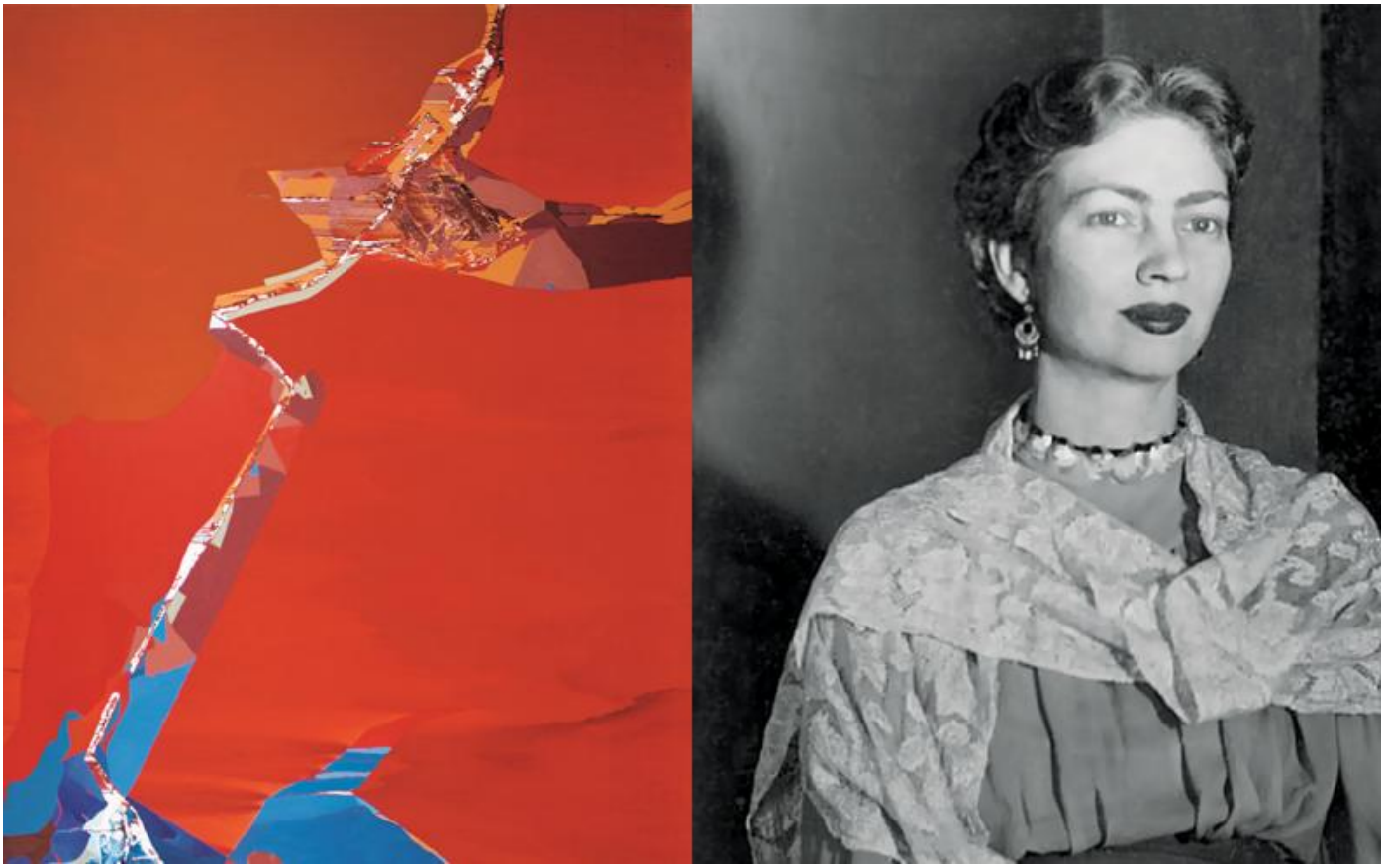
Fame in the Abstract

Dorothy Hood was one of Texas's greatest artists, yet her work remains largely unknown. Now, sixteen years after her death, can her fans bring her the acclaim she never received in life?

September 2016*By* Katy Vine



Dorothy Hood had all the makings of an icon. One of Texas's most talented artists, she was a stunning strawberry blonde with a fearless sense of adventure. In 1941, fresh out of art school, she drove her dad's roadster to Mexico City and stayed there for most of the next 22 years, drawing and painting alongside Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Roberto Montenegro, and Miguel Covarrubias. Pablo Neruda wrote a poem about her paintings. José Clemente Orozco befriended and encouraged her. The Bolivian director and composer José María Velasco Maidana fell hard for her and later married her. And after a brief stretch in New York City, she and Maidana moved to her native Houston, where she produced massive paintings of sweeping color that combined elements of Mexican surrealism and New York abstraction in a way that no one had seen before, winning her acclaim and promises from museums of major exhibits. She seemed on the verge of fame.

“She certainly is one of the most important artists from that generation,” said art historian Robert Hobbs. “She represents not only Texas but great connections with Mexico and New York, because she was carrying on artist conversations in a number of different worlds. She’s not only regional, she’s also national and international.”

But she never quite made it big. Hood died of breast cancer at age 81, in 2000, without ever gaining the national recognition many, including Hood herself, felt she was due. Why this didn’t happen is anyone’s guess: she didn’t adhere to a purely formalist type of abstract art popular in her heyday, she was a woman, she lived in Houston. “If she had been in New York, it would have been a whole different story,” said critic and historian Barbara Rose. “I think the paintings are first-rate.” It’s often a mystery why certain artists become famous and others don’t. Even for the lucky few who do gain recognition, it often takes a long time, sometimes coming years after their death.

Five years ago, some of Hood’s most loyal backers began an effort to resurrect her work. It started at a dinner in Fort Worth commemorating the opening of an exhibition for another artist with Texas ties, Alexandre Hogue. During the dinner, Joe Schenk, the director of Corpus Christi’s Art Museum of South Texas, approached the show’s Houston-based curator, Susie Kalil, and said, “We’ve got to talk about Dorothy Hood.”

Schenk explained that the Art Museum of South Texas, which had acquired Hood’s entire personal archive, including 1,017 works of art, back in 2001, had been too consumed with other projects to give Hood’s pieces much attention. But finally, Schenk said, the museum was ready. Would Kalil be interested in curating a full-scale retrospective and writing an accompanying book for the show? Kalil, who had met Hood in Houston art circles years earlier, knew the answer before he even finished the sentence. “Absolutely,” she said.

Kalil has a birdlike nervous energy and an obsessive nature, and she is passionate about Hood. “When you stand in front of her really powerful works, you feel this reverberation in the pit of your stomach,” she told me. Kalil urgently wanted to cement Hood as a major twentieth-century American artist, and she believed that the Corpus archive could make that happen. Kalil could create an exhibition for Hood on a scale unprecedented for a Texas artist.

Enhancing Hood’s legacy would be tough but not impossible, and Kalil was tenacious. It had taken her nearly thirty years to publish a book on Hogue and curate a retrospective exhibition. Because of Kalil’s efforts, Hogue, who had been branded solely as a Dust Bowl painter, was reconceived more broadly as a notable American artist.

The time seemed right for a similar revival of Hood. Kalil observed that people who had been more interested in conceptual art and photography in the past decade were now turning their attention back to painting, especially abstract work, and reevaluating women artists like Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, and Lee Krasner. Hood was ripe for rediscovery too. “I can’t think of another artist at this point right now, a twentieth-century artist, more deserving,” Kalil told me. So she set out to secure the fame that the artist had never achieved in life. But as ever with Dorothy Hood, deserving success would be no guarantee of it.

Curator Susie Kalil, photographed in front of Hood’s Cross of the Magic Flute in August 2016.

Photograph by Brian Goldman

Kalil began by sorting through the Hood archive, including Hood’s journals and letters, for the book about the artist’s life. She would then have to fund-raise for and curate the exhibition—all in a mere three years, an ambitious timeline set by the museum. The magnitude of her undertaking had become clear when Kalil stepped into the Art Museum of South Texas’s concrete vault in 2012 and flipped on the lights. She saw three floor-to-ceiling pallets with boxes and trunks still in shrink-wrap. The Dorothy Hood archive had been largely forgotten, left untouched and unorganized, gathering dust in the basement since it arrived, in 2001. It was a scene that would cause any researcher to grab the Pepto-Bismol.

Yet slicing open the plastic, she was awed by the treasures encased within. Hood had

clearly anticipated that she would one day become famous: she maintained meticulous journals, even in her early twenties, and as she aged, she kept carbon copies of her letters to artists, curators, major museum directors, and Houston's prominent families. She saved bills, valentines, Christmas cards, and thousands of pages of tiny writing on yellow legal pads. There were paintbrushes, unopened tubes of paint, jars of gold flecks, drafting tables, scrapbooks, rolls of unfinished canvases, and a collection of books (including four copies of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*). Even Hood's and her husband's cremains were stashed
in a box. Kalil knew that creating a narrative of Hood's life out of the stacks would be time-consuming, but the information was all there.

As she dug through Hood's paintings, though, Kalil realized she faced the opposite problem in curating the show. Hood was a less detailed record-keeper of her art than she was of her life. It quickly became clear she had mismanaged a number of her works. In one case, Hood had labeled a single work with six titles. She sometimes wrote incorrect dates if she wrote dates at all. To curate the exhibit, Kalil would need to tediously sort Hood's art, as well as hunt down pieces that weren't in the Corpus archive, with only a few catalogs to help her track them to private collections and national museums.

But the work she found astounded her. Kalil knew that at the height of Hood's regional popularity, in the seventies and eighties, Hood, like many artists, would sometimes churn out formulaic works, decorative paintings that flooded the market and served to define her. Kalil instinctively sensed that Hood had produced more great art. Still, she was surprised by the depth and complexity she saw, works on par with Hood's 1969 painting *Haiti,* which pulses with ghostly shades and dark powers, and her 1972 masterpiece *Zeus Weeps,* which juxtaposes slices of pinks, oranges, and browns against a vast backdrop of black space. And her drawings were a revelation. "Those drawings have the precision of a surgeon's scalpel," Kalil said. "They look today fresher and edgier than when she did them. She was way ahead of her time."

All these works of art, all these keepsakes, formed a puzzle. Kalil set up a few tables as she sorted through the boxes and trunks, digging through the reams of letters and photographs, tagging items with sticky notes. What unfolded was a story of Dorothy Hood that nobody had heard before.

Hood, photographed in Mexico in the forties.

Courtesy of the Art Museum of South Texas

Her upbringing seemed ideal, at least from the outside. She grew up in comfort, the only child of Georgianna and Frank, a vice president at Houston's City Bank and Trust. Hood must have been envied by her peers as she played on a friend's yacht or enjoyed loop-the-loop tricks in a two-seater airplane her father co-owned, but by the time she was eleven, her charmed life had vanished: her parents had separated, her father had remarried, and her mother—with whom Hood stayed—had come down with tuberculosis, necessitating visits to a nearby sanatorium. Hood felt physically abandoned by her father and emotionally abandoned by her mother, who, Hood wrote, "would have wished me to be another, yet I was hers, the product of her depressions, her crying, her delicate health."

After studying art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Hood moved to New York City and briefly supported herself modeling for fashion magazines. In 1941, on a lark, she and two friends drove to Mexico City. And what she found changed her life. "The Mexican Revolution was only twenty years over—its fires and illusions and memories were still alive in the air. It was an era of action for artists and intellectuals," she wrote.

A two-week vacation became a 22-year stay. She wore rope-sole shoes and stayed at Frida Kahlo's house and Diego Rivera's studio. At dinner parties and cafes, she rubbed shoulders with surrealist painters Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington. She flirted

and cast aside whatever remained of her Victorian sexual mores (“She was, um, bohemian,” one friend told me) and became lovers with the Spanish novelist Ramón Sender, who would write in bed, drinking thick Mexican chocolate with a raw egg dropped into it. Clearly she was far from home.

Though she had little money, Hood worked on her art and began forming her abstract style, often in Orozco’s studio, where the great muralist advised her. When she complained about not having money for paint and canvas, he told her to draw on paper sacks.

What came tumbling out of her was sometimes figurative, sometimes abstract, and often unsettling. Chaotic wartime scenes showed spindly, haunting children, and horses stampeding over a mother and child. And the paintings, when she could afford to make them, were equally anguished and gloomy. Neruda, who called the statuesque Hood the Amazon of Manhattan, wrote, “There is in the painting of Dorothy Hood, this desperate interrogation, an aesthetic of human pain.” In her semi-abstractions, women huddled in dark corners and ghosts chased people as they fled in terror.

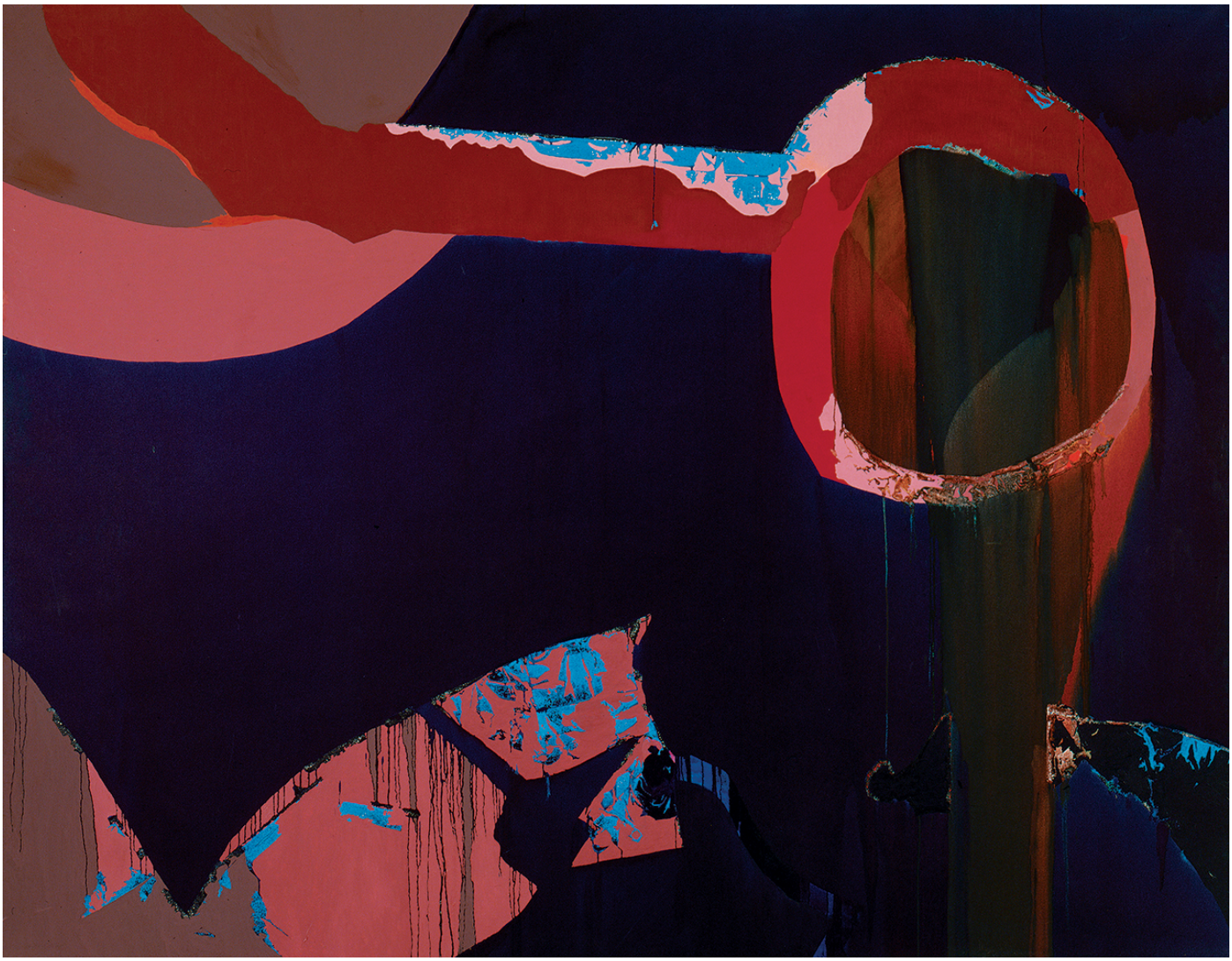
In 1943, after Hood had been in the city only two years, the Galería de Arte María Asúnsolo hosted a one-woman show for the 25-year-old artist, attracting such notable painters as Montenegro and Covarrubias. News reached the *Houston Chronicle,* which noted the stir Hood was making with the critics. “The case of this young woman painter is a source of inspiration,” wrote a reviewer at the Mexican magazine *Las Artes*. “Dorothy Hood’s painting is human, profoundly and barefacedly human.”

For a short time in the mid-forties, after splitting up with Sender, Hood left Mexico and moved around Houston and the East Coast, developing important relationships in the New York art world with the influential Museum of Modern Art curator Dorothy Miller and the director of the esteemed Willard Gallery, Marian Willard. But Hood didn’t feel she belonged. Her influences were from Latin America as much as New York, and the scene was too competitive.

So she returned to Mexico City in 1945, where, at Rivera’s house, she met José María Velasco Maidana, a famous, dashing, and charismatic Bolivian composer 22 years her senior, a man who’d conducted all over Latin America and the United States, including six concerts with Arturo Toscanini’s NBC Symphony Orchestra. Maidana was a heroic character, an expat who had been thrown out of Bolivia by its right-wing government. When he walked through the streets of Mexico, some say, children would follow him and give him flowers. Harlequin bodice-ripper authors could not have invented a more

romantic partner. “She used to tell me stories of how incredible it was to be with him when they were young,” one friend said. “He would dance around and throw her on the bed.”

They married in 1946, and for the next fifteen years, Hood and Maidana bounced between the Mexico City area and towns in the States. (She even indulged Maidana in a medallion jewelry business in Mount Vernon, New York, an endeavor that left her exhausted, with little time to paint.) But by the time Hood was in her early forties, Maidana, then in his early sixties, was showing signs of Parkinson’s disease, and his career was on the decline. Many of her friends had died or were leaving Mexico, and Hood was beginning to feel unwelcome. “I am an American artist, and I am hardly ever there,” she wrote to the Houston gallerist Meredith Long. She started wondering if it was time to return to Texas.



One of Hood’s most important paintings, Zeus Weeps, 1972.

Zeus Weeps, 1972, oil on canvas, 88 1/4” x 115 1/4”, Blanton Museum of Art, The

University of Texas at Austin, Gift of the Childe Hassam Fund of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1974; Photograph of Zeus Weeps: Rick Hall

Houston in the late fifties and early sixties was an experimental, booming city. Oil money flowed through all areas of commerce, the space program was taking shape, and the art audience, while not large, was growing increasingly sophisticated. John and Dominique de Menil put their support behind the Contemporary Arts Association and helped bring exhibits of Alexander Calder, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst to the city, and a few galleries began to show local contemporary art. This was not the conservative Houston of Hood's youth, with its paintings of bluebonnets and ranches. And when she returned, in 1962, she quickly became the grande dame of the arts scene, costumed for openings in furs and hats and gliding about in a queenly manner, holding court.

Since she was terrible at managing her money, Hood was considerably relieved when Long—whose gallery was one of the few places in Houston at that time where an artist could sell works to wealthy patrons—signed on as her dealer and put her on a monthly stipend. Hood felt that she was in good hands. Long knew how to work with wealthy buyers, he could build collections for people, and he guaranteed his artists a major exhibition every other year.

A small circle of artists was forming, one that would come to dominate the sixties and seventies scene in Houston; a common joke at the time was that if Hood, Dick Wray, Jack Boynton, Richard Stout, and Jim Love were killed in a car wreck, the Houston art world would have to start all over again. But while Hood enjoyed the independence that came with being apart from a "school," a freedom she hadn't felt in Mexico and New York, she also noticed a competitiveness far removed from the camaraderie she had experienced south of the border. "You sit at a table and think there's plenty for everybody to eat, but there wasn't—at all," she once told Kalil. Though she enjoyed her peers and would later move in next door to Wray, in a bungalow in the Heights neighborhood, she felt separated from them. She was the only female, she was older, she was married, and she was settled into a bourgeois life.

Still, the respect from her fellow artists was immediate. Stout, the only surviving member of that foundational circle, remembers Hood's first Houston opening during that period, at Katherine Swenson's New Arts Gallery. "When Dorothy had this show of her drawings, the black ink drawings on gray paper, it was like a recognition that someone from Mexico from our own general milieu had surfaced in the most interesting way," he said. By this time, the drawings were less fearsome and more eerily strange, with an outsider quality to them: curvy abstract shapes evoked aquatic life or outer-space

otherworldliness. “Everyone paid attention. The drawings were breathtaking. No one had seen anything like that.”

Then, in the late sixties, her work took a turn. Knowing that Hood had been using a room in her rental house as a studio, the then director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Sebastian “Lefty” Adler, leased a small building for her to use and changed her art forever. “He’d come over to the studio and be on the floor,” she told Kalil. “Then he’d sort of wallow and roll over and say, ‘I want you to make big paintings —you can do it!’”

The size of the paintings began to grow, from her previous five-by-six-foot scale to enormous ten-by-eight-foot canvases, and the bigger the works became, the better her results. Those around her recognized the paintings as masterful achievements. Emotionally challenging abstract plains and streaks of color in Hood’s works did not sit quietly on the wall—they hit “like a gong” is how one friend put it—and they couldn’t have come along at a better time, as the office buildings multiplying in downtown Houston needed to fill their large wall space.

As her work grew in complexity, her personal life did too. Maidana, who was suffering from severe dementia, would sit at his piano all day, unable to compose. Hood would occasionally receive emergency calls that he had wandered off down the street. Visitors to the home at that time say she continued to dote on him, speaking in slow, deliberate Spanish, as he had never learned English. But he required nursing visits and constant attention, and Hood couldn’t always hide the stress of that burden.

For a person who needed support more than ever, Hood didn’t fixate on cultivating her friendships. Even people who venerated her describe her as aloof, elitist, and self-centered. Often, she couldn’t hold her tongue, firing off a letter in a rage, then apologizing, then torching the bridge altogether.

Her passive-aggressive tendencies flourished in her studio as well, where she was hardly the world’s greatest marketing guru. “My wife and I were trying to buy some things once,” said William Camfield, a Rice University art history professor. “She looked at me and said, ‘I can’t understand why you want that. That’s the most violent or erotic thing I’ve ever done!’ So she wouldn’t sell it!”

Yet Hood loyalists adored her: she was unique, she was intelligent, she was passionate. They allowed her the same leeway she often allowed herself, and the strict rules of social behavior did not apply. As Maidana grew more ill, Hood, then in her fifties, began to flirt—and more—with various romantic prospects, carrying on a noteworthy

correspondence with the influential art critic Clement Greenberg, who wrote to her that she was still “nubile enough to bring up thoughts of sex. Take that into consideration. And beware, and then don’t.” And in 1973, while visiting Europe on a travel grant, she met Baron Krister Kuylenstierna, a tall, dignified man with thick eyebrows and an intense face who counted among his friends Frank Lloyd Wright, Carl Jung, and Aldous Huxley. She quickly developed a daily correspondence that continued until his death, in 1987, interspersed with passionate rendezvous around the world.

By 1971, she’d had a pivotal solo exhibition at the CAMH, followed by solo shows at Rice University and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, in New York, and her opportunities for the rest of the decade abounded. She won awards, and her work was incorporated into prestigious collections. A solo exhibit of her drawings started at the Everson Museum of Art, in Syracuse, and traveled around the country. Her work, which by this point included collages, was exhibited nationally and internationally. She always had something in the works: Abrams was going to publish her book; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston was going to organize her retrospective. All she needed was a major show at a New York gallery that would transform her from a regional painter into a significant American artist. Hood was on the verge of stardom. She could feel it.

Texas artists—like all American artists outside New York City—have always had more difficulty getting noticed. Forrest Bess, the eccentric fisherman from Bay City, found rare success in Texas in his lifetime, but Robert Rauschenberg and Julian Schnabel became famous only after they left the state, and Donald Judd was already established when he started spending time in Marfa. “We were then determined to be flyover, nothing more,” said Stout. (“That has not changed,” he added.) A woman painter outside New York had an even harder time breaking through. “I found this letter from a gallery in New York that, at the time, represented Joan Mitchell, who is *the* expressionist woman artist,” Kalil said. “The letter [to Dorothy Hood] said, ‘Well, thank you so much, we like your work, but we’re already representing Joan Mitchell, and she wouldn’t like another woman artist in the gallery at this time.’ It’s almost like they had room for one woman artist.”

After Maidana and her lover, Kuylenstierna, died, in the eighties, Hood clearly came unmoored. Her work increasingly turned to a theme of mortality, and she began investigating Eastern spirituality, traveling to India with a new friend, Krishna Dronamraju, a handsome, intelligent geneticist seventeen years younger.

But as the friendship deepened and became romantic, many of Hood’s other friends found Dronamraju off-putting, and as he began to take control of her business affairs, the relationship raised eyebrows among them. “She was definitely under his spell,” one

friend said. “He was a more domineering character than Velasco [Maidana].” Hood stuck by Dronamraju and defended him, even after he pleaded no contest to attempted sexual assault, in 1997. According to the police report, he undressed himself and groped an employee on her first day of work for him. He was sentenced to seven years’ probation. (Reached by phone, Dronamraju had no comment about the charges and said little about Hood. “I haven’t thought about her” was all he would tell me. “She died long ago.”)

Throughout the eighties and nineties, as more artists came onto the scene, Hood was still in demand, and people in Houston continued to want pieces of her work. Long got Hood’s paintings into major museum collections: the Whitney, the MFAH, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. He was selling her in Houston and even exhibited her work in 1980 at a gallery he’d opened in New York (the gallery later closed). But Hood was disappointed by his efforts. He barely raised prices, she complained. Moreover, “He didn’t promote her in a way in which she wanted to be promoted,” said a friend. Hood’s associates who told her to end her business relationship with Long remember her saying, “He has always been there, and he helped me before anybody else. I’m loyal.” And she was. Until she wasn’t.

“She did out-of-the-studio trades all the time,” remembered her half-brother, Frank Hood. As she profited off of Long’s promotion, she circumvented his cut by selling the work directly to her fans—a cardinal sin in the art world. When word of Hood’s dealing reached Long, “Meredith told her not to,” remembered Stout. “And Meredith told her again.”

It was Long who eventually severed their relationship, in 1996, and their split—a fight one art enthusiast described as World War III—created waves in the Houston art community. Many say that Long, now 87 years old, remains angry. (Long declined a request for an interview.) At age 77, Hood was without a dealer, and she would soon face the biggest challenge of her life: she was diagnosed with breast cancer, leading to a mastectomy and chemotherapy.

Yet her work continued to plumb the depths of her imagination, expressing her headlong engagement with the end. Dark abstractions crackle and explode on the canvases, and sinister blues and reds pierce the blackness in sinuous thin lines.

Knowing, by this point, that she would not become famous while she was alive, Hood created a foundation that would care for her legacy, and she reserved a few dozen of her favorite works from this period for her personal collection. “I picked this one

painting—gorgeous black-and-white huge abstract work—and it was just stunning, and I said, 'Boy, I'd like to have that,'" said Kathryn Davidson, who got to know Hood's work when she was a curator at the Menil Collection from 1966 to 1989. "She said, 'I wouldn't lend that—that's a very special painting.'"

Always persistent, in her caftan (and sometimes, now, a turban), Hood pursued other galleries that would work with her, placing Dronamraju in charge. "I recall that Krishna came into the gallery in '97 or '98," remembered Lynn Goode*, who owned a space called the Lynn Goode Gallery. "I went to Dorothy's studio, but it was clear to me that there was no real access to Dorothy at that time. All access was through him. . . . I was very intrigued with her work, and he kind of took over and managed it all, and I found I couldn't work with him."

When Hood died, on October 28, 2000, Dronamraju was the sole heir to her estate.

Haiti, painted in 1969, measures ten feet by eight feet.

Haiti, 1969, Oil on Canvas, 120” x 96”; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith Long; Photograph of Haiti: The Museum of Fine Arts,

Located on the edge of Corpus Christi Bay, where dolphins can be seen jumping by its large windows, the entrance to the Art Museum of South Texas masterfully employs height, air, light, and water. When the museum opened its doors, in 1972, its influential architect, Philip Johnson, wrote that it was “the most interesting building I have ever done.” Along with Johnson, the inaugural ceremonies brought in luminaries Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns. According to one attendee, “Corpus Christi didn’t know what hit them.”

Nearly thirty years later, in 2001, Bill Otton, then the director of the museum, received a letter from Dronamraju inquiring whether the institution was interested in acquiring the artwork that remained at Hood’s residence. Otton was working on a $10 million capital campaign to add a Ricardo Legorreta–designed wing to the building, doubling its space, and it pained him to ask patrons for any more money. But he was struck by the offer: Dronamraju stated that the museum could have the works—along with other items from Hood’s studio—if it paid Hood’s outstanding medical bills, in excess of $50,000. Back in the eighties, the MoMA’s esteemed former director of exhibitions and publications, Monroe Wheeler, had advised Otton that if he ever had an opportunity to acquire a great collection, he should move quickly.

So he did. Though few people in Corpus Christi at the time collected modern art—especially abstraction—Otton believed Hood was the mother of modern art in Texas, and he trusted his gut. He asked the museum’s board for a loan, which he planned to repay by selling a few Hood paintings, and a week after signing the papers, Otton’s small team drove up to Hood’s studio with a 24-foot truck.

They returned with two such trucks. Dronamraju had held an estate sale for the kitchenware and much of the furnishings, but the studio remained filled with Hood’s works, art supplies, and inspiration. “As we took the works from the studio, he had a list of size categories for the paintings and selected what he wanted from each group as we took them out of the studio,” Otton said. Otton had been told that Hood’s most prized paintings—the ones she told people she had been setting aside—would stay with Dronamraju. Yet the works Otton and his museum staff drove back to Corpus Christi were spectacular. If they were good stewards of the collection, he thought, people might one day make pilgrimages for scholarly research. The Art Museum of South Texas could become a repository for all things Dorothy Hood.

But that grand ambition would have to wait. After the museum’s dazzling Legorreta wing

opened, in 2006, Otton retired. He was replaced by a man named Joe Schenk, the former director of the Gilcrease Museum, in Tulsa, and other projects soon took priority. Because of the small size of the staff, most of Hood's archive sat in the museum vault for the next six years. That is, until Kalil got to work.

As she sorted through the archive, Kalil knew her main obstacle would be money. For the conservation, crating, and shipping of a museum's worth of gigantic paintings, she was going to need hundreds of thousands of dollars—and she knew where to get it.

The wealthy Houston art collector, fundraiser, and philanthropist Carolyn Farb had long been a fan of Hood's. She'd even funded a short film about the artist in 1985 titled *The Color of Life.* After Kalil reached out to her, Farb unleashed her magical fund-raising powers, which have been known to bring in seven-figure sums in a single evening. Taking the role of underwriting chair, she sent letters, made calls, and held a party for potential donors—former students, art enthusiasts, and collectors like Steven* Borick, the retired president and CEO of the aluminum-wheel company Superior Industries, who contributed roughly $250,000—and eventually helped the museum raise more than a million dollars for the project.

Hood's fans found the enthusiasm for the show invigorating—and the timing seemed right: people were giving more-serious attention to abstract artists who had slipped through the cracks. "The whole community felt like something might finally get done," said the painter Lynn Randolph.

"She was a creative genius as an artist and should have had major exhibitions years ago," said Davidson, the former Menil curator.

The exhibition, "Dorothy Hood: The Color of Being/El Color del Ser," is scheduled to open on September 30 of this year. It will fill nearly the entire 60,000-square-foot building with 86 paintings, 46 drawings, 29 collages, archival elements like paintbrushes and correspondence from her collection, and a re-creation of her studio. Kalil's book of the same title will be published this fall by Texas A&M University Press. This is no small feat, no typical exhibition. Except for Rauschenberg, perhaps, no Texas artist of Hood's generation has ever received as momentous or as thorough a treatment in the state. This could be her moment.

In February 2015, Farb began an email barrage that no museum director would want to receive. She was fuming at the Art Museum of South Texas, sending Schenk and other employees a rat-a-tat of questions about the exhibit. Farb was angry that the Hood exhibit had not yet been scheduled to tour—an element essential for an artist to gain

wider recognition. The money was there; this was a singular opportunity. “When I agreed to become the underwriting chair, I was under the impression that an exhibition of Dorothy Hood’s magnitude and a major part of the museum’s archives would travel to several venues,” she wrote. “It has been my understanding through past museum experience that these travel arrangements, contracts, specifics, and other details need to be scheduled at least two years in advance.”

Schenk responded, “You are correct about the retrospective and traveling show. . . . The timeline for getting the traveling show together, while condensed due to other issues, is still doable. We have a target list for the traveling venues and are exploring them.”

This seemed to make Farb angrier. “What has been done thus far?” she wrote. “If nothing has been done, why not? What does it take to get this most important aspect of this exhibition moving?”

Farb was fed-up. In her view, she had helped the museum raise more than a million dollars for an exhibit that few would see. “If you’re going to put on a major exhibition and do a monograph, it’s just a natural thing that it would follow to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, that it could go to the Dallas Museum of Art, that it could go east to other museums, or west, where she has her work,” Farb told me last May. “We’re not trying to advocate for someone who is not worthy for this type of exhibit.”

She was not alone in her frustration. Some said that Schenk didn’t have the connections to sell this type of show—that, as a former president of the Mountain-Plains Museums Association, which includes art and history museums with a primarily Western bent, such as the National Museum of Wildlife Art at Jackson Hole, he lacked the influence with modern-art museums that would have had a natural interest.

Last June, sitting at a small, round table in his office overlooking one of the museum’s galleries, Schenk was genial, with a businesslike, grandfatherly comportment. When asked about his critics, he replied, “Let me say, yes, it’s going to tour, and, yes, it will be seen in Houston—in a different rendition.” Explaining that he simply could find no venues thus far, he listed the typical obstacles: museums have their own missions, projects, and boards. (As the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston curator Alison de Lima Greene told me, “We’re in the middle of getting ready for a big building expansion project, and the scale they proposed for us didn’t work because of a lot of factors.”)

Despite the disappointments, Schenk seemed upbeat. “I think it’s going to take the show opening and the book coming out,” he said, “because I think a lot of people—it’s a ‘show me’ kind of thing.” He believed that the exhibit would follow a similar trajectory

as the Alexandre Hogue show Kalil curated for his museum back in 2011, which began at the Art Museum of South Texas, toured briefly around the state, then later toured again in a modified form in New York, Texas, and Oklahoma. “What we intend to do is invite curators and directors to go see the show . . . and ‘Let’s talk about where do you have an opening in your schedule, and can you do it, and what is your scope?’ It’s definitely our intention,” he said.

His primary focus was getting people from Corpus Christi into the museum. “People feel threatened by abstraction,” he said, and he argued that an interactive component for the exhibit that he has commissioned will address that concern with flair. He enthusiastically described how museum visitors would enter the exhibit and see a “deconstructed Dorothy” painting on layers of scrim hanging from the ceiling—“so you can see how it developed from the gessoed canvas to the finished product.” And because many museum guests tend to bypass the artwork and head directly to the attached cafe, three cameras will capture the visitors’ moving images on the walkway leading to the restaurant and project them along a wall. The effect, Schenk said, is that visitors themselves “will turn into an abstract painting” by the time they reach the cafe.

Perhaps the station Schenk was most excited about is the one that will provide visitors with a tool with which they can move across a screen and create virtual brushstrokes on a wall canvas. “So you can try your hand at painting,” Schenk said. “Because so often, when you deal with abstraction, so many people say, ‘Oh, well, my three-year-old could do that’ or ‘A chimp could do that.’ But could you do it successfully? It gives them a chance to experience that.”

News of these interactive elements reached Farb and some other Hood fans months ago, and it did not sit well. “That’s a ridiculous waste of money,” said Barbara Rose, the historian. “I can’t begin to say how stupid that is. . . . They totally bungled it, especially spending all that money on the *glamorous* interactive program, money that could have been used to travel the exhibition all over the U.S. and Europe and to pay for major national PR. It will be a great show because of the work and a great book because Susie Kalil is such a terrific writer, but who knows if the show or book will receive any serious attention.”

It is certainly possible to re-curate the show, Kalil said, though it would be difficult with this particular exhibit, on this scale. Paintings, drawings, and collages will soon arrive from 95 lenders, and when the show ends, on January 8, 2017, those works will be returned. To reprise the show—especially with paintings that are twelve feet by ten feet, shipped in crates that cost $2,500 to $4,000 each—an outside museum would bear a

bigger financial burden than if it had attached itself to this particular exhibit and shared expenses.

While some Hood loyalists already assess the show as a lost opportunity, there's still a chance that her work will gain some acclaim. "In my own experience," said de Lima Greene, "every time I curate a show, I send the information out in the world and other people pick it up and find ways of using it in their projects. Maybe the next Dorothy Hood show will be Dorothy Hood and other women artists. The next Dorothy Hood show may be Dorothy Hood and Texas sculptors of her generation—things we cannot even anticipate right now—and that, I think, is the most exciting thing that can happen: the unanticipated serendipity of when someone says, 'This is so exciting! I can do more with it.' That is what one looks for."

Even near the end of her life, Hood still believed the depth and greatness of her work would one day be widely appreciated. This may be her time, it may not. But even if the exhibit doesn't thrust her work into the national conversation this fall, it will show Texans who have forgotten or overlooked her that Hood was one of the best artists the state has ever produced. "People will see [abstract color-field painters] Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler as being first in line—well, they're not. And their work is not nearly as interesting as Dorothy's work," Stout said. "Dorothy's work is the first and most important bridge between art made in Texas and Mexico. It is very sophisticated and brilliant. I don't think people in New York City are too interested in this subject, but we are." For now, that will have to be enough.

**Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the names of Steven Borick and Lynn Goode. We regret the errors.*

Tags: **Art**, **Longreads**, **Society**, **The Culture**, **abstract art**, **Art Museum of South Texas**, **carolyn farb**, **dorothy hood**