

LONDON

Dorothea Tanning

Alison Jacques Gallery // July 11–October 9

AS EVERY GOOD student of psychoanalysis will tell you, Freud knew that a certain region of each dream lay beyond interpretation. He called this part “the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.” The previously unseen collection of Tanning’s haunted drawings, paintings, and ragged ephemera assembled in “Web of Dreams” seems to emerge from this mysterious territory.

If Tanning, who died in 2012 at the age of 101, has long appeared as a marginal figure in the history of Surrealism—typically referred to as Max Ernst’s wife, and little else—then this show signals a mighty sea change. Here’s an artist of singular gifts and intoxicating strangeness who spent 50 years attempting to capture her dreams in their full, writhing perversity. They assume many forms, including blearily expressive and anguished blurs, a sinister ink drawing of an owl that bristles with totemic menace, and the fearful *Notes for an Apocalypse*, 1978, in which two sleeping figures

wrestle in a room suffused with a woozily phosphorescent glow. The arrangement shows a remarkable sensitivity to oblique formal continuities, connecting works made decades apart by the repeated jaggedness of certain limbs and the eerie recurrence of dancing shapes.

Women always appear in conditions of gothic ecstasy, swooning from fever or twisting with fear as if they’re dreaming up the tableaux Tanning has conjured around them. The pieces with female subjects feel at once like part of a submerged autobiography, an old-school psychoanalytic game in which the women incarnate fragments of Tanning’s anima, and an account of a lifelong expedition into the depths of the unconscious. These dream paintings are necessarily obscure where too often other paintings are readily comprehensible, as the scenes that appear in our sleep rarely seem to be. But if you try to read them as expressions of madness or maternal angst, then some of their ghoulish thrill is lost too.

What Tanning knows is that the unique convulsive effect of dreams can come from something other than their weird pageantry, lying instead in uncanny atmospheric shivers and the spooky promise of horrors just beginning to coalesce. She expertly records these elusive sensations and transmits them, strangely radiant, to the waking mind. —Charlie Fox



Dorothea Tanning
Un tissu de Songes (Web of Dreams), 1973–93. Oil on canvas, 51¼ x 38¼ in.