



2 Weaving Fantasy and Reality

Birthday and rebirth

By the summer of 1942 Tanning was thus well ensconced in the artistic circles of New York. Mixing in the world of Julien and his wife Muriel Levy, she was able to explore more deeply the surrealist 'sensibility' that she had been developing since childhood, by utilising some of the familiar visual vocabulary used by the surrealists (juxtaposition of images, dreamscapes, motifs including flowers, fantastical creatures and forms in nature) and making it distinctly her own. Tanning concentrated on the notion of transformation, the shift from one state of being to another in the context of our everyday physical and imaginative experience. She wove together the fabric of fantasy and reality, and tucked it into every corner of daily existence.

Preoccupied with these interests and immersed in the whirlwind of experience that she encountered in early 1940s New York, the artist painted what would become one of her best-known works, a self-portrait entitled *Birthday* (1942, fig.11) in which she depicts herself in the process of metamorphosis, a 'rebirth' from one state to another. Completed around her 32nd birthday, the artist stands semi-naked, her hair pinned back, and her elaborate, Elizabethan-style shirt exposing her chest and breasts. Her skirt appears to be falling away, leaving in its place a thick woody layer of spiked brambles that tumble to her bare feet. On closer inspection, this throng is in fact composed of writhing naked bodies twisting and interlocked in a fabric of woodland sprites (see fig.13) These invoke the supernatural menace often contained in the ancient stories of the natural world. The winged famulus,³⁵ crouching at Tanning's feet and strangely composed of hybrid parts, appears to be a manifestation of the fusion between reality and fantasy, the mundane and magical.

The overall impression of the figure is of a chrysalis emerging from a cocoon. Yet her elaborate shirt suggests a sense of theatre at ease with the timber floors and numerous, repeated doorways – a series of endless entrances and exits, portrayed within the confines of the apartment. As both a fusion of nature and a product of nurture/culture, this dazzling young woman stands on the threshold of an unknown, yet exciting

11.
Birthday, 1942
Oil on canvas
102.2 x 64.8 cm (40 1/4 x 25 1/2 in)
Philadelphia Museum of Art

adventure. The technical skill demonstrated in *Birthday*, its clarity and precision, typical of the surrealist style, intensifies the effect of the interwoven strands of fantasy and reality. In a statement that accompanied a reproduction of the painting in the catalogue for the 1944 exhibition entitled *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* in New York she wrote:

One way to write a secret language is to employ familiar signs, obvious and unequivocal to the human eye. For this reason I chose a brilliant fidelity to the visual object as my method in painting *Birthday*. The result is a portrait of myself, precise and unmistakable to the onlooker. But what is a portrait? Is it mystery and revelation, conscious and unconscious, poetry and madness? Is it an angel, a demon, a hero, a child-eater, a ruin, a romantic, a monster, a whore? Is it a miracle or a poison? I believe that a portrait, particularly a self-portrait, should be somehow, all of these things and many more, recorded in a secret language clad in the honesty and innocence of paint.³⁶

The notion that the inherent truth of what we see is both 'mystery and revelation', that it contains our conscious understanding but also brings with it our unconscious experiences, values, judgements and imaginings, is crucial to appreciating the whole of Tanning's work. Neither necessarily one thing nor another, and resistant to a definitive interpretation, *Birthday* encapsulates the danger of assuming a single truth about what we are seeing – even if that truth contains the authority of the self-portrait.

In 1999, the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired *Birthday*. In the brochure for the survey show, *Birthday and Beyond*, Tanning noted of the painting:

It was a modest canvas by present-day standards. But it filled my New York studio, the apartment's back room, as if it had always been there. For one thing, it was the room; I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors—all, kitchen, bathroom, studio—crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light, shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless doors. Moreover, alone and taking stock of myself, I felt a sort of immanence as if my life was revealing itself at last—real birthday.³⁷

The 'immanence' of 'a real birthday' rather than a calendar one is a sentiment that captures the multi-layered significance of the 'rebirth' that Tanning experienced in 1942. This was also the year that Max Ernst was sent by his then wife Peggy Guggenheim to look for works to be included in an exhibition that would eventually be called *31 Women*, and would run throughout January 1943 in Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century. Ernst came knocking at Tanning's door on Julien Levy's recommendation, to see if she had anything suitable for the show. Tanning herself has outlined the details of their meeting in both of her memoirs, but Ernst was so impressed by the painting, and presumably by Tanning herself, that he suggested a game of chess after spotting the

board and pieces set up in the apartment (Tanning was both an enthusiastic and highly competent player). As she has recounted, after that first meeting he never really left, and whilst this may be a slightly poetic gloss over the practicalities of the period, it is also indicative of the intensity between these two artists and gives us an insight into the type of bohemian lifestyle they would pursue. In 2009, Tanning explained that she had never liked celebrating her actual birthday and that she viewed the meeting with Ernst as her symbolic 'birthday'.³⁸ This seismic emotional and imaginative shift, this intense rebirth, was not only felt by Tanning but also by Ernst, as evidenced in his signing a letter noting 1943 as the year he 'found his true love'.

The theme of the transformative potential of the 'birthday' is more violently imagined in the 1943 short story that Tanning published in the short-lived surrealist journal *VVV*, entitled 'Blind Date'. The piece contains the familiar imagery of doors as indicators of a threshold, as well as the language of physical and psychological excess found in surrealist writing; but again, Tanning uses the metaphor of rebirth to indicate the pain, delirium and catharsis of a powerful state of creative transformation:

Today you have been born, out of abysmal sorrow and knowledge, out of symbols, destructions, warnings, wounds, pestilence, instruments sacred and obscene, spasms, defilements; out of hates, and holocausts, guts and gothic grandeurs, frenzy, crimes, visions, scorpions, secretions, love and the devil. Today you shall be married to your future.³⁹

Tanning relates the physical extremes of birth and conscious awakenings to the larger texture of the violent drama of human history. By doing this she brings together the acts of creation, procreation and destruction, showing us how easily they fold into and around each other in a continuum of life experience. She also describes an intimate account of the creative process in all its explosiveness.

The notion of the 'birthday' resurfaces multiple times in the artist's work. It symbolised an important threshold, a powerful and deeply personal transformative state rather than the celebration of mere natality. This sentiment is reflected in one of Tanning's poems published in 2002, 'Secret', in which the narrator's imaginative potential is sharpened and transformed by the secret that it is her own birthday:

On one of those birthdays of which I've had so many
I was walking home through the park from a party,

pleased with myself for not mentioning the birthday—
why hear congratulations for doing nothing but live?

The birthday was my secret with myself and gave me,
walking under all those trees, such a strong feeling of
satisfaction that everything else fell away: party sounds,

the hostess who stared and as suddenly disappeared
on seeing her husband walk in with a young(er) friend;
another guest examining garment labels in the room

where I went to leave my jacket; one of two waiters
balancing a trayful of foot-high champagne glasses;

a bee-like buzz of voices I ought to have enjoyed
but heard as foreign babble, so remote it was from

a birthday, so empty of import nothing would remain.
I got my jacket, waved from the hall, pressed *Down*.

In summer the park, for an hour or so before night,
is at its greenest, a whole implicit proposition

of green leaves, a triumph of leaves enfolding me
that day in a green intimacy so trustworthy I told

them my secret. "It's my birthday," I said out loud
before turning away to cross the avenue.⁴⁰

All the vicissitudes of everyday life – parties and chatter – fall away in the intense intimacy of the final image of the poem in which the psychic and physical reality of the narrator is enfolded in green. We get the impression that something transformative has happened before life resumes across the avenue: perhaps a meeting of the natural world and pure imagination, a quick rupture in the fabric of an everyday event in which the boundaries that separate fantasy and reality are momentarily blurred.

13. (below)
Detail of skirt from *Birthday*, 1942
Oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art



nymphs, sprites and maidens who are at once part of the natural and supernatural worlds are rendered with their hair and robes flowing into the serpentine shapes of the art nouveau style (fig.12). Tanning had been developing her own interest in hair as hybrid nature in images such as *Arizona Landscape* (1943; fig.16) and *Deirdre* (1940; fig.17), both of which use green leaves to depict 'hair' on the heads of her young women. When looking at these images, I am reminded of the artist's own recollection of drawing a figure with leaves for hair when she was seven and musing, rather humourously, that even then, she may have been a 'tiny surrealist'.⁴² In 1945, whilst she was spending the summer in Amagansett, New York, the artist Robert Motherwell captured Tanning in a photograph wearing a garland of leaves in her hair (fig.19), similar to the composition in *Deirdre* – one of a series of photographs taken whilst Tanning, Ernst and others seemed to be playfully dancing a Dionysian rite.

While flora replaces the hair on the heads of both figures in *Deirdre* and *Arizona Landscape*, in *Voltage* (1942; fig.18), the 'head' of the figure is not represented at all, leaving the hair connected to the body by a plait attached to a button-like nipple. This 'chord' of hair suggests that the long tendrils of floating blonde locks are 'plugged' into the body and therefore have a life of their own. The figure holds her eyes in one hand, as a pair on a stick handle, rendered in much the same way as a decorative Venetian mask. The same motif was used by Francesco del Cossa in his Renaissance depiction of Saint Lucia,⁴³ who, as the patron saint of sight, was often shown carrying a duplicate pair of eyes on a plate. Tanning's use of the motif is interesting given that these substitute 'eyes' are held so elegantly in the manicured hand of a figure perfectly poised on the edge of a swimming pool. They seem to be able to 'see' more than the natural eye could and certainly more than the viewer, given that they appear to be looking up at something, or someone, outside the frame high over the pool's edge. The tendril of hair itself curls into a rounded shape implying the possibility that there was once a head on the shoulders of this fashionable figure.

In *Angelic Pleasures* (1943; fig.21), Tanning plays around with the motif of hair once again, allowing it to flow into the space around each of her supernatural 'angels'. These creatures, whose hair, wings and bodies seem to be fashioned from the same tendril-like material, appear to be floating enigmatically under the vaulted ceiling of a ruined gothic-style church. Clouds float in the blue sky around the missing walls, as we look up at the strange happenings above. The fluttering hair is shape-shifting, charming yet sinister, and well known to the childhood of Tanning who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, deflected the fire and brimstone sermons of churchgoing on Sunday mornings with imaginings of angels playing mischievously in the arches above her. Another little thatch of hair is seen hanging precariously over the edge of a Juliet balcony in *A Parisian Afternoon (Hôtel du Pavot)* (1942; fig.22): the shape of its wild, twisted strands is echoed in the monstrous swirling silhouettes of the poplar trees that cast dark shadows into the cobbled street. There is a still, enigmatic atmosphere in this streetscape, accentuated by a solitary young girl who looks up at the façade of the 'Hôtel du Pavot' (the name given

13. (below)
Detail of skirt from *Birthday*, 1942
Oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art

14. (opposite left)
Daphne, 1943
Oil on glass (double-sided)
Glass 30.2 x 10.2 cm (11 7/8 x 4 in)
Image 29.2 x 8.9 cm (11 3/4 x 3 1/2 in)
Private collection

15. (opposite right)
The Magic Flower Game, 1941
Oil on canvas
90.2 x 43.2 cm (35 1/2 x 17 in)
Private collection



Notes

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- 35 See D. Ades, 'Surrealism and the Female Subject in Mexico and Postwar Paris', in W. Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images*, MIT Press, 1998, p.116, for more on this.
- 36 This statement accompanied an illustration of Dorothea Tanning's painting *Birthday*, 1942, in *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, Reynal & Hitchcock, New York, 1944, p.107, which was the catalogue for an exhibition of the same title curated by Sidney Janis.
- 37 *Dorothea Tanning: Birthday and Beyond*, exh. brochure, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 24 Nov 2000–7 Jan 2001.
- 38 Unpublished interview, 2009, op.cit..
- 39 Dorothea Tanning, 'Blind Date', *VVV*, March 1943, p.104.
- 40 *A Table of Content: Poems*, Graywolf Press, New York, 2004, p.57.
- 41 Tanning, in conversation with the author, New York, October 2009.
- 42 Tanning, *Between Lives*, op.cit. p.16.
- 43 *Saint Lucia* by Francesco del Cossa, c.1430–77.
- 44 For a fuller discussion of this in relation to the