



Dorothea Tanning, *Mean Frequency (of Auroras)*, 1981, oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35".

New York

DOROTHEA TANNING, Stephen Mazoh & Co., Inc.; "Follies," Leo Castelli Gallery; **CHRIS BURDEN**, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts:

DOROTHEA TANNING

These are grand, weird, sinister, absurd images, painted with the same ambition that gave Michelangelo his claim to *terribilità*, but in a lower, peculiarly more frightening and volatile key. Dorothea Tanning was Max Ernst's wife, famous from a photograph of herself with Ernst—she looking splendidly uncensored, hypererotically charged in a world in which everything was sexualized, he like a preternaturally calm imp. In these paintings she is heir to the Surrealist magic, the keeper of its uncompromising flame. Still urgently in pursuit of the marvelous, she comes up with pictures that are so purely fantasy that they can be read as allegorical personifications of the unconscious itself. It is as though Tanning were deliberately showing us that Surrealism can never be stamped out, even by misunderstanding.

Tanning's paintings show the Surrealist essence as through a glass darkly, from an "eternal feminine" perspective. These are images of a faded yet still perverse and violent Venus, alone or with demonic cupids, obsessively in love with herself. Bronzino would have painted them had he been a Surrealist. The pictures articulate what Heinz Kohut calls the "archaic grandiosity" of the "narcissistic self." Case studies of the primitive female imago deliriously

asserting its timeless rights, these are "borderline" works, reminding us openly that painting is a delusional activity performed with inadequate means, its message uncertain and apt to be misread. With tireless vigor, Tanning explores a lasting Surrealist concern—the wavering line between fiction and delusion, and between painting as such and painting as the instrument for involuntarily unconscious imagery, however voluntarily elaborated. She asserts that painting is always a kind of dream work.

In the chronology she wrote for this show's catalogue, Tanning shows she knows exactly what she is about: "She has been around for some time, firmly planted somewhere between the immediate past and a hazy future, between the inner eye and the other side of the door, between what was painted yesterday and what will be painted tomorrow." The work's amorphous quality bespeaks the "hazy future," death, "the other side of the door"; under the threat of the unknown, Tanning's "inner eye" perceives "lusty emblems" in an environment showing "a quite exuberant attachment to the curved line and the arcane." "Heedless of modes and mores," Tanning gives us a "pendulum of appearances" that "swings free of gravity," "its maenads . . . propelled into that space we call *outer*, so intimately paired with *inner*." For these maenads, the erotic and the arcane fuse in a single act in which the power of life seems limitless. Their bodies conduct that power despite their fading form; indeed, their tendency to formlessness seems to allow it to flow more freely and strongly. The dissolution of the body, its loss of eroticism, pre-occupies these paintings, but they show

the erotic frozen for its greatest adventure yet, its transformation of eros into pure soul.

The Venus of these paintings is an aging beauty, still concerned with the exercise of her powers of enchantment but now masking them in myth. Nakedness is blurred, but it is still there, still trusted, in the mind's eye. Outwardly it no longer signals the consciously ideal, but it still has power over the unconscious. Tanning's devilish maenads are in a long line, unbroken from the dancing maenads of Greek antiquity to Cézanne's stolid yet insecure figures, and still not ended. Surrealism here is an Ovidian dream of the metamorphosis of the female image, which in part may be what feminism is about; Tanning's rearticulation of female eroticism confronting the power of death is trenchant for the current time.