

Insomnias by Charles Stuckey

From *Dorothea Tanning: Insomnias 1955–1965*. New York: Kent Gallery, 2005.

So full, so complex, so richly orchestrated with colors, the large upright painting *Insomnias* (*Insomnias*) marks both a triumph and a turning point for Dorothea Tanning. *Insomnias* and her other paintings with tempests of prismatic forms could hardly be more different from the conventionally representational works with which she first made a reputation in the 1940s as a member of the stable of artists at the legendary Julien Levy Gallery. These were realistically rendered and often self-referential images of zombie girls with long hair and shredded garments in bleak, sexually charged settings full of doors and crumpled sheets; they were part of an extraordinary and unsettling trend, introduced in the 1930s by such film-influenced artists as Fini, Balthus, Dalí, Bellmer, and Magritte in an attempt to evoke the psycho-mythic roots of human experience. I mention these other artists with all due respect to Tanning, who is understandably weary of writers like myself concerned with where to put her work historically. As she laments in the most recent version of her autobiography, *Between Lives*, “Once, looking over a two-page article about my work, I counted the names of twenty-three artists (male) including Max.”¹ (Max Ernst, that is, the master surrealist whom she wed in 1946.) I may feel obliged to go beyond twenty-three, but I will also do my best to privilege Ms. Tanning’s own commentaries.

Insomnias was begun during the winter of 1956–57 in Sedona, Arizona, where she and Ernst had established a remote base not long before their marriage. Revealed by intense, hallucinating sunlight, the vast, rocky landscape there had a considerable impact on the very different works of both artists. As Tanning recalls:

Beginning, roughly, in 1955, after a period of painting direct, simple images . . .
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 image, as if it had appeared with no help from me. I was very excited and called it *Insomnias*.²

As if shifting poses in some incomprehensible ritual, the naked female anatomies in *Insomnias* mostly disappear into a color storm without revealing themselves as full tangible entities. Although in its specific details *Insomnias* may be a never-before-seen image, understood more broadly as the conjuration of supernatural concupiscence, as an Ovidian cloudscape of heavenly love, Tanning's painting amounts to an ambitious meditation on the traditions of allegorical courtly European art from Correggio to Boucher. With its tumultuous graphic rhythms, *Insomnias* might also be understood as Tanning's inadvertent recollection of visits to the Louvre and encounters with works like Delacroix's 1827, ultra-Romantic *Death of Sardanapalus*, so overheated with bedroom colors. Coincidentally, Delacroix's Paris studio was located not far from where Tanning and Ernst settled in 1953 on the Left Bank. Indeed no work that I can recall better prefigures Tanning's *Insomnias* than a watercolor by Delacroix (now in the Louvre) showing his own disheveled bed vacated from sleeplessness as a self-portrait by proxy, a matrix for the unsettling apparitions of genius. In terms of abstract color drama, Tanning's paintings from these years should also be considered as something like reincarnations of late pastels by Delacroix's great admirer Degas, most of all those that depict women stepping out of tubs to dry their bodies in settings chaotic with mismatched fabrics.

Among colors, Tanning emphasized off-whites, sallow, bruised, blushing. With all their exquisitely tinted facets, some of her works from this period could be considered as sheet-scapes or shroud-scapes, extending the crystalline polar expanses of crumpled bedclothes included in several of her works from the 1940s. Keeping such disarrayed fabrics in mind, it is well worth comparing the convoluted settings of Tanning's paintings of the mid-50s to what Aldous Huxley described in 1954 in *The Doors of Perception* as "the luxuriant development of drapery as a major theme of all the plastic arts." Referring to works by Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, Bernini, El Greco, and Watteau, Huxley wrote that "draperies are living hieroglyphs that stand in some peculiarly expressive way for the unfathomable mystery of pure being."³

Covering and uncovering seem to be at issue in remarks about emergence made by Tanning during a 1974 interview with the French critic Alain Jouffroy: "I've been trying for a long time to deal with the figures that emerge on the canvas. . . . One looks at them somewhat slyly."⁴ Tanning's remarks about her painted figures emerging from the canvas vaguely recall Michelangelo's well-known concept that hidden figures "trapped" in blocks of stone can be perceived and liberated by genius. (It seems worthwhile to mention Michelangelo because Tanning in the 1970s eventually opted to express her ideas about emergence and entrapment in remarkable part-figure-part-background sculptures, made with fabrics.) Judging from a brilliant transitional work like *Nue endormie (Sleeping Nude)* of 1954, Tanning was concerned with the apparitional relationship between three-dimensional form and its two-dimensional skin: the eyes of a nude sleeper are covered with what seem like her own shed skins, or discarded images of herself, here liberated into some poetic mental realm. While there is little if any visual resemblance between works by Tanning and 1950s works by so-called New York School artists, it seems worth pointing out the close conceptual relationship between *Nue endormie* and de

Kooning's *Woman* paintings of the early 50s or Krasner's slightly later collage paintings, which incorporate bits of drawings, imprints, or rejected earlier paintings into complexly layered works about the many revisions and reconsiderations compelled by artistic imagination.

Tanning's paintings of 1955 and 1956, like *Le Mal oublié (The Ill Forgotten)* or *Tempête en jaune (Tempest in Yellow)*, inevitably feature the exquisitely rendered head of a partially visible figure otherwise submerged, like a bud inside a rose, in a strange infinity of glowing petal shapes, some few of them suggestive of the same head evaporating into the wind or slowly consolidating from gaseous formlessness. In a rather obvious way these works by Tanning recall the masterpiece of her friend Pavel Tchelitchew, who had spent the summer of 1947 outside Sedona. Tchelitchew's *Hide and Seek* of 1942 is a pulsating allegory of birth and sexual awakening full of phantom heads. Like Tchelitchew's highly acclaimed painting, or like the similarly hybrid figure-landscape paintings made by Masson and Lam in New York during World War II, Tanning's works of the middle to late 1950s might best be described as "inscapes." I take this term from the title for a 1939 painting by Matta (now in the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco) where the molten sky spanning an otherworldly landscape is full of cranial apparitions, as if it provided an account of an infinite exterior as registered and projected inside the brain, a macrocosm superimposed within a microcosm.

Of course, the inexhaustible twentieth-century genre of "inscape" was originally established by the Cubists and Futurists before World War I. Without any disregard for early works in this mode by Chagall, Delaunay, and Leger, for Tanning, as for Matta, the fountainhead of the "inscape" genre was their friend Duchamp, in particular his 1911 and 1912 paintings of chess matches, culminating in *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*. But in the 1940s, as Tanning established her own artistic identity, it was her ubiquitous contemporary

Matta who most impressively demonstrated the intensity and scope of the “inscape” genre. Unstinting in her praise, Tanning recalls how “[Matta’s] ebullience and his vision dazzled our own young artists, merging in his big canvases the architecture of outer space with the conceits or earthly technologies.”⁵ Among the artists associated with the Julien Levy Gallery, it was of course Gorky who most immediately responded to Matta’s example, with riotous abstract aggregations of shapes suggestive of body and landscape details, all writhing in otherworldly red and yellow atmospheres.

Tanning’s own response to Matta coincided with his return to Paris in 1954, where he extended the “inscape” genre in cosmic twilight fantasies replete with floating screen shapes as antic references to his enthusiasm for projected disembodied cinema images traveling through empty space. A cinematic mood, although less literal, also pervades these paintings of Tanning’s inhabited by pallid, even ghostly, images as much “of” as “in” space. In both *Nauffrage en rose* (*Shipwreck in Pink*), 1958, and *Tamerlan* (*Tamarlane*), 1959, Tanning indicated traces of a large spectral head, wide-eyed in a corner of the foreground, as if to suggest the faint presence of a witness watching formlessness for evidence of forms taking shape. These large ghost heads, of course, have counterparts in the traces of heads included in some of the famous Rayographs by Tanning’s old friend Man Ray, who since 1951 had expatriated himself to Paris, where he had lived before World War II. Man Ray’s ghostly apparitions were disturbing and provocative when they were first published shortly after World War I. No wonder that in the years following the second World War, with its still more nightmarish atrocities, Tanning and other veteran surrealists had an equal concern for such fragile, uncertain, and hence elegiac images. “Death’s face, which I fear, looks out at me from many of my pictures,” Tanning confided in her autobiography.⁶ Whether hellish or heavenly, Tanning’s pale glowing images of etherealized

bodies emerging from and disappearing into irrational, seemingly multidimensional mindspaces are among the most ambitious and sophisticated paintings to address the dilemmas of imagination and culture in a new atomic, space-race age. The artist seemingly cast herself as a Virgil extending a hand to any Dante with eyes to see: “What am I after? A long time ago I said that I want to seduce by means of imperceptible passages from one reality to another. The viewer is caught in a net from which there is no escape save by going through the whole picture until he comes to the exit. My wish: to make a trap (picture) with no exit at all either for you or for me.”⁷

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¹ Dorothea Tanning. *Between Lives*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001, p. 280.

² *Between Lives*, pp. 213–14.

³ Aldous Huxley. *The Doors of Perception*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1954, p. **TK**.

⁴ Dorothea Tanning. Exhibition catalogue. Malmö, Sweden: Malmö Konsthall, 1993, p. 57.

⁵ *Between Lives*, p. 177.

⁶ *Between Lives*, p. 336.

⁷ *Between Lives*, p. 327.