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Hotel Room from Hell

The must-see work in London



Installation view of Dorothea Tanning, *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73) at Tate Modern (2019). © Tate photography (Andrew Dunkley)

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Published 2 May 2019 in [Must See](#)

Dorothea Tanning's three-walled stage-set-cum-sculpture *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73) conjures up a fearsome place. By the light of a naked dangling bulb a pair of pink fabric bodies explode from the dingy paper lining the walls, while two more human-like forms are in an unholy alliance with the furniture. Meanwhile, a chimney breast appears to be giving birth to a tangle of lumpen shapes look part-human, part-beast. In a jarring juxtaposition, these creatures within the room, conjured from Tanning's subconscious, are covered in a stifling layer of tweed—that most respectable of fabrics.

Tanning (1910-2012) said that she wanted the work to possess “an odd banality”, while also being unnerving enough to suggest that the wallpaper might “further tear with screams”. Indeed, this small drab room pulsates with sinister possibility, giving expression to the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich*—where a familiar thing or event is encountered in an unsettling, eerie or *taboo* context.

Enough to suggest that the wallpaper might “further tear with screams”

This early example of sculptural installation was unveiled at Tanning’s first survey exhibition—at the [Centre National d’Art Contemporain](#) in Paris in 1974—and is currently the star of a major retrospective at [Tate Modern](#) (“Dorothea Tanning”, until 9 June)

Tanning was in her 50s when she started working with fabric. Her work had already begun a dramatic shift from crisp and meticulous figurative Surrealist paintings into a looser and more fragmented abstraction during the mid-1950s, which she described as “prismatic surfaces”.

With her soft sculptures, which first appeared in the form of the wonderfully titled black velvet work *Pincushion to Serve as Fetish* (1965) and culminated in *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202*, Tanning broke into radical new territory. It was apparently the clashing sounds she heard during a performance in 1969 of *Stockhausen’s Hymnen* at the Maison de la Radio in Paris that inspired the decision to make her fabric works play with and off of the human form—or as she put it, to work with “living materials becoming living sculptures.”



Dorothea Tanning, *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73) at Tate Modern.

© Tate photography (Andrew Dunkley)

She saw these bizarre bodily forms (precursors to the fabric works of [Louise Bourgeois](#), [Annette Messager](#) and [Sarah Lucas](#), to name but a few) as “the avatars, three-dimensional ones, of my two-dimensional painted universe”, she said.

Certainly, *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202*, and its occupants distill many key Tanning themes: bodies in a state of flux, open doors offering ambiguous possibilities and the violent disruption of a domestic space in which infinite psychosexual possibilities teem beneath the surface. Right from the start, her work is charged with a ferocious energy that, in her paintings, causes clothing to rip and unravel, forms to fragment and bicycles to hurtle through the air.

Here, in the force field of *Hôtel du Pavot*, that energy erupts with an intensity that owes a debt to Tanning’s experience of working on sets and designs with the choreographer [George Balanchine](#) in the 1940s and 1950s.

This disconcerting work is testament to her long and complicated relationship with Surrealism. Tanning is commonly described as a Surrealist artist, the girl from Illinois who came to New York, was talent-spotted by [Max Ernst](#) and became his wife of 30 years. While there is no doubt that her encounter with the massive [1936-37 exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism”](#) at New York’s [Museum of Modern Art](#) was an artistic road to Damascus, and that she shared many of the movement’s central concerns (and was of course married to one of its key figures), Tanning was never a signed-up member of the group—instead, she considered Surrealism to be a philosophical rather than an artistic movement.

Tanning had an enduring dislike of labels, declaring that being called Surrealist made her feel like “a fossil”. She especially resented being defined as a woman artist and took particular exception to her work being discussed in the context of her marriage to Ernst. It was this dogged individualism and freedom of spirit that enabled Tanning to extend, invigorate and liberate the language of Surrealism, and in *Hôtel De Pavot, Chambre 202*—one of the most stunning and unnerving works of the second half of the 20th century—to claim it for herself.

Dorothea Tanning, *Hôtel De Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73), Tate Modern, London