This is predictable mix-and-match surrealist painting.

But soon Tanning's own unique vision driven by her personal passions starts to appear. One passion was for Gothic story telling. Growing up in Galesburg, Illinois, where 'nothing happened except the wallpaper', the young Tanning fed her imagination with the books of Anne Radcliffe and other Gothic novelists. The spaces that feature so prominently in these books – half-open doors, darkened rooms, creaky staircases – become claustrophobic backdrops for unsettling narratives. In *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943), two young girls, one again bare-breasted, the other with her hair floating upwards as if underwater, stand on a hotel landing. Blocking their path is a giant sunflower whose tentacle-like leaves creep menacingly across the floor while ahead a door left ajar offers safe haven.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* 1943 Tate © DACS, 2019

Another passion was to depict female lives and bodies, especially the passage from childhood to maturity and sexual awakening. In *Family Portrait* (1954), Tanning dissects the power structure of the nuclear family. The paterfamilias wearing mirrored glasses and a ghastly orange tie towers spectrally

over his petite daughter, while the cook tinier still holds a dish away from a begging dog. Imprisoned by invisible bars, the daughter blankly shoots us a glance as if to say 'welcome to my life'.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) *Family Portrait* 1954 Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art modern/ Centre de création industrielle Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /image Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI © DACS, 2019

And in the best paintings of this period, these twin obsessions come resoundingly together. In *The Guest Room* (1950-2), a hooded dwarf in cowboy boots stands beside a naked pubescent girl, whom Tanning has painted with a startlingly fidelity that would undoubtedly be viewed as suspect were the artist male. Further into the darkened room is a sleeping child cuddling a life-sized doll and further back still stands a shadowy figure dressed in the robes of the Inquisition. Yes, it really is as puzzling, complex and disturbing as it sounds.

Then in the 1960s almost without warning, Tanning's career takes another turn and the tightly plotted dreamscapes of the '40s and '50s give way to kaleidoscopic compositions. More loosely painted, these prismatic paintings as they are called still feature narrative. But now the figures are fragmented and

jumbled, and their imaginary worlds visualized through light and colour. In *Useless* (1969), female bodies intertwine sensuously in steamy clouds of colour, while in *Dogs of Cythera* (1963), bodies, faces, and limbs, both human and animal, loom out of a billowing maelstrom.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) *Dogs of Cythera* 1963 The Destina Foundation, New York © DACS, 2019

These are paintings that divide opinion and their impact is diluted by the number on show. But for me, the best are intriguing works by a mature artist exploring the limits of her medium and her own vision. In fact, unlike the secondhand predictability of the early works, I can think of nothing quite like these voluptuous paintings.

But painting this way came at a personal cost. The liberal use of turps in her small studio literally got up Tanning's nose and in the late 1960's, her career suddenly took another and wholly unexpected twist. She turned to soft toys. These 'sewn sculptures' look back to the assemblages of earlier surrealists but uniquely give physical form to the ambiguous shapes from her paintings. In *Nue couchée* (1969-70), a pink female body writhes in self-love, while *Embrace* (1969) is a soft toy like no other. A brown furry primordial figure is wrapped around – assaulting? – a mutant pink female form.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) Étreinte 1969 The Destina Foundation, New York © DACS, 2019

I suspect the art in these pieces comes from the tension between subject and form – soft toys don't rape. But I found it hard to look past the form. They stayed soft toys for me, rather limp and twee. But one piece from this period is emphatically neither – in fact, *Hotel Du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-3) is the darkest work in the show. Tanning took inspiration from a childhood song about Kitty Kane who married a gangster and later poisoned herself in room 202 of a Chicago hotel. But here the room itself looks to be in its death throes. The furniture sprouts limbs, bodies writhe through the walls, a hand waves in desperation from behind the chimney breast. Tanning is using fabric to give pliant three-dimensional shape to the gothic nightmares from her early paintings. It's like a David Lynch film set 20 years before its time.



Dorothea Tanning (1910 – 2012) *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* 1970-1973 Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art modern/ Centre de création industrielle Photo (C) Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat © DACS, 2019

One drawback of a long career though is it gives time to produce lots of misses to go with the hits and the show ends weakly with more lame soft toys and paintings that come close to kitsch. Keen to argue for Tanning to be reassessed as a uniquely female voice in a largely male art world, the Tate has gone in for quantity over quality when some judicious culling would have strengthened their case.

That said, this is an eye-opening show. Tanning is revealed as wholly herself - original, perceptive, rebellious, optimistic, defiantly female, and an accomplished and versatile artist. Her works wrestle with the psychological constraints of sexuality, marriage and family life set against backdrops of doors, rooms and tables, but it is the unrestrained joy Tanning found in her femininity that is the lasting memory of this show. Go girl!

Dorothea Tanning is on at Tate Modern, Bankside SE1 9TG from 27th February to 9th June 2019

Published: Dorothea Tanning at Tate Modern review, London Student

Date published: 3rd June 2019

URL: <http://londonstudent.coop/dorothea-tanning-at-tate-modern/>