Lecture summary:

American artist Dorothea Tanning was born in Galesburg Illinois in 1910 and died in New York in 2012. Her intensely creative life produced a body of highly experimental work spanning more than 70 years which included: paintings; drawings; collage; lithographs; etchings; sculpture; installations; textiles; gold jewellery; and, costume and set designs for theatre and ballet. In 1999, after the rigours of oil painting became too physically demanding, she turned her hand to writing, producing two volumes of award winning poetry, a novel entitled *Chasm* and a memoir, *Between Lives*. Her work was influenced by the highly charged psychodramas of gothic and other fiction that she loved reading in her younger years; and, by the physical and imaginative intensities of her own childhood experiences. But she was most profoundly influenced by surrealism and a surrealist ‘sensibility’ pervaded her work. Entranced by Andre Breton’s notion of ‘the marvelous’, a place of infinite imaginative possibility, her characters are often caught in states of physical, emotional or psychological transformation. Her work demonstrates a preoccupation with thresholds, liminal and transitional spaces in which fantasy, reality, sensation and imagination converge. Her iconographies: doors; doorways; everyday interiors inhabited by otherworldly forces; cloth; sunflowers; wallpaper; children; women and, dogs are repeated throughout her work but never as a simple return. Instead they shapeshift into a continuum of visual associations as the idea of one motif formally and imaginatively becomes another.

Tanning was the long-term partner and wife of Max Ernst from 1942 until his death in 1976, as well as being an active member of the avant-garde milieu both in New York and in Europe. This, along with her love of ideas, the stylistic range and depth of her work entitles Tanning to occupy an important space in the history of modernism and twentieth century art history.

Slide list:

*Birthday, 1942*, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, USA


*Children’s Games, 1942*, oil on canvas. *Private collection*

*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, 1943*, oil on canvas. Tate Modern, UK


*A Mrs Radcliffe Called Today, 1944*, oil on canvas. *Private collection*.

*Mrs Radcliffe Called Again (Left No Message), 1988*, collage with graphite, watercolour and photocopy on canson. *Private collection*.

Avatar, 1947, oil on canvas. Private collection.


Interior with Sudden Joy, 1951, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Interior, 1953, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Some Roses and their Phantoms, 1952, oil on canvas. Tate Modern, UK.

A Parisian Afternoon, 1942, oil on canvas. Private collection.


Wall figure detail from Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202, 1970.


Hotel, 1988, collage with photocopy and watercolour on paper. The Destina Foundation.


Valse bleue (The Blue Waltz), 1954, oil on canvas. Private collection.

Tableau vivant (Living Picture), 1954, oil on canvas. The Destina Foundation.

Family Portrait, 1977, oil on canvas. The Destina Foundation.


Reference:

For a comprehensive range of resources, including scholarship and a visual chronology of all Tanning’s work please visit the Dorothea Tanning Collection website at www.dorotheatanning.org.


