



COURTESY MEREDITH LONG & COMPANY © ESTATE OF DOROTHY HOOD

From top: Dorothy Hood with *Subterranean Illuminations*, circa 1976.

Dorothy Hood's *Ingeli*, 1969, at McClain Gallery.

# Rediscovering Dorothy

This fall, McClain Gallery unfurls a new look at Houston artist Dorothy Hood, who

might just be Texas' greatest 20th-century painter. Catherine D. Anspón reexamines the legacy and life of the queen of abstraction.

A quarter century has passed since Dorothy Hood's death, and our age seems ready to rethink the contributions and creations of an artist believed by many to be Texas' greatest 20th-century painter. Her art can be found in major museum collections coast to coast and was the subject of two critically acclaimed Texas museum exhibitions in recent memory: 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, and the 2016 survey at the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi — keeper of the artist's estate and significant

artworks, some of which have never entered the permanent collection and are now being offered at McClain Gallery in the exhibition "Dorothy Hood: Celestial Voids," in order to send Hood's legacy out into the universe for a new generation of collectors.

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 and paint 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.

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## A Dorothy Hood Primer

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 combined 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.

After graduating from RISD, the striking, statuesque strawberry blonde supported herself as a model, moving to NYC and attending the Art Students League. But Mexico called, and on a lark, she and a couple of pals took her new roadster (a graduation gift from her bank-exec dad) to Mexico City in 1940 and never looked back.

Her ensuing double decades in Mexico added a formative, seminal layer to her unique creative narrative. Her interaction with figures ranging from Pablo Neruda (who penned a poem to her for the catalog of her first Mexico show) to Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (at whose casa she met her husband, Bolivian conductor and composer José María Velasco Maidana, whose father was president of Bolivia) and José Clemente Orozco (who opened up his studio to share and daily gave her lunch) would make for a compelling cinematic bio.

Hood's reach back in the day extended from California to New York, including representation in the Whitney and MoMA. When she and Maidana moved to Houston in 1961, she began teaching at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's 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, David Hickman, William Anzalone, and James Boynton. (Stout, Hickman, and Boynton have all passed away, but Anzalone, now based in Round Top, still actively paints and exhibits.)

Thanks to being picked up by gallerist Meredith Long the year after she arrived in town, notable Houston art names became Hood collectors: Dominique and John de Menil, Faye 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 MFAH.

From the '70s through the '90s, Hood continued to rule the Houston art scene along with fellow painters Dick Wray, Richard Stout, and Earl Staley. In 1970, Hood had a solo exhibition at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston that marked a breakthrough and saw her working with



8-by-10-foot canvases. In 1984, she was named Texas Artist of the Year by Art League Houston.

The following year, Hood was highlighted in the seminal "Fresh Paint: The Houston School," curated by Susie Kalil and Barbara Rose; the exhibition marked a milestone in Houston art history and traveled to MoMA PS1 in NYC. In this era, every major art collector owned a Hood — either one of her soaring paintings, which bridged the void, surrealism, 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 without his knowledge. 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, and recently The Menil Collection, devote wall space to her works. However, with the icebox of art history now being raided and historic talents (especially Black and women artists) being celebrated for their accomplishments, Hood's star is once again ascendant. "*Dorothy Hood: Celestial Voids*," through December 28, [mclaingallery.com](http://mclaingallery.com). Read our review at [papercitymag.com](http://papercitymag.com).

From top: Dorothy Hood's *Earth Seed I, II, III*, undated, at McClain Gallery.

Dorothy Hood's *Untitled*, 1979, at McClain Gallery.