

NY artist Q & A

Dorothea Tanning



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art. I cannot imagine talking about techniques and materials. As far as the current art scene is concerned, have you ever been to galleries in Chelsea? Depressing is a mild word for those spaces: a sinister building like a factory or, even worse, a storage building; a prison-like interior with a freight elevator; then you have to walk at least a block. Finally, at the end, you see a light and that's the gallery. It's spooky. **Do you still go to museums?** I go round in a wheelchair. Why walk when you can ride? It's wonderful; I can stay as long as I like; I can get up from the chair and then go back to sit down.

It's a very good formula. The only lamentable aspect of museums is that they've become money-mad; everything has to do with funding. A curator is hired today on their ability to charm the old ladies and get money out of them.

Do you think of yourself as a Surrealist?

No, I don't consider myself a Surrealist. For about ten years I was painting like a Surrealist, reading about them, but the movement itself was petering out. All movements have a life, they rarely last more than twenty years. People always used to be concerned their work would last at least a hundred years. In our time, we're not concerned with duration, which is sinister. It is moment to moment, year to year nowadays.

Surrealism is now a very solemn academic topic.

This happens to everything. Everything avant-garde becomes acceptable. I remember when Surrealism came to New York, brought first by Julien Levy in his little gallery. He did two little shows of Dalí and didn't sell one picture. Then MoMA took it on in 1936. People were baffled, but excited. From that time on, it was established. Surrealism was a pretty big explosion, compared to what had gone before—after all, Americans were

just getting used to Impressionism.

Do you find yourself endlessly cross-questioned by doctoral students and interviewers?

It goes on and on and on. Surrealism is a juicy subject for all struggling and hopeful art writers. Now people only talk about it if they can put a spin on it, such as "Women Surrealists". Oh they love that subject! I tend to think there weren't any. There was even a book on American women Surrealists. I have to say that I am categorically against being in anything called a "woman's" show. I have nothing against feminism, but don't believe painting should be segregated, put in a ghetto of its own. In my autobiography, *Birthday*, I wrote about these all-female shows: "A medical examination should be a condition for inclusion—above all today when imposture is so rife that a woman exhibitor could turn out to be only a man."

You returned to New York after many years in France.

I was away from New York when all the exciting things started happening, when it became a centre, producing something new, such as Abstract Expressionism. At that time I was living in France. I came back in 1980, I thought, "Well how nice coming back to New York. Everyone will be so glad to see me." Well they weren't; they didn't know me. I'm still not here, not in these museum worlds at all, but I am having an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum next year. It will trace a little bit of my entire life, which is a difficult thing to do in twenty-five pictures. As I mentioned, they just acquired the painting "Birthday", which is a little bit of my quarrel: they only know those early pictures. It seems to me I have so much more exciting and challenging work. I look at those little Surrealist pictures and they look sort of dinky.

In 1994 you set up the Tanning Prize which awards \$100,000 each year to a poet. That seems a pretty big amount of money. The amount life costs today, \$100,000 is not excessive. I gave exactly half of what I had. I felt I could finish my life on the rest. I believe so very strongly in the importance of poetry. I thought that doing this might give some of those hideous millionaires and billionaires the idea they could do the same, since they spend money like water anyway. No other poetry prize is anything over \$15,000.

Does the world seem very different to you, now you are ninety? I'm getting a lot of attention just because I'm so old; I'm lasting too long. When I tell people how old I am they say, "God bless you", as if I'd done something marvellous. It has nothing to do with what you have done; it is just because you are still breathing. If you had lived as long as I have, before there were even radios, everything was made by hand and by human brains. These things—hands and brains—have somehow lost their importance and their honour.

Interview by
Adrian Dannatt

Currently showing Zabriskie Gallery, New York, until 15 January 2000
Background Born in Galesburg Illinois, 1910. Married Max Ernst in 1946. Lived in Sedona, Arizona; Seillans, France; currently lives New York

Track record Solo shows include: 1944: Julien Levy Gallery, New York; 1945: Caresse Crosby Gallery, New York; 1959: Galerie Edouard Loeb, Paris; 1964: "Dorothea Tanning, Bilder, Zeichnungen, Collagen", Amerika Haus, Berlin; 1967: Retrospective, Casino Communal, Knokke-le-Zoute, Brussels; 1974: "Dorothea Tanning: Oeuvre", a retrospective at the Centre national d'art contemporain, Paris; 1980: Yares Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona; 1988: Kent Fine Art Inc., New York; 1992: "Hail delirium!", a print retrospective at the New York Public Library; 1993: "Dorothea Tanning: Works 1942-92", Camden Arts Centre, London; 1999: "Still in the studio", Boston University Art Gallery. **How many flower paintings are you showing at Zabriskie?**

Only eight. I made twelve, but four of them were sold. I hope the gallery sells them all. I have never, never been reluctant to sell my work. I think if you can paint one, you can paint another. But I feel very strongly about certain pictures; I don't have great pretensions, but I do feel certain of my pictures are of museum interest, rather than for private collections. "Eine Kleine Nacht Musik" that the Tate bought in 1997, I painted in Arizona. Roland Penrose was out there and gave me \$400 for it and I was very happy. I heard the Tate paid \$260,000 for it. My dealer had someone to buy "Birthday" for a million dollars, but I wanted it to be in the Philadelphia Museum, so I sold it to them for half of that. I was so glad to get rid of it; I was pretty fed up with this one picture getting all the attention. My dealer told me: "You don't realise. This painting is an icon; you don't have any others."

What I loved about that picture was that I painted it in 1942 before I knew anyone; it came out of pure solitude, and that painting was what attracted those other artists to me.

Flowers have been a feature in your paintings since almost the beginning of your long career.

Yes, flowers have occurred in my paintings. I like to think they've occurred in almost everyone's paintings, but often not as the main subject, sometimes incidentally. I had not even realised that I had been painting flowers all my life, perhaps they have been an unconscious part of the composition. They are indeed flowers, but sometimes quite unrecognisable. Since painting these flowers, all my friends send me images of flowers. **Are you at all involved in the current art scene? Your work now seems connected to a lot of young artists, such as John Currin, Jenny Saville or Lisa Yuskavage.**

All I can say about the contemporary art world is I don't know it. I'm in the poetry world now, I know poets. I think I must be a loner. I never hobnobbed with other artists or sat around talking