

Book Review: *New Books on Dorothea Tanning*

Alyce Mahon, editor, *Dorothea Tanning: Behind the Door, Another Invisible Door* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia with the collaboration of the Tate Modern, 2018)

Victoria Carruthers, *Dorothea Tanning: Transformations* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020)

Katharine Conley
College of William & Mary

When I first met Dorothea Tanning in January 2002, she told me she would become famous “when I’ve kicked the bucket” and she laughed. Although a book by Catriona McAra, *A Surrealist Stratigraphy of Dorothea Tanning’s Chasm* (Routledge), appeared in 2012, and Tanning herself was able to visit “Dorothea Tanning: Birthday and Beyond,” a retrospective held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2000-2001, it is only now, eight years after her death in 2012 at age 101, that her prediction is finally coming true. The major exhibition of her work at the Reina Sofia and Tate Modern museums curated by Alyce Mahon in 2018 and 2019 and the publication of Victoria Carruthers’ study of Tanning’s work this year are both milestones in the recognition of Tanning as a significant artist. They are finally making her famous.

The exhibition as I saw it at the Tate Modern was laid out chronologically, with a first room dedicated to Tanning’s talent as a child artist through her work as a commercial artist in New York City, culminating with her iconic self-portrait *Birthday* (1942), as the proper portal beside which the visitor passed into the main exhibition room filled with paintings and sculptures that spanned her long career. As the exhibition guide explains, *Birthday* marked her “‘birth’ as a surrealist.” This is partly because it was the painting on her easel when Max Ernst first came to visit to recruit her for his then-wife Peggy Guggenheim’s 1943 *Exhibition on 31 Women*

Katharine Conley: kconley@wm.edu

and they wound up together, eventually marrying in 1946. She had already recruited herself to surrealism, as she explains in her two autobiographies, *Birthday* (1986) and *Between Lives* (2001), when she came face to face with examples of surrealist art at the memorable “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition curated by Alfred Barr, Jr., at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 and experienced “the real explosion, rocking me on my run-over heels.” The paintings in the Tate Modern exhibition ranged from the intimate *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943) to the spectacular *Murmurs* (1976), which had hung prominently in her New York apartment, *Mean Frequency (of Auroras)* (1981), *Door 84* (1984), and the magnificent flower sequence from 1997-98, to the soft sculptures and sculpture room environments she created, most notably *Chambre 202*, *Hôtel du Pavot* (1970-73). Striking, as well, was the documentary that closed the exhibition, an extended conversation with Dorothea about painting and art.

Alyce Mahon’s exhibition catalogue serves as a wonderful introduction to Tanning and her work, including Tanning creation of sets and costumes for the ballet and her writing, both prose and poetry. Mahon wrote two of the four catalogue essays, one in lieu of an introduction to Tanning’s life and work, “Behind the Door, Another Invisible Door,” and one to mark Tanning’s turn towards sculpture later in her career, “Life is Something Else: *Chambre 202*, *Hôtel du Pavot*.” These definitive analyses are supplemented by an essay on Tanning’s work for the ballet by Idoia Murga Castro and a closing essay on Tanning’s legacies in modern and contemporary art by co-curator for the Tate Modern exhibition Ann Coxon. Mahon’s essays skillfully situate Tanning as an artist throughout her life, from her childhood in the American Midwest to her life in New York City followed by the life as a surrealist she enjoyed with Max Ernst up to his death in 1976. Tanning continued making sculpture and painting for at least 20 more years. The last work in the catalogue, *Crepuscula glacialis* from her flower series, dates from 1997. Mahon brings great detail and precision to her two essays and builds on Tanning’s life to clarify the lively intellectual energy that informed Tanning’s life’s work, so expertly displayed in the exhibition and revealed in the catalogue. Mahon captures how Tanning’s paintings and sculptures share a “sense that art, life and love are fragile whilst still paying homage to all that the imagination can reveal” (65). Tanning chafed at the fate of being known primarily as the wife of a famous artist in her autobiographies and interviews, at not receiving the recognition she knew she deserved. These essays by Mahon and the exhibition she mounted in two major European capitals finally right the wrong Tanning felt for so long by placing her in the spotlight of her own stories—those she energetically invented and realized in art for over 70 years and the full and documented story of her own life.

If Tanning would have been gratified by the exhibition and catalogue by Alyce Mahon, she would have been delighted to read Victoria Carruthers’ new book, *Dorothea Tanning, Transformations* (2020). Carruthers knew Tanning for at least a decade and stayed in her in New York City apartment when she came to visit.

Carruthers has captured the poetry of Tanning's work, the multiple layers that spark the illusion of metamorphic movement and light within the paintings. As Carruthers notes in her introduction, "Tanning was interested in the fluid and hybrid spaces in between realities: these are the places of infinite possibility as they act as metaphors for the imaginative and creative process itself" (5). This is an important work of scholarship for the way Carruthers follows Tanning's poetic trajectory from realistic representations of fantastic dreamt and imagined realities to transformative representations of bodies in full mutation. Tanning's painted bodies shape-shift through multiple energies, emotions and inner worlds, all the while transfused with translucent light and glowing color, as though grasping to catch and pull the viewer in. As Carruthers acutely observes: "For Tanning, painting is the catalyst for the creation of ultra-receptive imaginative states in which both artist and viewer can simultaneously cohabit" (145).

Carruthers follows the chronology of Tanning's life and work in a narrative that is deeply informed by the scholarship reflected in the select bibliography and by conversations and interviews that took place over many years. Her writing is illuminated by her knowledge and appreciation of Tanning's work and it is greatly enhanced by the beauty of the publication. Lund Humphries has made a gorgeous book throughout which the images proliferate in rich color allowing the luxuriousness of the reproductions to testify to the quality, quantity, and variety of Tanning's oeuvre, created over a lifetime informed by literature and passionately dedicated to art. Carruthers' readings of the paintings are highly informed by the books Tanning loved, from the gothic tales of Ann Radcliffe to the realist fiction of Gustave Flaubert, and by Tanning's own writings, both prose and the poetry she began to publish late in life when the physical demands of painting became too difficult. Carruthers is thorough in her study of the ensemble of Tanning's work, from her best known paintings and soft sculptures to her costume designs for ballet and the less well-known works on paper, drawings, collages, and prints.

Both of these books meditate on Tanning's obsessive return to doors, thresholds, and the liminal spaces that define transformation. Carruthers cites a 1974 interview with Alain Jouffroy in which Tanning states revealingly, "the mirror for me is a door" (5). Mahon cites Tanning in the same interview observing that "enigma is a very healthy thing, because it encourages the viewer to look beyond the obvious and commonplace" (15). Mahon and Carruthers both achieve the rewarding conclusion that Tanning's work is hard to categorize because she made it so. They invite the viewer and reader to pay attention to the invitation that always existed in Tanning's paintings, sculptures, books and poems—to come close, touch, and be changed, as though experiencing a close encounter not merely with a work of art but with a living being.