

HYPERALLERGIC

Belated Acclaim for Dorothy Hood's Surreal Abstractions

The exhibition *Illuminated Earth* asks audiences to consider not only Hood's dynamic and commanding murals as the thought-provoking pieces they are, but also how artistic legacies are made and remade over time.



Lydia Pyne November 15, 2019



Dorothy Hood, "Space of the Minds Eye - The Cave" (ca. 1970s), oil on canvas, 50 x 66 x 1 1/4 inches (photo courtesy Paul Hester)

HOUSTON — It's impossible to talk about Dorothy Hood's art and legacy without beginning with her move from New York to Mexico City in 1941. She went, nominally, for a vacation, but and stayed for over 20 years. Her time in Mexico shaped and defined her art for the rest of her life.

The origin story of this trip is as much a part Hood's legacy as is her oeuvre tracing back to those decades. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design and living for a short stint in New York City, Hood "turned south from New York with a schoolmate and her

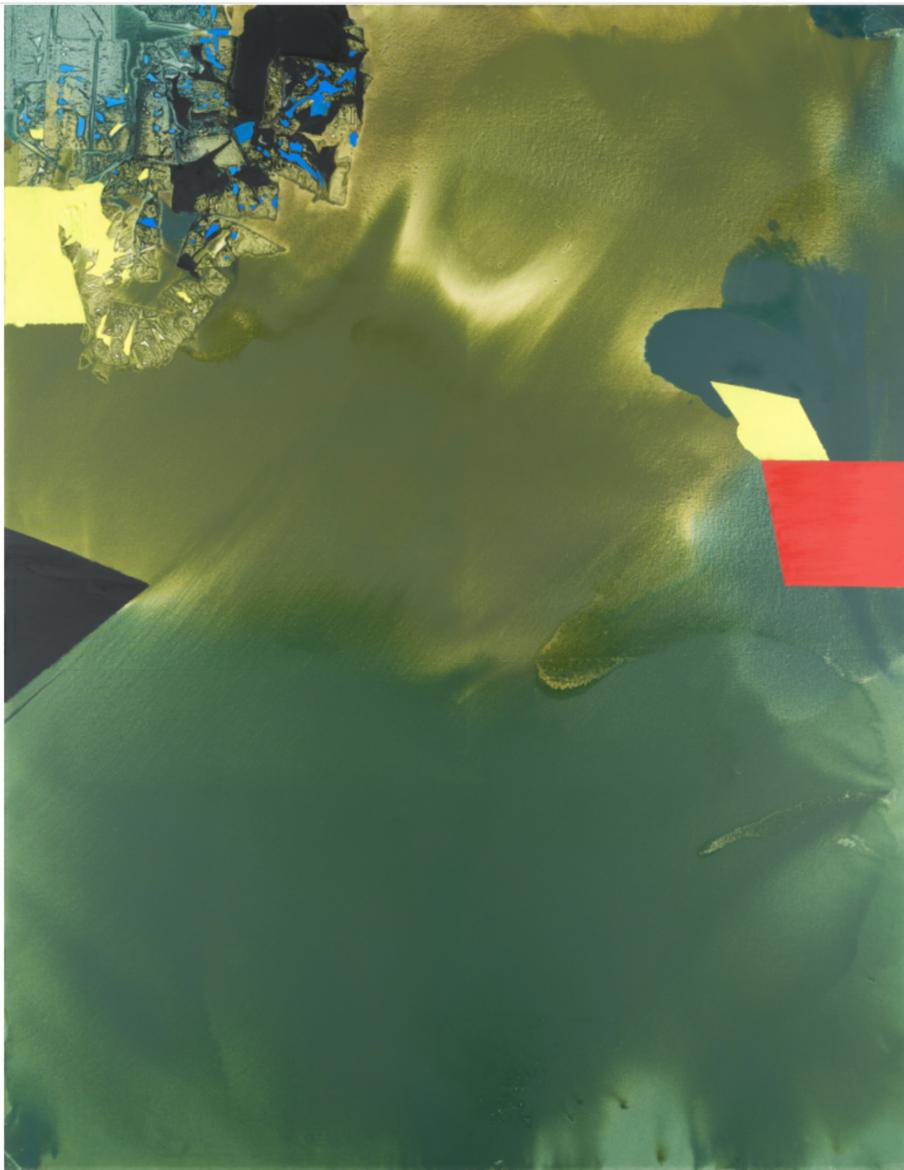
husband in an old roadster,” author and curator Susie Kalil describes in her Dorothy Hood monograph, *The Color of Being/El Color del Ser* (2016). “They lived by chance and their wits, eating canned goods, and camping under the stars.”



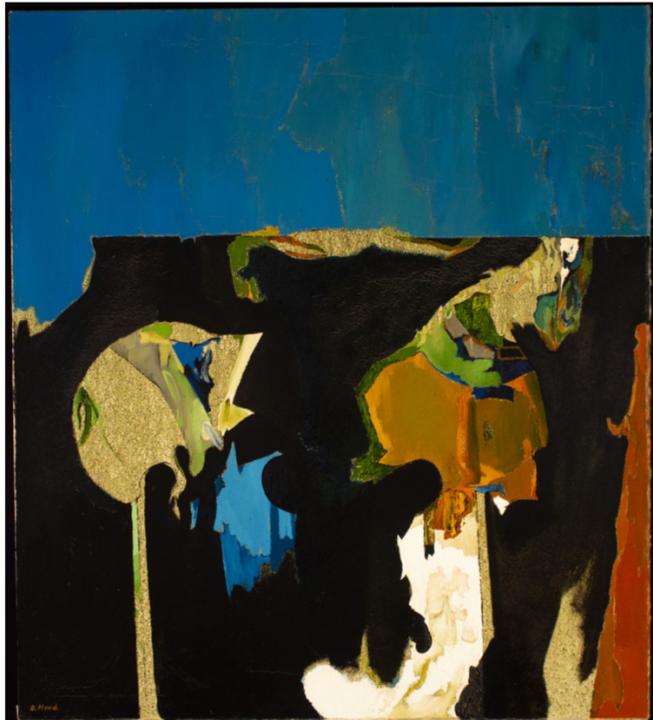
Dorothy Hood, “Untitled (Wall)” (1943), gouache on paper mounted on linen covered board, 10.625 x 13.5 inches (on loan from AMST, photo courtesy Art Museum of South Texas)

Mexico City in the 1940s was a cultural milieu for artists: an epicenter of ex-pat European intelligentsia and a nexus of surrealism and emerging modernism in the Latin American art world. Hood drew and painted alongside Mexico’s well-known artists like Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Roberto Montenegro, and Miguel Covarrubias. Her work was widely exhibited in Mexico City during her time, while she attained critical success with her exhibition at the Willard Gallery in New York in 1950.

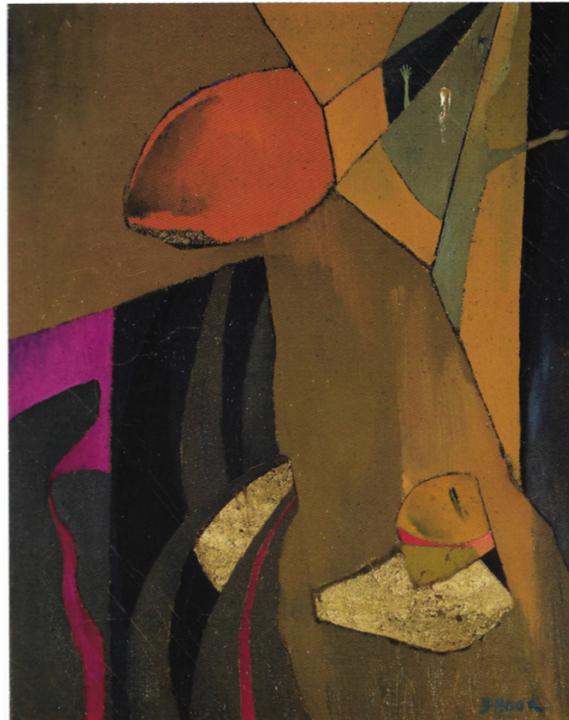
Hood’s work is currently in the collections of more than 30 museums and a 2016 exhibition at the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi has helped to raise her public profile. However, she never quite seemed to achieve the level of acclaim and recognition that she and her devoted followers might have hoped for, particularly during her lifetime. Whether this is due to her status as a woman artist in the mid-20th century, her geographic distance from New York City, or a host of other reasons is anybody’s theory. But the effects were felt by her and those who supported her work.



Dorothy Hood, "Untitled" (n.d.), oil on canvas, 90 x 70 x 1 1/8 inches (photo courtesy Adam Neese)



Dorothy Hood, "Untitled" (1950s), oil and sand on canvas, 44.875 x 39.875 inches (on loan from AMST, photo courtesy Art Museum of South Texas)



Dorothy Hood, "Untitled (Abstraction)" (1950s), oil and sand on canvas, 24 x 18.75 inches (on loan from AMST, photo courtesy Art Museum of South Texas)

Illuminated Earth, currently at the McClain Gallery in Houston, is letting Dorothy Hood have a moment in 2019, almost two decades after her death. This moment — this exhibition — asks audiences to consider not only Hood’s dynamic and commanding murals as the thought-provoking pieces they are, but also how artistic legacies are made and remade over time.

Born in 1919 in Bryan, Texas, Hood is considered by some to be one of the first American abstract surrealist painters. Her work bridges a plethora of art schools and traditions, emphasizing abstract landscapes as well as the human psyche. Inevitably, it demonstrates — conceptually and visually — strong ties to those decades spent in Mexico as well as her willingness to experiment with painting on an enormous scale.

Illuminated Earth features 16 of Hood’s paintings, ranging from abstract collages (“The Money for School,” undated) to the enormous and powerful “Illuminated Earth,” from which the exhibition draws its name. Most of the pieces on display date from the 1970s and ’80s and all are excellent examples of the tension in Hood’s work between hope and despair, darkness and light. In particular, these pieces work with landscapes — landscapes that are informed by the size, scale, and vastness of her native Texas. It is difficult to look at Hood’s “Minoan Blue,” (1973) for example, and not see a backstop of endless, blue, blue Texas skies.

Hood’s work is often contextualized and understood by her proximity to better-known members of her circles. In the exhibition, we learn that she painted with Frida Kahlo, for instance; that her husband was the great Bolivian director and composer José María Velasco Maidana; that the famous Chilean poet Pablo Neruda called her the “Amazon of Manhattan.” (“There is in the painting of Dorothy Hood this desperate interrogation, an aesthetic of human pain which runs through the path of all the arts,” Neruda offered.) It can seem as though her legacy comes from how others shine light on Hood to prove that she “ought” to finally get her due. (“The art world, however, is a forgetful place,” Kalil wryly notes in *The Color of Being/El Color del Ser* of Hood’s stochastic reception.) The fact that her supporters are still struggling to ensure that she gets her due shows just how complex it is to build a legacy as an artist.



Selections from the Dorothy Hood Papers, a collection of the Art Museum of South Texas and the University of Houston Libraries, UH Libraries Special Collections

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Illuminated Earth* is how the exhibition uses archival ephemera, like journals, newspaper clippings, and scraps of old paintings to let Hood speak to us for herself. Ephemeral bits of her everyday life from the archive of her papers at the Art Museum of South Texas show audiences why they should appreciate Hood's work. This material elucidates how and why she went about the everyday business of creating her art, allowing it to be illuminated by the artist herself. It helps her to shape her own legacy, through her own words, to shine her own light on her work.



Dorothy Hood, "Aymaran Memory" (ca. 1970s), oil on canvas, 70 x 60 x 3/4 inches (photo courtesy Paul Hester)

[Dorothy Hood: Illuminated Earth](#) continues at McClain Gallery (2242 Richmond Avenue, Houston, Texas) through December 21. The exhibition was curated by Erin Dorn.