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Visiones desde el Desierto. Las Metamorfosis de Dorothea Tanning

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Visions from the Desert. The Metamorphoses of Dorothea Tanning

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Abstract

This paper offers an overview of the oeuvre of Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012) based on the iconography and hermeneutics of images relating to identity, trauma and violence. Tanning was not only a painter, but also a sculptor, writer, poet and outstanding chess player, who single-handedly pursued her artistic career through the best part of the twentieth century until her death. In addition, reference will be made to artists with links to Surrealism, such as Leonora Carrington, Dora Maar, Maya Deren and Louise Bourgeois, in order to frame the aspects discussed here in a wider context of female artists. Thus, Tanning will serve as a paradigmatic example of a sensitivity tending towards the mysterious, the occult and trauma in general.

Keywords: Dorothea Tanning, Surrealism, mystery, trauma, identity



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Resumen

Este artículo plantea una visión de la obra de Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012) a partir de la iconografía y de la hermenéutica de las imágenes relacionadas con la identidad, el trauma y la violencia. Artista poco conocida de la época tardía del surrealismo: pintora, pero también escultora, escritora, poeta, gran jugadora de ajedrez, y que recorre solitariamente algunas décadas del arte del siglo XX hasta su muerte. Asimismo, artistas con vínculos con el surrealismo serán citadas en este artículo, como Leonora Carrington, Dora Maar, Maya Deren o Louise Bourgeois, para situar las coordenadas comentadas dentro de una corriente más amplia de mujeres artistas. Tanning es el ejemplo paradigmático de una sensibilidad con querencia por lo misterioso, el ocultismo o por las obras del trauma en un sentido más general.

Palabras clave: Dorothea Tanning, Surrealismo, misterio, trauma, identidad

Tanning's imaginary is spectral, constantly blurring, metamorphosing. In her oeuvre, she has left footprints, fleeting images, silhouettes of memories: of an always present (and sometimes disturbing) childhood, of her anguish, insomnia and irony, all begging certain questions. "Obsessions come to the surface as marks that can't be erased. My paintings, and lastly my sculptures, are part of the same search, with the same discoveries, the same storms, the same mad laughter, suffering and rebirth" (Jouffroy, 1993). In a photographic self-portrait entitled, "The Artist as a Dog" (1967) (Figure 1), she superimposes the head of her terrier on her own. This photographic collage evokes the metamorphosis and the mask, common reminiscences, since they are one of the main manifestations of the twentieth-century female self-portrait, from Claude Cahun to Cindy Sherman.



Figure 1. Tanning, D. (1967). *The Artist as a Dog*. From <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/401/>

At the same time and linked to the above, this image poses a question of identity, addressed by the majority of contemporary artists. She herself writes, "It's hard to be always the same person," before adding, "For me, a

biography, if not an outrageous lie, is, at best, a distorted mirror” (Jouffroy, 1993, p. 51). In this mirror, what the spectator can see is a glittering veil, a horror vacui which she would invoke in her paintings and in the manifestation of her inner world inhabited by intensity and nightmares. The fluid element of identity is one of the linchpins of her reflection and her work.

In this regard, she notes:

But what is a portrait? Is it a mystery and revelation, conscious and unconscious, poetry and madness? Is it an angel, a demon, a hero, a child-eater, a ruin, a romantic, a monster, a whore? Is it a miracle or a poison? I believe that a portrait, particularly a self-portrait, should be somehow, all of these things and many more. (Janis, 1944, p. 107)

Tanning’s life began in Galesburg, a small town in Illinois, in Middle America, in 1910. She spent her childhood there, an isolated place in which she ironically quipped, “nothing happened but the wallpaper” (Tanning, 1977, p. 34). As she herself wrote in her memoirs *Between Lives*, “My early memories surfaced, wavered through time, riled the stream—floated forgotten fantasies rising in murky fluids” (Tanning, 2001, p. 16).

In her numerous autobiographical writings, Tanning mentions a moment in particular: on a very windy day, a veritable hurricane blew down three huge poplar trees in front of her house. Unlike her terrified mother, for her it was a theophany, she had been reborn. As a result, she pondered on what she called “the seven spectral perils” which she would illustrate in a series produced in 1950 and which would accompany her for the rest of her life. She lists them as follows: “1. The peril of angels and geniuses; 2. The peril of flexible cruelties; 3. The peril of the square root; 4. The peril of joining the immortals; 5. The peril of calm, the sepulchral hours of the day; 6. The peril of the sea on the floor; and 7. The peril of white” (Tanning, 1977).

Galesburg was a remote place on the Great Plains, where “Everything glares, so that the street and shops seem to be simmering in a desert hallucination, a mirage without the sand in it [...]. In my white shoes and organdie dress. Downtown heat flings up a shimmery veil from the pavement bubbles and our heels indent its black tar like miniature horseshoes” (Tanning, 2001, p. 19). In that context of small-town America, it was easy to dream, to fuel her prodigious imagination creating fairy stories featuring monsters and other strange creatures impossible to observe in physical reality (Gruen, 1991, p. 187). Max Ernst asserted that wonderland was Tanning’s home country (Ernst, 1982, p. 262).

Imprints, such as those of the horseshoes of the last quote, are a presence, a phantasmal image of ourselves, which invokes an absence. Presence and absence, together. Where are we? Since Peirce, many have written about this type of art based on the hint of the real, metaphorised by the imprint. Yet, the surrealist imprint, also present in the oeuvre of Joan Miró, for example, would be more akin to that of Pleistocene cave art.

Returning to the point about presence and absence together, in several interviews with Tanning it is possible to note the influence of the first of *The Letters of the Seer* written by Rimbaud (so loved by the Surrealists), since she feels that the real is somewhere else and that she does not fully belong to this world. In her writings, Tanning's footprints have become the hoof prints of a horse. For her part, Dora Maar, another artist linked to Surrealism, also depicted footprints, but in this case her own in the sand—*Empreintes de pieds sur le sable* (1931) (Figure 2)—in which they challenge an image on the threshold of the visible.



Figure 2. Maar, D. (1931). *Empreintes de pieds sur le sable*. From https://1.bp.blogspot.com/_yGhhoxqr3uE/TKqCbCn4jRI/AAAAAAAAAB5w/1Fj-rOMA7ik/s1600/Empreintes+de+pieds+sur+le+sable+1931.jpg

The works that Tanning produced in the 1940s refer to the aforementioned world of childhood. In *Concerning Wishes* (1942) (which has since disappeared), she depicts hair for the first time, along with a number of spheres, an important aspect of one of her obsessions: the woman whose body is covered with mathematical equations and whose infinitely long hair has, like a torrent of water, left a furrow in each step of the staircase that she has just descended. A recurrent motif in her work, Maar also depicted hair like running water, enclosed in a bottle, or like a sea on which to navigate, in a number of photographs that she took for Pétrole Hahn during the 1930s (1934-35) (Figure 3). Another variation on the theme is hair resembling a fountain, an inverted image that suspends the perception of the body (a non-existent one), on which Man Ray, another colleague sharing her concerns and artistic sensitivity, also worked in *Woman with Long Hair* (1929) (Figure 4). It is also the image of excrement, of that which flows.



Figure 3. Maar. D. (1934-35). Pétrole Hahn. From <http://www.unepageblanche.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/dora-maar-petrol-hahn.jpg>



Figure 4. Man Ray. (1929). Woman with Long Hair. From <https://www.wikiart.org/en/man-ray/woman-with-long-hair-1929>

Tanning’s obsession with hair—which would appear in many of her works—also becomes a weightless world enclosed in nightmarish interiors. In one of her most important works, *Children’s Game* (1942)—which resembles a page out of a children’s picture book of the period—she depicts a harrowing scene that she would also repeat at the end of her life. Two girls are stripping wallpaper off a wall from which bodies emerge, the sphincter of one of which is swallowing the hair of one of the girls, trapping her in that long dark passageway. It is probably in this work in which the greatest amount of both head and pubic hair appears (on the other hand, omnipresent in her oeuvre). Behind the conventional appearance of the wallpaper lurks another occult world: parallel worlds “under the veneered surface of normality” (Carruthers, 2011, pp. 145-146). What is unsettling about these dreamlike works is the way in which things embody the uncertain and the undetermined. About occults worlds, Tanning claimed that occult is something astonishing (Morley, 1990, p. 43).

Consequently, it is possible to broach another of the central aspects of Surrealism: the tribute to imagination and the fantastic. In some of the first paragraphs of his First Manifesto of Surrealism, André Breton reflects on “beloved imagination” (Breton, 1969, pp. 4-5), while in his Second Manifesto of Surrealism he draws parallels between the Philosophers’ Stone and imagination; this faculty allows for a poetical liberation of that which has been constrained by reason; alchemists and surrealists, alike, have rode the wave of imagination, in a liberation of the mind conditioned by centuries of rationalist domestication (Breton, 1969, pp. 198-199; secondary source: Lepetit, 2014, pp. 221-222).

In 1936, Tanning discovered the Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism Exhibition, organised by Alfred Baar at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. This exhibition shocked her to the core, for according to her own words, ‘Here is the limitless expanse of POSSIBILITY [...] From that day “aberrance” was for me a meaningless three syllables [...] My own drawings, technically timid scraps of old obsessions, stayed underground.’

In *Voltage* (1942) (Figure 5), a braid of hair emerges from the nipple of one of the breasts of a faceless woman. “Me, eating my hair,” Tanning wrote in a poem (“Lucky”, in Tanning, 2011), in which there is reference to autophagy, to the “scared evil”. For María Zambrano, “eating oneself” is rooted in the ancient concept of love; a love that devours itself, that destroys itself before its object until reducing it to dust (Zambrano, 1989, p. 162). But in this painting, the faceless woman also holds a pair of heterotrophic eyes (namely, isolated, displaced eyes) in her right hand (Balsach, 2007, pp. 119-131). Eyes that stare. This painting refers to vision, as in the Ferrarese Quattrocento painter Francesco del Cossa’s *Santa Lucía* (1470) (Figure 6), depicting the martyr with her eyes gouged, like those of Oedipus, converted into a flower, which she holds in her left hand. The references to the Trecento and the Quattrocento are by no means trivial ones, since they were held in high esteem by Tanning and Carrington (On Carrington, see Aberth, 2004, p. 19 y 68).



Figure 5. Tanning, D. (1952). Voltage. From https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/58_tanning-dorothea_voltage-1942-web.jpg



Figure 6. Del Cossa, F. (1470). *Santa Lucia* (Detail). From [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_del_Cossa_a,_santa_lucia,_dal_polittico_griffoni,_1472-73_dettaglio_02.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_del_Cossa,_santa_lucia,_dal_polittico_griffoni,_1472-73_dettaglio_02.JPG)

The Double in the Mirror

The previous section has concluded with heterotrophic eyes, for, as with hair, are one of the most frequent symbolic elements in the artist's lexicon. For Tanning, eyes also have the shape of sunflowers, as they appear in one of the aforementioned prints comprising the 'Seven Spectral Perils' series, in this case the *Sixth Peril* (1950), in which the flower has been transformed into the reticule of an insect eye, enlarged, prepared to be devoured. According to Victoria Carruthers, the artist would have used this flower as a symbol of menace and, at the same time, seduction (Carruthers, 2011, pp. 146-147), a contradictory combination much to the taste of the surrealists.

In another work, *The Mirror* (1951), the spectator encounters a *mise en abyme* in which there are several picture planes: a large sunflower enclosing a strange being, a woman metamorphosed into a plant who is looking at herself in a mirror which is, in turn, a sunflower; a large mirror-eye-sunflower. It can be hazarded that this same relationship is reflected in increasingly smaller (and larger) versions of eyes, women and sunflower mirrors. We are enclosed in the mechanism of vision without it reflecting any image. In an interview with Alain Jouffroy, Tanning replied,

I've been trying for a long time to deal with the figures that emerge on the canvas. Time is needed to know them. In the years, I was painting our side of the mirror—the mirror for me is a door—but I think that I've gone over, to a place where one no longer faces identities at all. One looks at them somewhat obliquely, slyly. To capture the moment, to accept it with all its complex identities. (Jouffroy, 1993, p. 57)

Apparently, Galensburg was surrounded by sunflower fields, an aspect that is depicted in *Sunflower Landscape* (1943), another of the artist's works.

According to Tanning's memoirs, the next significant recollections for the purpose of this paper date back to 1942, the year that she met Max Ernst in New York, with whom she would live for 35 years until the death of the French painter.

Max Ernst was preparing an exhibition on surrealist women for Peggy Guggenheim and, recommended by the gallerist Julian Lévy, went to meet Tanning. Within a week, Ernst had moved into to her study on East 58th Street in New York. They got married four years later in 1946, in a dual wedding ceremony with Man Ray and Juliet Browner, their great friends.

Unlike Man Ray, with whom they enjoyed a long friendship, Tanning and Ernst did not get on well with André Breton. Their close friends in their

artistic circle were Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell, plus—all younger than the couple—John Cage, Merce Cunningham and the choreographer George Balanchine, for whom they designed the scenery and costumes for the ballets *The Night Shadow* (1946) and *Bayou* (1951), performed by Les Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo.

It was her self-portrait, *Birthday* (1942) (Figure 7)—also the title of one of her autobiographical writings—which would mark the beginning of her relationship with Ernst. Tanning looks at us, bare-breasted, attired in timeless cloths with tangled roots hanging from her skirt and a winged, lemur-like creature at her feet. The roots: inverted hair. The winged creature refers to the power of dreams, of the unconscious. *Birthday* could be compared with Carrington's *Self-Portrait (À l'Auberge du cheval d'aube)*. Both share some elements.

Tanning writes:

I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors [...] crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless doors. Perhaps in a way it was a talisman for the things that were happening, an iteration of quiet event, line densities wrought in a crystal paperweight of time. (Tanning, 1986, p. 14)

Doors would be one of the most important symbolic elements in Tanning's paintings. They appear in *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1947) (Figure 8), like the title of Mozart's famous serenade: three of the four doors are shut, while a ray of light emerges from a crack in the last door, with a large sunflower-eye in the centre. Doors are also depicted in *Portafolio* (1946) and *Lettre d'amour* (1948), in which the pages of the open book are full of locks, which formally become heads of hair, windows and keyholes. "Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait" (Kafka, 1953, p. 229). The drapery on the floor evokes the sea, another of Tanning's 'spectral perils', in a work clearly characterised by both desire and fear, once she had learned "that I could transfer my inmost desires and enigmas to pictures that could be read like books" (Tanning, 2001, p. 213).



Figure 7. Tanning. D. (1942).
Birthday. From

<https://www.wikiart.org/es/dorothea-tanning/birthday-1942>

To speak of doors and keys is to talk about being, as in *A Mrs. Radcliffe Called Today* (1944). What can be observed are empty architectures. Yet again, suspended hair, women without faces or metamorphosed into trees, as can be seen in the bottom left-hand corner. This figure in the foreground alludes to Bernini's sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* (1625), in which the sculptor represented the nymph at the moment of her transformation into a laurel tree, as Ovid tells us in *Metamorphoses*:

[...] a heavy numbness grips her limbs, thin bark begins to gird her tender frame, her hair is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs; her feet—so keen to race before—are now held fast by sluggish roots; the girl's head vanishes, becoming a treetop. All that is left of Daphne is her radiance. (Mandelbaum, 1993, p. 24)

In 1945, Robert Motherwell took the famous photo of Tanning as Daphne (Figure 9), with her hair converted into laurel, at that moment of transformation.



Figure 8. Tanning, D. (1947). *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. From <https://www.wikiart.org/es/dorothea-tanning/eine-kleine-nachtmusik-1943/>



Figure 9. Motherwell, R. (1945). *Daphne*. From <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/621/>

But Daphne would also be converted into a monster. In *Lumière du foyer* (1952), the glow of the fire on the threshold of the image illuminates a metamorphosed figure. When painting, Tanning's mind was in a state of 'perpetual vertigo'. 'Everything is a miracle,' she writes, 'iridescent, obsessive and alive. Everything is in motion. Also, behind the invisible door (doors), another door. You might say I lead a double life. Or a triple or multiple life. In fact, outside my studio, I am not who I pretend to be. There is no showing who one really is.' Painting—a 'wrenching, exalted, pulverising process'—led to the realisation of an inner vision, 'the kind that shifts behind your eyes in and out of focus'. This image also corresponds to other pictures that invoke what appears to be unsustainable, as in *Intérieur* (1953). Indescribable, monstrous beings that conjure night, fire, isolation. She wrote that she did not want there to be any escape from her paintings. "My wish: to make a trap (picture) with no exit at all, either for you or for me" (Tanning, 2001, p. 327).

The Guest Room (1952) (Figure 10), one of her most well-known works, offers an unsettling vision of what can appear behind a door. The door of a room opens to show us what is inside. This painting alludes to nightmares: a dreamlike image of darkness versus the fragile image of puberty in a static narrative. The blindfolded double of the girls stands outside, a dual image that looks at us and which forms part of the (still) unspeakable. The mother—is she the mother?—in bed with a doll or a manikin; two hooded, faceless individuals. On the table, there are four egg cups, their eggs eaten, with dirty bits of shell strewn on the floor. The nascent is shown in something already born that does not belong to us. As Carruthers notes, in this painting it alludes to fairy tales and gothic narratives, the enigmatic and the sinister converge here, an ominous work with connotations of sexual initiation (Carruthers, 2011, pp. 141-142). On the gothic fiction, the artist asserted to be fascinated with those novels (Morley, 1990, p. 43).

There is nothing more frightening than works depicting women confronting each other when revealing the innermost recesses of their beings. As Rimbaud remarked in a letter that he wrote to Georges Izambard in 1871,

When the endless servitude of woman is broken, when she lives for and by herself, man—heretofore abominable—having given her her release, she too will be a poet! Women will find some of the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from our own?—She will discover strange, unfathomable, repulsive, and delicious things; we will take them, we will understand them. (Rimbaud, 1966, p. 309)

The motif of this picture reappears in one of the works produced by her partner Ernst. Hans Richter, the German film director living in exile in the USA, directed an experimental film, *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (Hans Richter, 1947) (Figure 11), with the participation of a number of surrealist and dadaist artists who had emigrated to the USA. In his film, Richter included several episodes authored by these artists, such as Alexander Calder, Fernand Léger, Man Ray and Ernst himself. In his episode, 'Desire', Ernst used an image close to Tanning's *The Guest Room*. An adolescent girl is asleep dreaming on the bed, from under which Ernst himself pulls out two dead bodies, the second being that of Tanning, amidst a dazzling light and smoke. It is some of the little footage of Tanning that has come down to us. Precisely, it is the artist playing the role of a dead woman and dream figure.

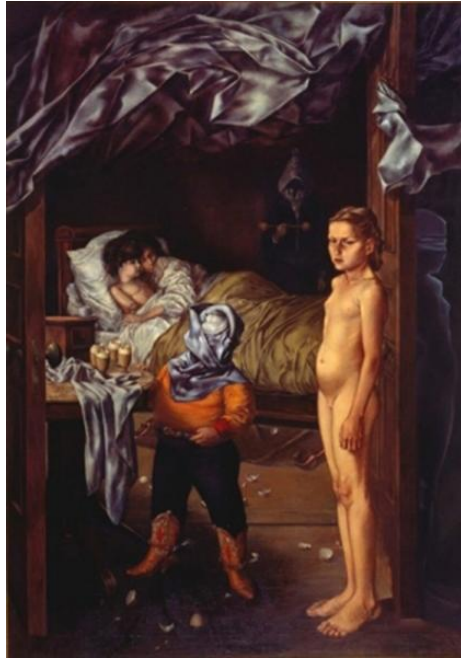


Figure 10. Tanning, D. (1952). *The Guest Room*. From <https://www.wikiart.org/es/dorothea-tanning/the-guest-room-1952>



Figure 11. Richter, H. (1947). Film Frame of *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (detail). From <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/520>

Death and the Maiden

Like a premonition that would open new doors, but with the same obsession, Tanning's painting would focus on a new theme as from 1953. *Death and the Maiden* (1953) (Figure 12) is the title of one of the fundamental works of that new imaginary, taking up where the previous one had left off. The painting features an open door with two defined figures in clearer tones inside, against an empty background. "Death's face, which I fear, looks out at me from many of my pictures," the artist remarks in her memoirs (Tanning, 2001, p. 336).

Yet again, the image of puberty: a girl—with her eyes covered by the flying drapery—is being lifted by a man with his eyes shut. Together they form a sole figure, as in *Tableau Vivant* (1954), in which death is now represented by a terrier, also a mundane image, that has taken on monstrous proportions. Heimlich/Unheimlich, the formula for the sinister defined by Sigmund Freud in 'The "Uncanny"' (1955 [1919]), and also a reference to T. S. Eliot and his poem, 'Lines to a Yorkshire Terrier', when he writes, "[...] Jellicle cats and dogs all must / Like undertakers, come to dust" (Eliot, in Ricks and McCue, 2015, p. 1197).

‘Death and the Maiden’ is a theme of European art with many ramifications, from the works of the German painter Hans Baldung Grien (1517) to Franz Schubert’s famous quartet. It originates from the representation of the *Danse Macabre*, a medieval allegorical genre that during the Renaissance acquired sexual undertones. The woman symbolises the *creatrix*, the bearer of life, while the man (the masculine) plays the role of death. These images also combine the relationship between sexuality, knowledge (wisdom) and death: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. The same can be said of Bible verses, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the expulsion from Paradise, plus death as possession. Insofar as it is one of the motifs and themes most often employed in different historical periods, it is a complex issue that has been resorted to time and again. Another outstanding use to which it has been put is to be found in Expressionism, in which it was referred to by painters such as Edvard Munch and Paul Klee.



Figure 12. Tanning, D. (1953). *Death and the Maiden*. From <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/77>

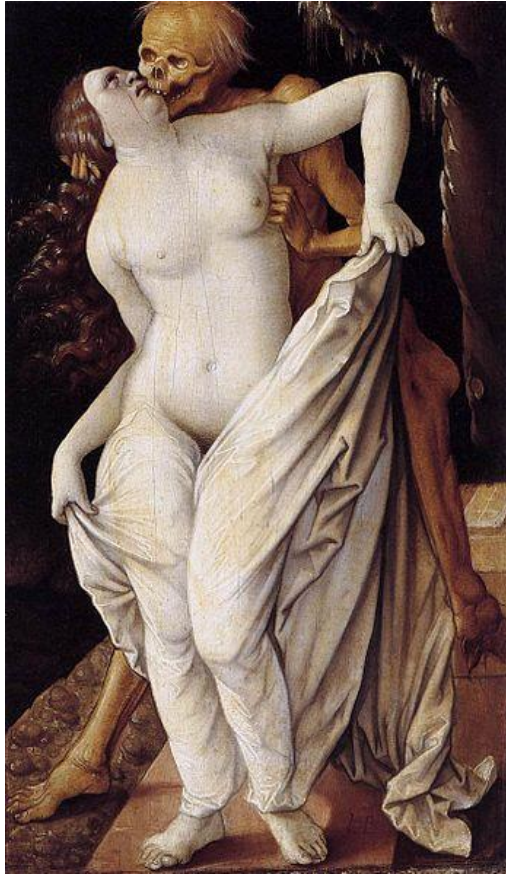


Figure 13. Baldung Grien, H. (1517). *Death and the Maiden*. From https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Baldung_-_Death_and_the_Maiden_-_WGA01190.jpg

In *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (1517) (Figure 13), another variation on the theme by Baldung Grien, death seizes the maiden by the hair in a peculiar embrace, an image that, as already noted, evokes one of the main elements in Tanning's symbolic corpus and one of her spectral perils. This symbolic corpus sets a language, as in other surrealists, a secret language (Janis, 1944, p. 107) close to the emblems contained in the alchemical engraving books (Lennep, 1978, pp. 259-261; Ferrer Ventosa, 2018, p. 324). The surrealists particularly appreciated those alchemical images (Bauduin, 2014, p. 20).

In a photograph taken by Lee Miller in 1946, Ernst appears seizing Tanning by the hair (Figure 14). He has been converted into a giant, a mythological cyclops in the desert landscape of Arizona. Tanning underscored one of the essential themes that characterise part of her oeuvre: “Death is dancing in the streets, death is a bear, death is a dwarf running on tiny feet” (Tanning, 2001, p. 161). Death is also the theme of the self-portrait of Meret Oppenheim, another of the artists linked to Surrealism. Entitled *Skull* (1964) (Figure 15), it is an x-ray of the profile of her head converted into a vanitas: death and the maiden at the same time. This is also the theme subtly underlying Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), a film about the two hours that a singer has to wait for the results of her biopsy. Varda is a filmmaker who has been strongly influenced by the cultural horizon of Surrealism and, above all, by the current’s female artists with poetical and symbolic qualities linked to the realism of the *Nouvelle Vague*.



Figure 14. Miller, L. (1946). *Oak Creek Canyon*. From

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/feb/08/dangerous-appetites-the-weird-wild-world-of-artist-dorothea-tanning#img-2>

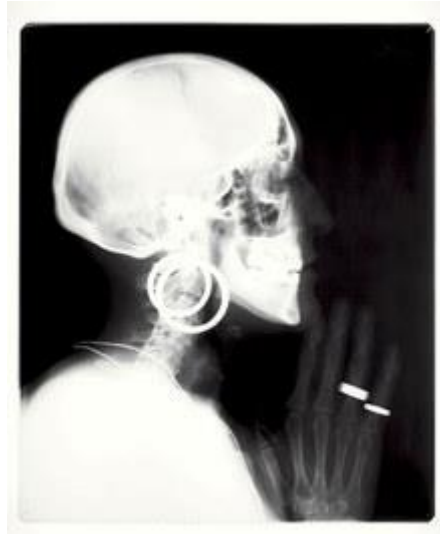


Figure 15. Oppenheim, M. (1964).
Skull. From
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M%C3%A9ret_Oppenheim_self-portrait.jpg

The theme of ‘death and the mirror’ is also to be found in Maya Deren’s films. Eleanora Derenkowsky—her real name—was a dancer, ethnographer, philosopher, journalist and the first experimental film director in the USA, in addition to one of the staunchest advocates of female cinema at the time. Deren was fascinated by the infinite possibilities offered by cinematography for reproducing the inexpressible. Very close to Tanning’s pictorial themes, her six films are pure visual poems in which, experimenting unceasingly, she invites the spectator to enter into dreamlike and unreal, mythological and ritual settings, replete with symbols open to multiple interpretations, dislocated in time and space.

In her film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Deren, 1943), the artist herself interprets her alter-ego on screen. It is a succession of dislocated shots, a circular time: keys, doors, the reference to meshes of the afternoon (i.e. the peril of calm, the sepulchral hours of the day, another of Tanning’s ‘great perils’) which enclose us in the struggle against the violence of the double, of duplication, of our countless egos, in the distorted mirror of dreams.

The Glimmer and Nothingness

Returning to the oeuvre of Tanning, what follows is a commentary of another fundamental biographical episode which would influence her work, together with some of the constituent elements of her universe. After suffering from a severe encephalitis, in 1946 Tanning and Ernst decided to move to the desert of Arizona, specifically to Sedona. The wasteland spirit and the materiality of the special light and colours of such a diaphanous atmosphere would leave their mark on Tanning's pictures.

Overhead a blue so triumphant it penetrated the darkest spaces of your brain. Underneath a ground ancient and cruel with stones, only stones, and cactus spines playing possum. The vilest creatures of nature crawled, crept, scurried, slithered, and observed you with hatred, but saved their venom while you kept your distance. (Tanning, 2001, p. 145)

Although not all of the desert of Arizona was so fearsome; in *Between Lives*, the versatile Tanning also refers to its captivating fragrances composed of dust, juniper and stones. Without forgetting the incredible immensity of the sky in that desolate place (Tanning, 2001, p. 145).

There are several photographs of the artist in Sedona, such as those with her dog Kachina and at home with Ernst taken by Miller in 1946, plus that taken by Cartier-Bresson, another of the great photographers of the period, in 1947. But the desert of Arizona also meant a reencounter with the traditions of the Hopi Indians and their Kachina dolls (so important in Surrealism) and the trip that Antonin Artaud made to Tarahumara country. It is a world that transports us to 'another' reality, replete with mysteries and rites of passage, akin to Deren's fascination for Haiti and the world of voodoo.

It was at home in the desert of Sedona (where the 'peril of white' started) where Tanning began work on a series of paintings that she would call *Insomnias*, produced between 1954 and 1965. As she herself notes in her memoirs,

after a period of painting direct, simple images as statement (*Tableau Vivant; The Blue Waltz; Death and the Maiden...*), my painted compositions began to shift and merge in an ever intensifying complexity of planes. Color was now a first prerogative: a white canvas tacked to the wall in Sedona would be blue and violet and a

certain dried-rust red. It would have to be vertical. It would also be not quite there, immediately. I wanted to lead the eye into spaces that hid, revealed, transformed all at once and where there would be some never-before-seen images, as if it had appeared with no help from me. I was very excited and called it *Insomnias*. (Tanning, 2001, pp. 213-214)

Le mal oubliée (1955) (Figure 16) reflects that atmosphere: ethereal bodies emerging and disappearing from the irrational, and multi-dimensional mental spaces. There is the figure of a boy and fragments of bodies in a prismatic space. Paintings such as *Le mal oubliée* and *Insomnias* resulted from a direct communication between the unconscious, imagination and desire. The form resembles baroque mathematics with its passion for ellipses, geometrical projections, inflections and infinite landscapes; it is an antagonist tension towards some point, as in *Tempest in Yellow* (1956) and *Midi et demi* (1957). This tension is never linear or distinct, but composed of echoes, reflections, folds and twists, metamorphosis and anamorphosis: a ‘shapeless form’.



Figure 16. Tanning, D. (1955). *Le mal oubliée*. From <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/114>

In *To the Rescue* (1965), there are equine, canine, simian forms, a sort of violent *Theriomachia*. Maenads, Bacchantes: without species or gender,

without distinguishing the act of life as that of death, positions of an incomprehensible ritual, in *Insomnias* the anatomies of naked women almost disappear in a storm of colour without ever revealing themselves as whole, tangible bodies.

Soft Sculptures

As the last of the relevant facets making up the Tanning mystery, these unsettling forms would also appear in her sculptural work.

At the end of the 1970s, Tanning produced a series of soft sculptures with very unconventional materials, without fixed structures, evoking bodily forms. Her intention was to give three-dimensionality to the pictorial universe appearing in her *Insomnias* series.

It is impossible to glimpse any recognisable form in *Pincushion to Serve as a Fetish* (1965), but its curves, protuberances and orifices suggest a living creature. Made of black velvet, with pins sticking out of it, it hints at a world of ritual and magic. Tanning would subsequently produce other figures of metamorphosed bodies, covered with cloth or tweed, such as *Nue couchée* (1970) and *Emma* (1970), yet again a literary quote, in this case a tribute to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Both refer to female sexuality in emotionally open bodies, as fragile and soft as those of living beings. According to Johanna Malt, they are the type of objects that Surrealism employs to refer to the body, regardless of whether or not the object in question contains explicit references to this (Malt, 2004, p. 113).

In Tanning's soft sculptures, distortions and contractions in the process of being transformed, such as the metamorphosis of chrysalises, as in *Myself as Never* (1969), are repeated. Parallels can be drawn between these works, which were produced at her house in Seillans, in the South of France, and those of Katharina Detzel, who was interned in the Andernach sanatorium in 1907, after sabotaging railway tracks in an act of political protest. In the 1940s, Detzel made human-sized dolls out of the string and fabric of her own mattress during her confinement. In 1958, Hans Bellmer also produced a collage with a photograph of the bound and disfigured body of the writer Unica Zürn which recalls some of Tanning's soft sculptures as regards to their most unsettling aspects. Mention should also go to Louise Bourgeois' rag sculptures, such as her self-portrait *Untitled* (1998), made of latex and dress fragments, *Arched Figure* (1999) (Figure 17), a piece associated with her works dealing with hysteria, and *Femme couteau* (2002) in which the female body and the knife form a whole, aggressor and victim *in one*.



Figure 17. Bourgeois, L. (1999). *Arched Figure*. From <https://romanroadjournal.com/louise-bourgeois-subversive-stitching/>

In Tanning's soft sculptures, such as *Canapé en temps de pluie* (1970), the bodies metamorphose into furniture, forming a alchemical *coniunctio*, as in *Tragic Table* (1970) (Figure 18), with strong sexual connotations and allusions to aggression and rape. These last two pieces would form part of her monumental work *Hotel du Pavot, Habitación 202* (1973), an installation currently housed in the collections of the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris. It depicts a nightmarish room, with bodies emerging from its walls and monstrous forms merging with the chimneypiece, trapping the spectator in this space, without an exit, in this frozen instance of aversion. What occurred in Room 202? It is a frightening space that, as before, evokes mortality (Carruthers, 2011, p. 149).

This installation leads us back to the themes discussed at the beginning of this paper, to the work *Children's Game* (1942). It is the same feeling of terror; the 'Seven Spectral Perils', discussed above, and which Tanning listed together: the peril of angels and geniuses; the peril of flexible cruelties; the peril of the square root; the peril of joining the immortals; the

peril of calm, the sepulchral hours of the day; the peril of the sea on the floor; and the peril of white.

Through them, one of the emotions that are elicited in Tanning's oeuvre becomes fully apparent: the aforesaid terror, a vital mystery that provokes a feeling ranging from vertigo to attraction, through disquiet. This is why Carruthers associates her style with romantic gothic fiction as a strategy of liberation with respect to rationalism and industrialism (Carruthers, 2011, p. 134 and ff.). Leonora Carrington advised: "Don't try to turn it into a game, into a kind of intellectual game. It's not! It's a visual world. Which is different" (Hanegraaff, 2014, pp. 101-102).



Figure 18. Tanning. D. (1970). *Tragic Table*. From <https://www.wikiart.org/es/dorothea-tanning/table-tragique-tragic-table-from-h-tel-du-pavot-chambre-202-1973>

Final Summary

These pages have had a dual objective: to offer a brief overview of the major milestones in Tanning's career and, at the same time, to note some of the principal characteristics of her oeuvre, especially the symbolic elements captivating it, judging by the number of times that they appear and because

of the psychic implications that they betray: “The master of mystery”, as Donald Kuspit calls her (1992, p. 10). There is no better way to conclude than to give Dorothea Tanning the floor, citing a number of verses from a poem by the multifaceted artist, entitled “Artist, once”, published in her book *Coming to That*:

[...]

They, hanging fire,
slow to come—to come,
out-being deep inside her,
oozing metamorphosis
in her warm dark, took
their time and promised.

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