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# LUXURY



Dorothea Tanning, *Reality*, 1973-83  
Picture: © Courtesy The Dorothea Tanning  
Foundation and Alison Jacques Gallery, London;  
Photography Michael Brzezinski

ART

## Untangling Dorothea Tanning's Web of Dreams

*A solo show of paintings and works on paper at Alison Jacques Gallery celebrates 50 years of sensuous surrealism by the late, great Dorothea Tanning*



BY LOUISA BUCK  
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“I want people to look at my art with three eyes, two outside and one inside,” declared the 83-year-old Dorothea Tanning when I interviewed her in 1993. “In our makeup there are so many conflicting elements that people aren’t aware of: civilisation has put a cork in that bottle and I’m trying to drag it out.” Sadly the wonderfully spirited Tanning is no longer with us – she died in 2012, aged 101 – but throughout [Web of Dreams](#), the current solo show of her paintings and works on paper at [Alison Jacques Gallery](#), her abiding interest in conflict, contradiction and the subconscious is strongly – and often disconcertingly – in evidence.

Web of Dreams spans more than 50 years: it opens with *Tango*, a charcoal and crayon drawing of two spikily stylised figures made in 1939, and ends with a 1989



Dorothea Tanning, *Un tissu de songes* (Web of Dreams), 1973-93

[Enlarge](#)

charcoal and pastel of the same title, in which the dancers have become infinitely more sinuous and dynamic. In between, whether in richly-executed oils or the most economic strokes of pencil and brush on paper, Tanning whips up a sensuous storm of bodily mayhem which erupts from the gallery walls as figures mix, merge and tumble, limbs cascade, lovers intertwine and naked girls enter into unholy alliances with giant dogs. “I don’t see why one shouldn’t be absolutely fascinated with the human form,” she said. “We go through life in this world envelope. Why not acknowledge that and try to say something about it?” Or, as she also put it rather more pithily: “all is libido, nicely smothered”.

In fact, freedom of the imagination and a love of manipulating the human form is about all their work has in common. Throughout her life Tanning always refused to be described as a woman, let alone a surrealist, and the paintings, drawings, collages and soft sculptures created throughout her long and prolific career (for which she received increasing recognition in the decades following Ernst’s death) share this obstinate inability to be pigeonholed.

Dorothea Tanning was born in 1910 in Galesburg, Illinois, a flat Midwestern town where, in her inimitable words, “nothing happened but the wallpaper”. Stifled by her restrictive Lutheran surroundings, she escaped into a fantasy world fuelled by hours spent in the public library devouring the likes of Carroll, Poe, Coleridge, Flaubert and Wilde. From an early age she knew she wanted to be an artist and after finding art school in Chicago too stifling, taught herself to paint by looking at Pre-Raphaelite and early Renaissance paintings in the [Chicago Institute](#), splicing their meticulous techniques with what she described as her “raging imagination”. However it wasn’t until she

moved to New York and encountered the [Museum of Modern Art](#)’s massive 1936 exhibition Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism that Tanning found her true artistic direction. “It was as if a door had opened and I was able to go through,” she remembered.



Dorothea Tanning, No contest, 1960

[Enlarge](#)

She went through, and also married one of the movement’s most famous figures, Max Ernst. They were together for more than 30 years, until Ernst’s death in 1976. “I like to think that it was my painting that seduced him,” she dryly remarked; but one of the most touching exhibits in the Jacques show in which the pages of a 1965 sketchbook

open out, concertina-like, to spell H-A-P-P-Y-B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y-D-E-A-R-M-A-X, with each page bearing a single letter accompanied by a fluid sketch of sexily embracing figures, suggests that her ability to seduce also extended beyond the paintbrush. But professionally her marriage proved a disaster. “It stained me for life. I could never have an exhibition without people saying that I was Max’s wife and that he influenced me.”



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