

# Dorothy Hood Revisited

AS OROZCO SAID TO ME IN MORAL TONES OF INTEGRITY ‘TELL THE TRUTH, DOROTHY, NO MATTER WHAT THE COST.’ SO THE TRUTH WAS MYSELF, RECOGNIZING MYSELF SHOULD THE RESULTS BE BEAUTIFUL OR UGLY, DARK OR LIGHT, ASSERTIVE OR PEACEFUL.”

**By Susie Kalil**

Every so often the world wakes up and realizes that an artist who was a familiar presence for many decades, right in our midst in the Southwest and was even widely respected, was actually something more: a major figure in the canon of great 20<sup>th</sup> century American artists. This happened in 2011 with the visionary painter Alexandre Hogue, thanks to the retrospective organized by the Art Museum of South Texas that made viewers aware of urgent environmental issues at stake in every seamless brushstroke. It's happening again on a grand scale with the Houston painter Dorothy Hood (1918-2000). The monograph, (to be published by Texas A&M University Press), and retrospective, (organized by the Art Museum of South Texas) – the first critical overview of Hood's life and art – will firmly establish her as a vital link between Texas, Latin America, New York and Europe. The exhibition will include some 65 paintings, in addition to 35 drawings and collages, gathered for the first time ever from important private and museum collections across the country and Mexico City: the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Everson Museum (Syracuse, NY), the National Gallery (Washington, DC), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. The exhibition will also coalesce the expansive body of works from the holdings of the Art Museum of South Texas. The book and retrospective will trace the career of the Texas artist, spanning the late 1940s until her death in 2000.

There is a paradigm shift occurring in American art – what it was, is, or could be. Categories and distinctions are being dismantled, thereby providing a perfect time to examine Dorothy Hood's life and art. The history of abstract painting and Hood's place in it face certain revision and appeal to a new generation of artists, collectors and viewers. Her mature paintings – mystical, cosmic works – are cross-cultural hybrids that presaged many current concerns in abstract painting. Dorothy once confided to me that as a young girl growing up in Houston she stole two gold titles from paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, then buried them under her house. In her dreams, they became lambent jewels – more important, the experience stimulated a lifelong quest of subterranean explorations. The book and exhibition will track the development of Hood's unique spatial context and psychic orientation that evoke vast energy fields with vertiginous ruptures of hard-edge, opaque passages and sensuous veils of color. Throughout her formative years, Hood continued to push and take risks in her art. Significantly, the book and

retrospective will examine the choices she made as a female artist in the Texas “boys” club, even as she attempted to break through the New York gallery system. Given the continued imbalance in the art world, for a woman to paint at all is still a political act; for her to do so in a gigantic cosmic scale is almost insurrectionary. I have always maintained that Texas will never be considered a major art center until its historical foundations are documented and referenced. There has never been a full-blown retrospective of Hood's work – the AMST exhibition and accompanying monograph will force open the “regional” issue, settling Hood firmly as a major Modernist painter.

Dorothy Hood was born in Bryan, Texas, raised in Houston, and won a scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the early 1930s, then did some modeling in New York to earn

money for classes at the Art Students League. On a whim, she drove a roadster to Mexico City with two friends in 1941 and ended up staying for nearly twenty years. She developed close friendships with all the European exiles and Latin American surrealists – artists, writers, composers (Pablo Neruda wrote a prose poem about her). Hood married Bolivian composer Velasco Maidana in 1945 – they traveled all over the world, but once back in Houston, she began to produce the epic paintings that evoked the psychic void of space, years ahead of NASA. Very few women worked in large scale throughout those decades – primordial



*Rending and Being Mountain, 1948, oil on canvas, 24" x 26 1/2", Collection of William and Linda Reaves*

seas, volcanic explosions, the space of the mind's eye. She wrote in her journals: “Almost everything in life can be imagined as receptacles, vessels, and with reverence, chalices. In plastic art, form is the shadow of an essence that has gone on to meet a new function. Light is the measure and the return of the gift of magnetic fields; space extends itself over and is the breath of every essence. The eye is our own earthly right of possession of the cosmic orbs. There exists spaces in the mind's eye. If this kind of space meets cosmic space, then it is as though the mind's eye orbits into the realm of stars.”

For Hood, the “void” represented the contemplative and meditative, but also of far broader implications – not just a black hole of despair, but a space of potentiality – a kind of silent scream, a pitch so high that it shakes the very ground you stand on. It's a space left behind, but also a space of the psyche, a conduit of energy and memory, of other realities. The limitlessness of space, the phenomenon of light and strange new terrains or galactic visions — precipitous and jagged



*Night Totems, c. 1965, oil on canvas, 70" x 60", collection of Matthew and Cindy Taylor*

shapes in thin greys, golds and blues are pitched against raw surface, seemingly tearing open a space in the brain beyond all that may be imagined. Hood's most successful paintings are enigmatic, rhythmically probing harmonies and dissonances. Broad flows of color — magenta, orange, cream, purple and green — are counterbalanced by luminous encrustations, glass-cut lines and terrazzo-like configurations. Hood's technical command enabled her to move quickly from shifting planes and limpid washes of poured pigment to intricately defined passages of minute details and "fencing" strokes.

Hood always acknowledged her formal sources and influences — Gorky, Brancusi, Ensor, Matisse, Redon, Ernst — as well as intensive studies of myth, science, nature, and spirituality (Christianity and Hinduism, in particular).

I first met Dorothy Hood in the early 1980s and spent considerable time over the years at the Heights studio discussing her art and life. Nothing, however, prepared me for the multi-layered complexity contained in the archive AMST acquired from the Hood estate: three pallets, six feet by six feet each, hundreds of boxes with thousands of pages of letters, personal journals, notebooks, cards, photographs, records, family history, scrapbooks and clippings from the early 1900s until her death in 2000. The Hood that emerges here is often different from the artist I knew. In the AMST archives, Hood digs deep into a more personal, often darker terrain. The thousands of pages of personal journals have moved me with the rawness of their exposure, the fearless image of human life experienced close to the bone. She explores themes of transition from upper worlds to nether worlds, from the rational to the spheres of the subconscious. Hood's diaristic "narratives" and poems are wholly caught up in the instability of shifting references, in the complex magic of cognition. The overall view of Hood's long trajectory resembles a journey bound for redemption and ecstasy. Her subjects and accounts extend to what she had seen, sensed and imagined to include everything from abstract surreal renderings of feathered creatures and voyaging souls to poetry of the broadest human and metaphysical significance. What these hundreds of boxes mainly reveal, however, was the constant percolating character of Hood's creativity and intellect. The archive contains surprising discoveries and information that not only document Hood's development in the burgeoning Texas art scene, but also track her

persistent goal to stake a presence in the New York art world. Included are several decades of correspondence between Hood and Houston art dealer Meredith Long, who "discovered" Hood in Mexico, subsequently supporting the artist through regular exhibitions and sales. In the process, we are given first-hand observations of both regional and national contexts from the mid 1940s through the final decade of her life. These include 28 years of correspondence between Hood and Dorothy Miller, renown curator of MoMA; reams of letters and paperwork between Hood and Marion Willard (Willard Gallery, NY) as well as Tibor de Nagy. Included are letters of support from Philippe de Montebello, former director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Lengthy correspondence between Hood and preeminent critic Clement Greenberg includes insightful comments about the artist's painting style during the heyday of Color Field painting. A gold mine of letters from directors, curators and major figures gives a rich picture of the times: James Harithas, E.A. Carmean, Patrice Marandel, William Agee, Sebastian "Lefty" Adler, Henry Hopkins, Dominique de Menil, Joan and Walter Mondale. Artists with whom Hood frequently corresponded include: Anthony Caro, Jules Olitski, Leon Kelly, Walter Darby Bannard, Mark Tobey and Elizabeth Murray.

Throughout the decades, Hood traveled extensively to Latin America, New York, Boston, Connecticut, Africa and Europe. On several occasions in the 1970s, Hood was invited by Teto Ahrenberg to work at his atelier near Geneva, Switzerland, where she met Tobey, Jean Tinguely, Arman and Christo. The overall picture from Hood's journals is of a highly disciplined, risk-taking artist who established national and international contacts in a quest to get her work seen in the larger arena. With such prestigious names lending encouragement and support, why wasn't Hood on equal footing with other recognized women artists of the period — Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler? Certainly, Hood was a vital force in the growth of Houston's art community, but her controlled streams of paint with carefully veined sections of inner thoughts or an astronaut's glimpse from the depths of the cosmos, should have rivaled the best colorists. What were the choices she made as a female artist living in Houston, and as primary caretaker of her husband, Bolivian composer Velasco Maidana? It's all about her place as a woman within her larger culture, requiring enormous courage and commitment simply to be who she was, doing what she was doing, when she was doing it.

At the core of the archive — and Hood's body of work — is the 20 year period (1941-'61) in which she was front and center to the cultural, political and social crossroads of Mexico and Latin America, a time and place where intellectuals gathered and traded ideas. Hood's circle included the Spanish novelist Ramon Sender, revolutionary writer Victor Serge, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, playwright Sophie Treadwell, the surrealist painters Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington, as well as Rufino Tamayo, Jose Luis Cuevas, Mathias Goeritz and Jose Clemente Orozco, with whom Hood developed a deep friendship. The lively and intellectual atmosphere proved vital to Hood's development as an artist. Personal journals describe meager living conditions, but also vibrant exchanges on the zocalo and market, daily passage of natives, her association with the younger Mexican painters who formed the first Proteo Gallery and the first salon of international experimental art. Included in the archive are boxes of letters, correspondence and personal entries with detailed descriptions of meaningful events and meetings. At every turn, Hood brings to life a period of intense, creative ferment. She wrote of her introduction to Orozco: "I was brought to his studio by the Latin American poet Pablo Neruda during the year of 1943. His studio was an apartment of very large rooms above his house. The walls were painted an austere off-white, and there was no visible luxury. Carpenter's tables, on wooden horses, were at one end of the painting room, with glass jars on top of the earth's pigments which he mixed himself. There being no ornaments, one had the impression of the rooms being a hulky frame for discoveries of a monastic realm. It spoke of a purifying element and of a man who had not left the earth's substance for the mind's substance."

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In Mexico, Hood was surrounded by artists and writers who lived in the world of ideas where everything was challenged dogmatically – even violently. She aimed for honesty, purity and freedom to think and paint as she pleased, thereby developing a profound affinity with the powerful mix of Indian and Latin cultures, the spiritual and subliminal. It's important to note that Hood was just 20 years-old when she arrived in Mexico City – truly her formative period. She participated in a crossfiring of ideas among an influx of European ex-presidents, European writers and Surrealist artists. Dorothy and Velasco lived on very little money and moved frequently between Mexico City, the nearby San Angel art district and the city of Puebla. Due to limited studio space, Hood produced small paintings and gouaches, choosing to concentrate on incisive pen and ink drawings that explore organic shapes and strange figures as symbolic content. Significantly, Hood had begun a series of anti-war drawings at the time of the Spanish Civil War. She was looking at Pre-Columbian sculpture, archaeological sites, folk art and vibrant street life. She referred to the Mayan and Aztec hieroglyphics and symbols as “events,” which became the core foundation of her paintings. Hood was “en confianza” in part because of her love and admiration for anyone who had the strength to impose his/her beliefs on local perimeters through work and life. They were all searching for truth. We can only imagine the provocative, engaging dialogue when all of them got together at cafes, bars or homes. Orozco told Hood that he had “made an experiment of his life.” She wrote in her journal: “Now what the people, or the public, feels in my work may well be that in each brushstroke, the color and mood, the shock, the readable signs of struggle, discipline and truthfulness in the beginnings of the form and the statement is honest. As Orozco said to me in moral tones of integrity ‘tell the truth, Dorothy, no matter what the cost.’ So the truth was myself, recognizing myself should the results be beautiful or ugly, dark or light, assertive or peaceful.”

In my opinion, there was less stylistic influence but more exchanging of ideas between artists, writers, poets, composers – more humanistic concerns. Hood clarified that Orozco was a realistic observer of the Mexican Revolution; he was also of it. He was in it. He had a strong moral drive. Hood saw great similarities between Gandhi and Orozco. She wrote: “I like those, who trying or failing, seek to turn the world around. For he who is a humanist is a believer.” An interesting sidelight from the years Hood was working with the artists’ group associated with Jose Luis Cuevas – at a gathering Cuevas told Ambassador Quinanilla that he depicted the lunacy in an asylum while Hood drew what went on in their minds. Hood took it as a dubious compliment, her one experience with machismo in Mexico. However, the statement does pinpoint Hood’s ongoing development of an abstract surrealist style. The significance of Hood’s Mexico period cannot be overemphasized. This is open territory, serving as a potential bridge to new relationships and scholarly research between Texas and Mexico.

By her own admission, Hood’s paintings didn’t begin to really “fly” until the late 1960s. The work as a whole reveals her strong roots to Texas with its seemingly infinite expanse of sky and special quality of light. The paintings break loose in the 1970s – the period of her strongest efforts,



*Field Plexus, 1971, Oil on Canvas, 90" x 70". Collection of Gerald D. and Barbara Hines (Referred to in a personal notation by Dorothy who considered this one an “especially fine painting”)*

during which the artist aims to sustain a unique visual language. Important works produced include *Haiti* (1969), *My Sumptuous Lion in Space* (1972), *Zeus Weeps* (1972), *On Untrodden Paths* (1972), *Extensor of the Sky* (1973), *Sea Elegy I & II* (1972) and *Outer Space Field* (1975). Again and again, broad fields of modulated color give breath to light surfacing from beneath. Cross-sections of metamorphosed rock are intercut with geomorphic shifts, causing surfaces to radiate or split, revealing soft skies beyond or dark crystalline caves within. In other works, lightning bolts seem to crack through to an unknown infinity, relating a more universal inner experience of the forces of nature. Hood didn’t adhere to linear development. For the most part, Hood’s painting style and thematic currents usually changed every ten years, sometimes revisiting earlier concerns. Hood rarely dated the backs of her works; a major task in the organization of book and retrospective is to develop a chronology through personal journals, notebooks and exhibition records.

In late years, Hood’s style became looser, more lyrical, and often celebratory, stimulated by trips to India, but also by visualizations of closely held thoughts. Important works produced during the 1980s include *Subterranean Illumination* (1982), *Samba* (1982) *Max’s Moon* (1982), and the explosive, gravity skewing *Halley’s Comet* series. Inspired by Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, bars of color and forms with razor sharp edges seemingly float like monoliths, polarizing the canvas as zones of light and dark. Some canvases feature connective hair-like tissues or extended filaments that seem volcanic or part of an enchanted sea – an electrifying X-ray of a marine organism. Hues of deep blues, black, strips of white and red reveal a decalomania process, fretted areas that glow with the luminosity of secret grottos and gardens. The monumental *Plexus* and visceral flower paintings are important examples of this late period. In these, the rhythm – more gestural – flow relaxed and confidently throughout the canvases. More nuanced shades of color and more varied textures seem to appear effortlessly. At the final turn, Hood opens up full throttle, turns decisively away from the work by which she became known and moved boldly into new territory.

Throughout, Hood prized, above all, the ability to follow her own light in ways that challenged the institutional infrastructure of the art market and unmanageable complexities of theoretical discourse. Rather, she spoke directly to the need for communication about the spiritual experience. But the crux of Hood’s art is one that we all confront at one time or another: the world is not ordered as we thought it was. Her work comments on the dangerous human tendency to take refuge in certainty when the truth may be more complicated and elusive. Necessity motivated Hood to stretch her vocabulary, sometimes going to the edge, sometimes going over into new domains. It is this kind of obsession to show us in any way she could – peacefully or with dissonance, through the otherworldly and the magical, that seemed to propel Hood throughout her lifetime. Toward that end, Hood’s paintings and works on paper serve as a metaphoric visual opera, propelling us across the emotional, psychological and physical landscapes of the human condition. With this retrospective, Hood emerges as a powerful, unique voice in American art.

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# On a Mission

By Carolyn Farb

*Dorothy Hood was one of the first female artists who soared with her monumental and majestic works of art. The world embraces her paintings that delve into one's soul and being.*

In 1985, I served as the Executive Producer on the major award-winning film, "The Color of Life," which focused on Dorothy Hood's lifelong commitment as an artist. The film was shot in exotic Latin American locations as well as in her intimate studio in Houston that literally enveloped one. Now, it's time for Dorothy, through the definitive monograph to be published by Texas A&M University Press, and retrospective at the Art Museum of South Texas, to establish her place as a major 20th century American artist. The exhibition will share the intellectuality of her work, probing both the primal and the cosmos. The retrospective will open at the iconic Phillip Johnson designed museum with the Ricardo Legorreta wing in 2015. The dream list of travel venues are the major museums on both coasts and Mexico City.

Without a doubt, I have been a strong advocate and patron of Dorothy Hood's for nearly three decades and continue to do so—it's called absolute belief. I remember Dorothy as if it were yesterday. I first became acquainted with her in the 1980's and frequently visited her studio, watching her paint, and listening to her musings. A profound thought for all of us to consider is that we would not have the need for museums or galleries without the work of artists who generously share their gifts and creativity. Dorothy was on the faculty of the Museum of Fine Arts, Museum School of Art for many years, mentoring young artists who would become brilliant artists in their own right. Now, it's our turn to reciprocate, firmly settling her legacy. It's all about her place as a woman with her larger culture, requiring enormous courage and commitment to be simply who she was, doing what she was doing, when she was doing it.



*Carolyn's Flower, 1986, oil on canvas, 62" x 72" Photo: Eric Kayne*



*Dorothy Hood*

Dorothy Hood was an artist ahead of her time and one of the first abstract surrealists. She was part of an elite group who was forging their own expression. At that time, women were not recognized as they are today as artists. Therefore, Dorothy was not embraced with the early recognition she so richly deserved. Her work endures, elicits a response, evokes an emotion, and a thought from anyone who is fortunate enough to come face to face with one of her paintings, drawings, or collages. Her most successful works take viewers- physically and psychologically to worlds unknown. She called her paintings, "the landscapes of her psyche."

Dorothy Rose Hood was a tenacious young woman who left Houston with a four year scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design tucked in her handbag and a very clear idea of what she was meant to do. Hood knew the kind of painter she would be- the Gauguin/Tamayo sort whose colors massed in big solid blocks with razor sharp outlines. Leaving New York and driving to Mexico began the most significant chapter in her life. Being in Mexico City in the 1940's was like Paris in the 1920's. Hood thrived on the gathering of intellectuals and the sharing of ideas. Within her circle was English born surrealist Leonora Carrington, the Spanish surrealist Remedios Varo and German born artist Mathias Goeritz. Other defining influences were Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet and Jose Clemente Orozco who was very generous in the way he interacted with Dorothy. In 1946, she married Velasco Maidana, the famous Bolivian conductor and composer who was the love of her life, and perhaps, a father figure who encouraged her work. Later, she returned to Houston, and the 70's became her decade. Dorothy Hood loved to wear fanciful clothes, hats and carried herself as elegantly as a fashion model. Her art and presence helped define the character of Houston, a place of sharp contrasts.

When you are in the presence of one of Dorothy's works, it is as if you are engaging in a metaphysical and cosmic conversation with her. Even today, I feel her presence. The work that artists create lives long after they are gone and becomes their eternity. It has been my mission to elevate Dorothy Hood to the height that she so richly deserves, and we find ourselves in the midst of a new generation of cheering fans rooting with all their might for this to happen - to shatter the myths about Texas and women artists.