



January 7–February 7, 1987

Dorothea Tanning

On Paper 1948–1986

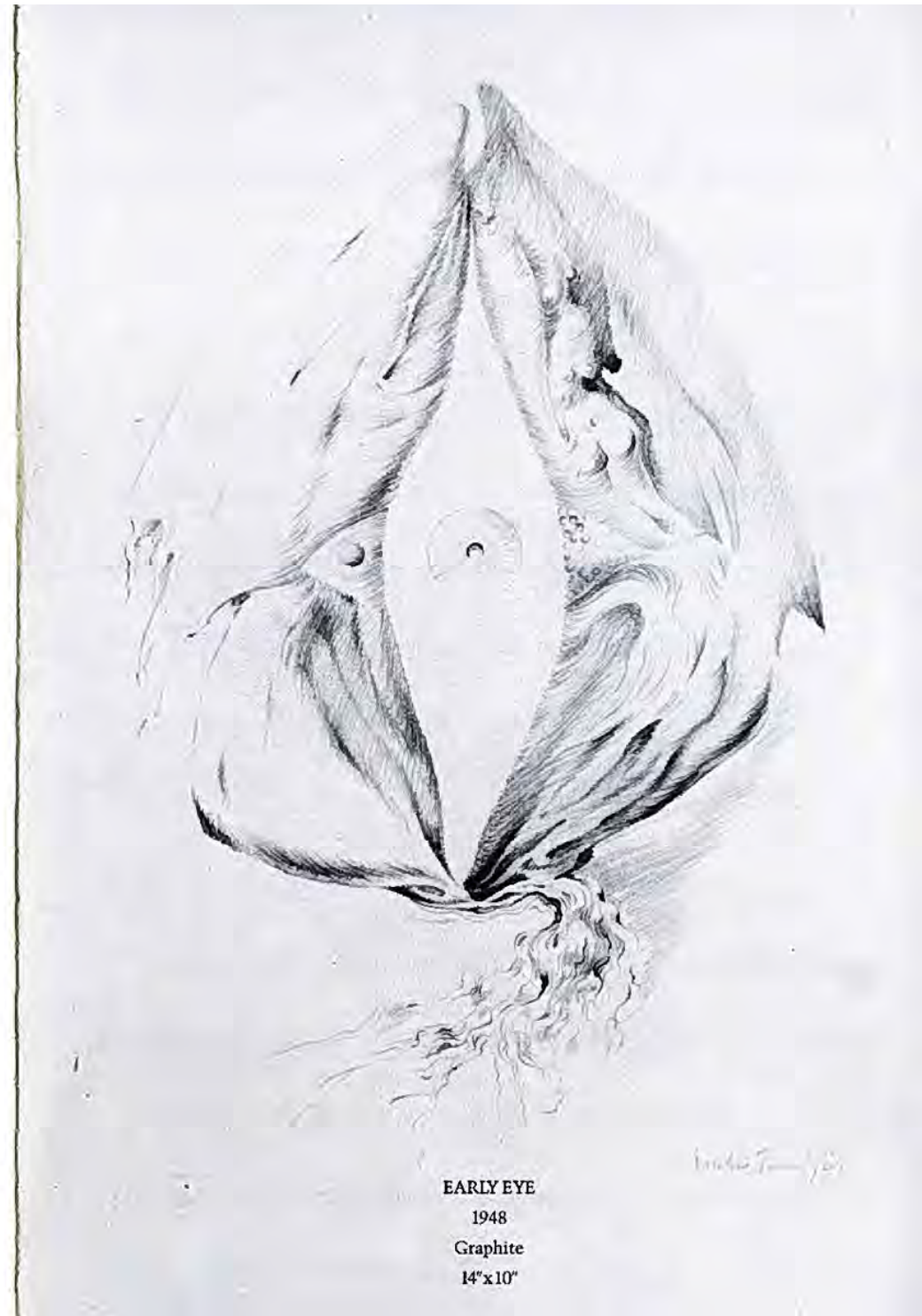
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DOROTHEA TANNING

Donald Kuspit

What strikes one about Dorothea Tanning's drawings of the 1980s, purely as drawings, is the sense of speed and energy that pervades them. The line moves rapidly, even when it breaks and mutates. Whether delicate or determined, it seems about to meander unpredictably. Shapes, whether closed or open, meld into other shapes, as if impelled by a single force. A high-spirited activity, a natural exuberance, unfolds the touch in a kind of succinct fluidity. Indeed, as one becomes aware of the developmental sequence of the drawings, one can see that the fluidity intensifies, as Tanning seems to be abandoning herself completely to the drawing process. Scenes emerge, but they are not photographically fixed. While the figures are legible, they are visionary, and



sometimes inchoate, as if highly malleable. They are like moments of arrest in a stream of line. The sublime fluidity—the magical flow of the unconscious, of a subterranean process that erupts in imagery but remains just out of reach—that informs Tanning's drawings is almost an end in itself. Tanning manages to make this invisible process seem as palpable as the images themselves. The expressivity of the whole seems greater than the sum of its figural parts. Her drawings reverberate with the excitement of an individual sensibility recognizing its own depth.

A drawing, Max J. Friedlaender wrote, is "an autograph, ... inestimable as an immediate, personal, intimate utterance of individuality." As the "result of spontaneous action, ... less closely tied to teaching, tradition and studio convention" than is painting, a drawing bespeaks "the inner sanctuary" of the artist more than any other kind of work.

eyeball and elegant, interesting hair, reveals that kind of masterful technique and hyperclarity. In *High Wires*, Tanning has set a bird, a familiar surrealist as well as romantic symbol, in an activated, ambiguously mineral/organic world and linked it to a vegetable form by threads of ambivalent attraction. (The art historian Hans Sedlmayr has pointed out the surrealists' preoccupation with the subhuman as symbolic of unconscious content and with inorganic and organic chemical process as symbolic of unconscious process.) Even the blurred parts of this image are fastidiously rendered. In neither of these drawings is there any real letting go, that special rhythm of release and restraint that marks the eighties drawings. After she returned to America, Tanning seems just to have let it happen. She has freed herself of standard surrealist preconceptions, which she handled authoritatively but without full individuality. *Early Eye* and *High Wires*, by



ORBIT
1986
Graphite & Watercolor
40 1/2" x 60"

form, converge in predictable surrealist novelty. The evocative-ness is more crafted than spontaneous, albeit beautifully so. In Friedlaender's terms, these drawings are more like paintings than drawings. Tanning seems to be striving to force form and content into a final image, to crystallize firmly and quickly whatever emerges from the unconscious—to freeze-dry its fluidity. The liberated spontaneity of the eighties works is still to come.

In the eighties drawings the spontaneity comes quickly, and it is associated with the Dionysian female figure, in a perfect correlation. Maenad and mother figures—the two sides of Venus—appear sometimes united in the same figure, sometimes split apart. In such drawings as *Murmurs on Paper*, *On Japan*, *Friends of Friends*, and *Orbit*, all of 1986, the flow of the line is as abandoned as the figures, from their fluid contours to the “moving atmosphere” in which they



OUIJA
1986
Watercolor & Pencil
28" x 39¼"

are immersed. Far from seeming foreordained, these images have a dazzling, metamorphic restlessness that is confirmed by the daring flexibility, the virtuosity, of touch. There is a verve to these works that is absent from the more stylized and more conventionally surrealist earlier works.

The iconography in Tanning's drawings of recent years is as fascinating as their restless vitality. These drawings show us how significant, culturally as well as esthetically, her imagery has become. The constant theme is the female, in all the vigorous fullness of her autonomous being. Unlike the figure *Still in the Studio (Study)*, who seems to have no identity other than that of a model passively posing for the artist, the woman with a child in *Artists and Models*, of 1986, is far from nondescript and far from passively posed. Her head is thrown back in a traditional gesture of maenadic abandon that stretches the tradition and in this context,

as in Euripedes' *Bacchae*, signifies self-assertion. Highly expressive, beside herself, so to speak, with expressivity, she is unpaintable, except by another female. In most of Tanning's eighties drawings, the figure's demonstrativeness is crucial, as is her association with the child. Tanning gives us a kind of surreal mother and child—a fantasy image of identification. This iconography adds to the personal, intimate quality of the images. Indeed, it is an articulation of intimacy.

Tanning has given us uninhibited images of the uninhibited female nude. One might even argue that she has revitalized the nude's traditional role as all-purpose allegorical personification. One could say that the figures of Tanning's eighties drawings personify the power of the unconscious itself. The female figure is certainly no longer the simple, lone person shown in two drawings of 1973 and

1974, *Solitary* and *Solitary Too*. Nor is she present purely as a sexual being, as in *Cousins (Study)*, of 1971. The full sense of her liberation is perhaps most evident in *To the Barricades* (1986). In the tradition that conceives of liberty as a feminine entity (Delacroix's painting of Liberty, also on the barricades, is a well-known example), this work reinstates, in vital form, an important ideal meaning of the female.

Tanning's works seem to be imbued with and to revitalize other traditional meanings. The crescent moon in many of the drawings suggests their occult character and immediately brings to mind the drawings of witches by Hans Baldung-Grien. But whereas Baldung-Grien's witches seem malevolent—there are images of them bewitching men—Tanning's appear benign. They are the incarnation of the life-force, as the presence of the child suggests. The moon also hints that woman has special sibylline powers, that she is by



THE TOAST IS BURNING

1986

Watercolor, Graphite & Gouache

24 1/2" x 20"

nature better able than man to be the medium of the unconscious. Surrealist artists have usually thought of themselves as mediums, and woman as medium has been a theme of thought since the Diotima of Plato's *Symposium*. The bacchante was understood to be in touch with underworld forces. Tanning's woman is perhaps as much demonic as daemonic: Tanning may unconsciously regard woman's ability to speak with the inner voice, to transmit the unconscious, as an "infernal" power. In any case, her figures are often associated with demons, and it may be that the children in her drawings are demons in disguise—"civilized" versions, in Poe's phrase, of "imps of the perverse."

The moon conjures up as well the goddess Diana, the symbol of feminine integrity and autonomy. The goddess of the hunt is perhaps the perfect emblem for Tanning, hunting images in the unconscious. Diana, the sister of Apollo, never



LOTTERY (Study)
1967
Graphite
12"x 9"

gave up her creative individuality and always remained in touch with nature. She was simultaneously Apollonian and Dionysian. In a sense, Tanning's pre-eighties works show the Apollonian side of surrealism, her eighties works its Dionysian side. Like Diana, she is completely one in her inner nature, as only a medium of nature's indwelling forces can be.

New York, 1986



TO THE BARRICADES

1986

Graphite

14" x 17 1/4"