A Pilgrimage to Dorothea Tanning’s Arizona Studio

Ilene Dube | 25 December 2018

Dorothea Tanning, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” (1943), oil paint on canvas, 407 x 610 mm (courtesy Tate © DACS, 2018)
SEDONA, Arizona — On the Visit Sedona blog you will find Dorothea Tanning’s oft repeated quote:

“Women artists. There is no such thing — or person. It’s just as much a contradiction in terms as ‘man artist’; or ‘elephant artist.’ You may be a woman and you may be an artist, but the one is a given and the other is you.”

Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012) was one of the most original and provocative painters of the 20th century, yet her role in the international avant-garde is not as well known as it should be. *Dorothea Tanning: Behind the Door* at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, with more than 150 paintings, soft sculptures, and installation (a form she pioneered), brings new attention to the artist who was also a novelist, film collaborator, and theater designer.

Organized in conjunction with the Tate Modern, where it continues in February, the exhibition bills itself as the first major retrospective of Tanning’s work. In a short film about her life, screened at the Reina Sofia, Tanning reflects on her time in Sedona, Arizona. I set out to seek traces of her among the rocky red mountains that inspired her.

Tanning and her husband Max Ernst lived in Sedona on and off from 1943 to 1957, building a three-room rough-hewn house she named Capricorn. The “landscape of wild fantasy,” as she wrote in her autobiography, was their backyard. Sedona’s human population numbered in the few hundred at the time, so that lizards, scorpions, and snakes made up the neighborhood.

“Alone it stood, if not crooked at any rate somewhat rakish, stuck on a landscape of such stunning red and gold grandeur that its life could be only a matter of brevity, a beetle of brown boards and tarpaper roof waiting for metamorphosis,” she wrote of Capricorn in her autobiography. “Up on its hill, bifurcating the winds and rather friendly with the stars that swayed over our outdoor table like chandeliers.”

Tanning painted in the house while Ernst worked in a studio around back. Although Tanning considered herself a loner — indeed considered it a necessity to getting her work done — Capricorn hosted a steady stream of guests such as George Balanchine (for whom she designed sets and costumes), Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lee Miller, Kay Sage, Marcel Duchamp, Roland Penrose, and Dylan Thomas.

My first stop was the Sedona Arts Center, where I learned that Ernst first visited Sedona in 1941 with his son, Jimmy, and third wife, Peggy Guggenheim (Tanning was number four; their marriage lasted more than 30 years, and was the final marriage for each). Two years later Tanning and Ernst arrived in Sedona, renting a small studio space in an area that is today a large, art-inspired shopping center named Tlaquepaque. It was in Sedona that Tanning painted her masterpiece, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,” that holds an important place in the show Behind the Door. In this provocative view, two young girls with electrified hair and torn dresses, as if
empowered by an enormous sunflower, are led to a half-open door through which burning flames entice.

Tanning and Ernst were drawn back to New York in 1944 for her first New York show at Julien Levy Gallery, of surrealist paintings, for which Ernst wrote the catalogue essay. By 1946 they returned to Sedona, traveling back and forth over the years, a trailer full of artwork in tow. “In the summer of 1947, Max Ernst, exuberant and inspired by the arrival of water piped to our house (up to then we had hauled it daily from a well five miles away), began playing with cement and scrap iron with assists from box tops, eggshells, car springs, milk cartons and other detritus,” wrote Tanning in her autobiography. The result was “a monumental sculpture of regal but benign deities that consecrated our ‘garden’ and watched over its inhabitants.” Also named “Capricorn,” the sculpture is featured in a 1952 LIFE magazine photograph of Tanning and Ernst, with Sedona’s mountains in the background.

Dorothea Tanning, “Birthday” (1942), oil paint on canvas, 1022 x 648 mm (courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art © DACS, 2018)
The woman at the Sedona Arts Center’s front desk sent me to Theia’s Coffee Shop, across the street, where the barista connected me with collector, gallery owner, lecturer and musician Mark Rownd, who is at work on a book about Tanning and Ernst’s time in Sedona. He invited me to his gallery, Noyes Salon de Artes, where he has a print of Tanning’s work “Birthday,” among others.

Dorothea Tanning, “Endgame” (1944), oil paint on canvas, 430 x 430 mm (Collection of Harold & Gertrud Parker. Courtesy Gertrud V. Parker © DACS, 2018)

Rownd, who is also an artist, curated an exhibition of Tanning and Ernst’s work at the Sedona Arts Center in 2014, and recounted how the couple first met at a party in New York. Guggenheim, then married to Ernst, was curating an exhibition on 30 women of the surrealist movement, and to select artists Ernst included a studio visit with Tanning, where her bare-breasted self-portrait in front of a series of open doors sat on her easel. He suggested the title, “Birthday” and the two played a game of chess, described by Tanning as “something voluptuous, close to the bone.” Tanning become the 31st artist in the exhibition, which included Frida Kahlo, Louise Nevelson, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Leonora Carrington. Ernst left Guggenheim, and several
months later, Tanning and Ernst arrived in Sedona. In her memoir, Tanning refers to the place as “our escape hatch.”

In 1957, at the height of the McCarthy era, Ernst — a German — was denied citizenship, and the couple left Sedona for good, moving to France where they lived until Ernst died and Tanning returned to New York. Sedona had been a place for them, together. While in Tanning’s time it was just an outpost on a dirt road, Sedona has become a bustling center of tourism with art — both the making and the selling — among its main attractions. Tanning and Ernst most certainly left their mark. And the show *Behind the Door* is sure to revive interest in this significant artist.

Dorothea Tanning: *Behind the Door, Another Invisible Door* is on view through 7 January, 2019 at the Reina Sofia (Calle Santa Isabel, 52 Madrid 281012), and then at the Tate Modern (Millbank, London SW1P 4RG) from 27 February – 9 June, 2019.