



Dorothy Hood,  
Mexico City, early 1940s

## DECIPHERING DOROTHY

A new retrospective — and plans to exhibit in Miami and New York — make this fall an important time to rethink the legacy of late Houston artist **Dorothy Hood**. Will the painter finally get the respect she deserves and re-emerge upon the national stage. Catherine D. Anspou investigates.

**I**t was nearly three decades ago, but it seems like yesterday. As a fledgling gallerist at Meredith Long & Company, I met Dorothy Hood, even then an icon of Houston's art scene. She was a formidable presence, both as an artist in command of her medium and as a forceful personality who demanded respect among her male peers. A charismatic woman devoid of small talk, she often came to the gallery to check on sales, oversee how and where her work was displayed, and to speak to Meredith Long about collector prospects and future shows. Most conversations with Hood were left to Long or a more seasoned colleague. I was a junior member of the ML & Company team; the artist and I were not peers. So, regretfully on my part, we never engaged in dialogue about her painting. In many ways, her towering canvases, with pools of deep space and depths that pull the viewer in with the force of a black hole, speak for themselves. Even more so in our age of zombie painting, these works are filled with God. I've often wondered: When will we see the artist's work enshrined at the Whitney Museum of American Art, or extolled in the arts section of *The New York Times*. Perhaps the time is at hand.

### Rediscovering Dorothy

Nearly 20 years have passed since Hood's death, and at last our turbulent era seems aligned to rethink the contributions and creations of an artist claimed by many to be Texas' greatest 20th-century painter. No fake news here: This is the talent held in major museum collections coast to coast, as well as the subject of two recent critically acclaimed Texas museum exhibitions. One was a 2018/2019 focus show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, curated by Alison de Lima Greene, which paired Hood with American sculptor Louise Nevelson; the other was the sweeping 2016 survey "The Color of Being/El Color del Ser: Dorothy



Hood, 1918 – 2000," curated by Susie Kalil, that took over two buildings at the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi. Both exhibits generated buzz in Houston art circles, but since neither traveled, their impact didn't register with mainstream art press. Nonetheless, both contributed to Hood scholarship. The Corpus Christi exhibition also produced an authoritative book written by art historian and exhibition curator Kalil, documenting the artist's work and life between NYC, Mexico City, and Houston.

This month, McClain Gallery unveils "Dorothy Hood: Illuminated Earth," signaling the next chapter in the quest for parity and respect for Hood from national and international art-world power brokers. Working with the Art Museum of South Texas, McClain Gallery now officially represents the artist's estate. In collaboration with AMST, the gallery will bring to market a series of exhibitions, presenting canvases, drawings, and collages not accessioned into the permanent collection of the museum, which owns a hefty trove of the artist's works and her archives.

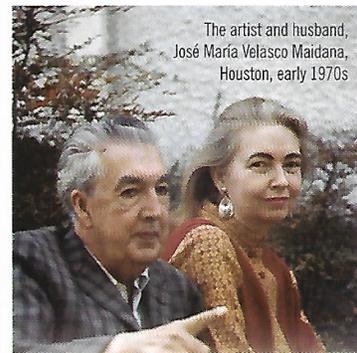
The gallery's first foray in reintroducing Hood occurred last spring in McClain's booth at the Dallas Art Fair. In December,

Hood will be one of two headliners, alongside contemporary abstract painter Shane Tolbert, at McClain's Untitled fair booth in Miami. Next spring, expect to see Hood canvases in a prominent New York venue, showcased again through McClain Gallery.

Why all this hoopla for a deceased regional painter? The answer is that Dorothy Hood was never merely a Texas painter. She had the ability to go epic with a signature style that paired psychological depth with an amalgamation of color-field abstraction and surrealism honed during her time at the center of the action in Mexico City. Hood, at her best, was every bit the equal of Helen Frankenthaler. One could argue she was often better. If Frankenthaler was the East Coast master of lyrical, powerful ab-ex and color-field painting mined from landscape, then Hood was the Southwest's proponent of a tough yet tender take on living in an environment defined by vastness.

#### A Cinematic Life

A Texas-born only child, Hood grew up in a prosperous middle-class family in Houston's Museum District. Her circumstances changed during adolescence, due to her mother's mental illness and bout with tuberculosis, and her parents' divorce. Hood decamped for the East Coast with a Rhode Island School of Design scholarship in 1936, after a teacher at San Jacinto High School submitted a portfolio of drawings to the national scholarship competition. A striking figure in stature, with red-blond hair, after graduating from RISD she supported herself as a model, moving to NYC and attending the Art Students League. But another world called; she and a couple of pals decamped from New York, motoring in an old roadster to Mexico City. It was 1941, and she never looked back. Her ensuing double decades in Mexico added a formative, seminal layer to the narrative of Dorothy. She interacted with the figures of the day: Pablo Neruda (who penned a poem for the catalog of her first Mexico show), Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (she met her husband, Bolivian conductor and



The artist and husband, José María Velasco Maidana, Houston, early 1970s

composer José María Velasco Maidana, whose father was vice president of Bolivia, at their compound), and José Clemente Orozco (who opened up his studio to share and daily gave her lunch).

Hood's reach back in the day extended from California to New York, including representation in the Whitney and MoMA. When she and Velasco Maidana moved to Houston in 1962, she began teaching at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum school; soon she claimed her place as one of the leaders in a world dominated by big, brash male painters. A vintage photograph in the AMST collection shows her as a member of the Houston Five — the only woman alongside Richard Stout, Dave Hickman, William Anzalone, and Jack Boynton.

Thanks to being picked up by gallerist Meredith Long the year she arrived in town, Houston notables became Hood collectors: Dominique and John de Menil,

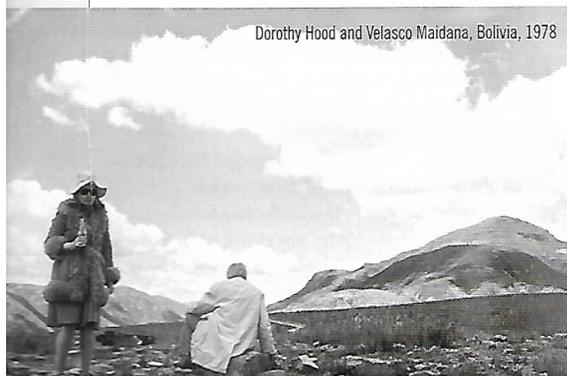
Fayez Sarofim, Nina Cullinan, John O'Quinn (a regular in her studio), Mavis Kelsey Sr., Carol Ballard, Isabel Brown Wilson, Diana and Bill Hobby, and Carolyn Farb. The latter served as associate producer of a 1985 documentary on Hood, *The Color of Life*, which won the American Film Festival Award in 1987 and was supported by the MFAIH. In the '70s, '80s, and '90s, Hood

continued to rule the Houston art scene along with fellow painters Dick Wray, Richard Stout, and Early Staley. There was not a major art collector who did not own a Hood — either one of her soaring paintings, which bridged the void and color field; an obsessive drawing with her signature Gothic-Surreal sensibility; or a collage that embraced globalism and sampled world cultures.

The end of her life saw a rift with Meredith Long, her staunchest supporter, due to her selling work privately behind his back. Since her death in 2000, Hood has not exactly been forgotten — she's in 30-some American museum collections — yet few of the institutions, aside from the MFAH and AMST, devote wall space to her works. While Hood has been shown by Houston galleries in recent years — in exhibitions at the now shuttered Thom Andriola/New Gallery and with greater success and commitment at Deborah Colton Gallery, as well as group shows at Foltz Fine Art — the opening of "Dorothy Hood: Illuminated Earth" at McClain Gallery signals a new chapter in the artist's reappraisal. Today, with the icebox of art history now being raided and historic talents (especially black and women artists) being celebrated for their accomplishments, Hood's time is incontestably now.

*"Dorothy Hood: Illuminated Earth,"* October 12 – December 21, at McClain Gallery; [mcclaingallery.com](http://mcclaingallery.com).

Dorothy Hood works: Opposite page, *Untitled (Abstraction)*, 1950s; this page, from top, *Minoan Blue*, 1973; *Space Signals*, 1970s.



Dorothy Hood and Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1978