

Dorothea Tanning and her Gothic Imagination

Victoria Carruthers
University of Sydney

Each of my paintings are steps marked on the same path. I don't see any cuts, any deviations. The same preoccupations are manifest since the beginning. Obsessions come to the surface as marks that can't be erased. My paintings, and lastly my sculptures, are part of the same search, with the same discoveries, the same storms, the same mad laughter, suffering and rebirth.¹

These were Dorothea Tanning's words to Alain Jouffroy in 1974, in which she claims that there is a continuity, a pathway of intention, underlying all of her work. Encompassing vastly different styles, mediums and techniques, the work revolves around a handful of obsessions and preoccupations. Influenced by the highly charged psycho-dramas of gothic and fantasy fiction and the subversive potential of Surrealism, Tanning develops imagery that seeks to explore the nature of feminine (and childhood) physical and sensual experience, collapsing the boundary between reality and fantasy in favor of a fluid imaginative universe in which all possibilities can potentially exist.

Many scholars have discussed the emergence of a gothic sensibility as a reaction to the socio-political changes wrought by the rise of industrialism and the Enlightenment emphasis on empiricism and reason. David Punter² and Rosemary Jackson³ specifically discuss gothic fiction in terms of the disruptive potential of fantasy. Feminist scholars Susan Suleiman⁴ and more recently Susanne Becker⁵ and Diana Heiland,⁶ are attracted to the gothic for its potential to subvert patriarchal culture through anti-realism, the depiction of altered physical and non-human states and an interest in feminine experience. Becker uses the word "filiation" to describe

Victoria Carruthers: vacarruthers@hotmail.com

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the way in which a gothic sensibility cultivates connections with the domestic, experiential, emotional and physical spheres of the feminine. The notion of excess, exaggeration, the grotesque and the chaotic are deeply embedded into the fabric of the gothic, positioning it as part of a postmodern discourse that resonates with a late twentieth century *fin de siècle* sense of anxiety, fracture and hybridity.

Tanning herself understands the subversive potential of gothic and fantasy fiction when she stated to this author that “gothic fantasy was very influential in my life. It allowed the possibility of creating a new reality, one not dependant on bourgeois values but a way of showing what was actually happening under the tedium of daily life. Of course, I was always thrilled by terror and chaos also.”⁷⁷ The use of the word terror here is interesting. Anne Williams discusses the distinction between terror and horror in her essay entitled “Edifying Narratives, The Gothic Novel, 1764-1997” arguing that horror “springs out of a fundamentally conservative world view that adheres to the ancient Western model of reality,”⁷⁸ in other words, it rebels against a particular set of moral norms. She suggests that terror on the other hand, “is thoroughly revolutionary in its implications. Since terror is an experience of the imagination.”⁷⁹ She explains that the gothic genre usually utilizes the common device of first person narration, and by doing so, only ever allows the reader/ audience to receive part of the story. This device of the “unreliable narrator” not only challenges essentialist Enlightenment notions of truth but allows the audience to fully experience the action and imagery through their own understanding of it: there is a movement in the darkness or a light shining from a slightly open doorway, but we often never really see what the source of the terror is. The chemical reaction occurs in our own imagination. Certainly Tanning’s work demonstrates a desire to convey the anticipation of dread rather than depict the dreaded event itself. In this way, the artist’s universe remains mysterious rather than explicit.

In the statement to Jouffroy, Tanning employs the language of drama, excess and the irrational, evoking what I will refer to here as a gothic sensibility. The storms and the maniacal laughter are familiar devices of the gothic trope. From an early stage, Tanning’s work utilizes the visual imagery found in the gothic novels she read in her youth, particularly the motif of the haunted house with its potential for both secret spaces and ordinariness, where supernatural activities could be folded into otherwise mundane, domestic interiors. Indeed, Katharine Conley begins her essay “Safe as Houses: Anamorphic Bodies in Ordinary Spaces: Miller Varo, Tanning, Woodman,”¹⁰ by reminding the reader that women artists have long depicted themselves within houses and more pertinently, as houses. She continues by observing that for these artists the “house” is an unsafe, haunted, alienating space, one that denies a sense of comfort and self-possession, suggesting that “Tanning’s

paintings redefine domestic space for young women as claustrophobic, haunted by malevolent spirits.”¹¹ Tanning is not the only woman artist to employ the house as a metaphor, but she is an artist that returns to and develops the motif throughout her entire career. Clearly the haunted house offers the artist a device with which to explore her preoccupation with thresholds and liminal spaces that connect reality and fantasy. Imagery depicting veils, fabric, walls, wallpaper and doorways are utilized throughout the artist’s career to signify the surfaces that reveal or conceal alternate states of reality. Ordinary domestic furniture is often used as a site for transformation and other-worldly inhabitation.

In this essay, I wish to explore the way in which a gothic sensibility is manifested throughout the body of Tanning’s work. By focusing on this theme I do not mean to be reductive or to downplay the enormous influence of Surrealism in Tanning’s experience, but rather to discuss a gothic sensibility that is clearly compatible with the artist’s understanding of Surrealism as a vehicle for disturbing the fabric of reality. The often obvious influence of a gothic sensibility in Tanning’s work needs more scholarly attention, and I am hoping to introduce the notion by touching on a broad sweep of examples that might illustrate some obvious confluences. The best known of Tanning’s works are arguably those from the 1940s in which the artist uses a precise naturalistic style to depict dreamscapes. Some of these pictures, usually referred to as surrealistic, will be discussed here. However, in moving away from this style towards a more abstracted practice, Tanning disbands her desire to portray the gothic as if she were illustrating a gothic tale, in favor of evoking the gothic sensibility of fracture and fragmentation through abstraction. In the late eighties, the artist produces a series of collages using torn paper; I would argue that by doing this she is literally performing a gothic sensibility. She explains the shift to abstraction in general to Jouffroy by saying that the movement away from a more conventional mimetic practice in painting and sculpture was part of a desire to convey a more immediate imaginative, embodied experience of the action to the viewer, “to invite the viewer directly into my own imagination.”¹² This shift parallels the commonly used device of first person in gothic writing to achieve the same effect. There also appears to be a striking similarity between the gothic device of the “unreliable narrator” and Tanning’s own narration of her life over and over again in memoirs, autobiographies, artist’s chronologies and explanations of her work. By far the majority of writing about the artist and her work to date has been by the artist herself. However, in telling and re-telling her stories in an alliterative and poetic style she weaves together memories, thoughts and words in such a way that reminds the reader of the relativity of personal histories, allowing the “facts” to recede into the ground like old bones, leaving a collection of images that I utilize intentionally here

to illuminate and compliment the artists imagery.

The following discussion will touch on the many confluences between Tanning's work and the gothic sensibility with reference to a wide variety of the artist's work: some early paintings; through her fictional writing in the form of the novel *Chasm* (2004); a sculptural installation; and concluding with an exploration of her shift to abstraction and the collages of 1988. As I have explained, I include a sweep of Tanning's recollections and explanations of her own work as a conscious reminder of another way in which she performs the gothic. I also explain how much of her imagery and penchant for high drama finds its roots in Tanning's early experience growing up in rural America and in her desperate desire to escape an environment where she recollects that "nothing ever happened but the wallpaper."¹³

A gothic childhood?

Born in 1910 in Galesburg, Illinois, Tanning recalls herself as an unusually small child, delicate in health, confined to the indoors, cosseted and pampered by her doting mother who allowed the "tantrums and tears and terrors to rise unchecked"¹⁴ in the young girl's imaginary games and voracious appetite for reading. From this universe of childhood sensuality and excess, are glimpses of the artist's early internal landscape. In *Between Lives*, Tanning recalls going to see a cowboy film with her father when she is around ten. In the darkened movie theatre with the 'blistering summer heat' outside, Tanning's young imagination, and her early tastes for adventure and sensual frisson, are fused with an awareness of everyday life:

... in the dark someone smiles at me from the screen: Lord Churlton. Blue moonlight shows me a careless leg encased in breeches and sensuously cuffed boot. It swings over the window sill. In a trice it has been followed by arms, torso, and head, all under plumed velvet hair, lace collar, doublet, gloves, rapier; and great hints of fine linen on pulsating muscles. Two cruel black eyes burn into mine. And while my father thrills to the clever cowboy Tony, I am lusting after Lord Churlton, the villain ... don't bother with that simpering lady wiggling her careful curls and swelling her bosom. Leave her to Tom Mix and come to me. I am waiting. Are you really a villain? What is a villain? O passionate Lord Churlton! I tried to draw him that evening. Not in his ruffled shirt and velvet redingote, or yet as Adam, but standing in a doorway and wearing red-striped pyjamas. As the fabric and tanned cheeks had to be coloured, out came my box of watercolours, the likeness was poor, but then, who could do justice to Lord Churlton? I dreamed of his coming to Galesburg, even as I knew that he would not ...¹⁵

Here we have burning passion and high romance fully assimilated into the orbit of the everyday: the hero, the ravisher, is imagined in red-striped pajamas, waiting for the young Tanning on the threshold of an exciting and unknown world of adult domesticity. Even the somewhat austere expectations placed on the Tanning family by the pastor and parishioners of the First Lutheran Church are transformed into an experience of sensuous resistance. The artist recalls:

My singing, dancing, miming and fondness for jazz music ... were godless, the arts of Satan to tempt you into certain hell. Dorothea considered them privately: hell, Satan, Sodom and Gomorrah, all flashing, all fiery—but wicked. Opulent Salome with her pretty red veils, and Venus always lying down, undraped, irresistible to weak but necessary humans. Angels, too, were naked, beautiful boys with wings and a flutter of veil across their groins, always that tiny veil, the caress. They hovered over their favorite mortals in the paintings in books; they told them to look behind the wallpaper.¹⁶

By referring to herself in the third person, Tanning shifts the prose from autobiography to poetic, fantastical fiction, and in doing so, slips in references to the secretive and astonishing worlds lurking under the surface of banality. Motifs such as veils, petals, wings and wallpaper would come to dominate much of her early work. By sliding in-between autobiography and fiction, fact and fantasy, Tanning linguistically creates a space in which the truth is slippery and relative, in much the same way as the more traditional gothic novelists use the device of the “unreliable narrator” to conceal or reveal the action in a less immediate, but more conspiratorial way. An emphasis on truth is replaced by an understanding that the reader is immersed in the world of story telling and shape-shifting. The huge influence of fiction is re-enforced as Tanning describes the importance of her experience, throughout her teens, of working in the Galesburg Public Library, where she would spend her time reading rather than “working.” Tanning’s recollection of reading those books considered to be of an adult nature (too much sensuality of one type or another!): “spell-binding revelations, those delicious hymns to decadence, dozens and dozens of them ... over the years, the library became my haven, its treasures slyly challenging the voice of ‘art’ in the tug of war for my ambitions, its sirens singing and cryings by turns, its weight crushing my fatuous certitudes forever.”¹⁷ It is not surprising, then, that an interest in using the vocabulary of the gothic resurfaces in the early 1940’s in Tanning’s work when she crystallizes her interests in feminine experience and female subjectivity through the experiences of a childhood, based

largely on her own experience of isolation, excess and drama.

Gothic interiors

Tanning's early work in the 1940s and 1950s takes up the drama and imagery of the gothic sensibility in her focus on confined interiors and domestic spaces, in which strange occurrences are folded into otherwise ordinary spaces. She develops the motifs of doors and wallpaper to represent thresholds into other possible realities, behind which something menacing or fantastic moves, and threatens to burst through. A lineage of imagery begins here: long strands of fly-away hair symbolize the notion of transformation and disruption that will themselves metamorphose into unfurling bolts of cloth, and eventually become layers of kaleidoscopic space that mark the artist's move towards abstraction. These spaces are more often than not populated by girls or young women who represent an emotional and physical in-between: not yet fettered by the rigors of adult rationality and bourgeois constraint, these girls violently tear at the veneer of normality, coming into direct contact with otherworldly forces, and showing us their inner secretive fantasies.

Tanning was already a convert to Surrealism by the time she saw the "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" exhibition in 1936, the effect of which she describes in her memoir *Between Lives* as her recognition of an "infinitely faceted world I must have been waiting for ... the limitless expanse of POSSIBILITY."¹⁸ In 1942 she met, and subsequently married Max Ernst, who unwittingly both facilitated her creativity and hindered her career.¹⁹ Early in 1943, they "escaped" the social, psychological and geographical confines of the city by visiting Sedona, Arizona, then a very small desert town "in the middle of nowhere, isolated and unsophisticated but, in many ways it was incredibly freeing for us."²⁰ In 1946, Tanning and Ernst moved there permanently. In the middle of the rocky desert, they built a house which "remained curiously unfinished in a way that never entirely left the desert outside."²¹ Tanning's response to the "vast openness of the land and sky,"²² the heat and isolation, was to withdraw into a psychological interior. She then develops visual imagery that reinforces her preoccupation with the gothic as a sensibility dedicated to imaginative excess and physical sensation, whilst also providing the perfect vehicle for the artist to find a voice for her own childhood memories and experiences of femininity. This arid and dramatic environment was itself a place that evoked extremes of desire and dread for the artist. In *Birthday*, she writes of the harsh light and soaring heat, of the windows that were never glazed, and of sultry desert evenings full of sounds and colors:

Then as now the decibels of nature can crush an artist's brain ... So I lock the door and paint interiors. Great events ... Chilly, secretive paintings that typify my response to the diabolical landscape outside.²³

Tanning uses this juxtaposition in her only novel, *Chasm*, begun in 1943 and extensively revised for publication in 2004.²⁴ The tale can only be described as a gothic drama in which the author deploys a number of conventional tropes of the genre: an imposing manor house haunted by the ghosts of the past; a leading man of "unnatural" fetishistic tastes (particularly for long skeins of hair cut from the heads of his victims), described as the personification of malignant forces, brooding, and somewhat vampiric; and a happy ending in which the rightful owners (the Baroness and her granddaughter) are restored to their lands. In the midst of this melodrama Tanning crafts the charismatic and somewhat otherworldly central protagonist in the figure of the seven-year-old Destina, a girl who easily manipulates the secretive world of the nursery as well as the vast and magical desert surrounding the house. The child is inextricably linked with the ancient and shamanistic powers of the desert, collecting visceral and talismanic items from the creatures within it (eyes that she keeps in a box of treasures) and enjoying nightly *rendez vous* with a mountain lion with whom she is inextricably and enigmatically connected.

Destina is the incarnation of the children and adolescents that populate the strange and secretive domestic settings that arise again and again in paintings from 1942 to the mid-1950s, when Tanning and Ernst begin spending more time in Europe, and finally move there around 1954. In these pictures, the artist's obsession with a childhood subjectivity that is replete with transformative potential is manifested in girls often positioned on the cusp of their physical maturity and all that it implies. They occupy states of psycho-emotional intensity that affords access to apparently otherworldly powers. It is not surprising, then, that the fantasy fiction and gothic terror tales of Tanning's own youth, which furnished her imagination so sumptuously, are invoked to provide the landscape where much of this action takes place. As Tanning states:

In many ways my early paintings always represented a challenge to me. Sometimes they are wicked and full of traps and sometimes they are illustrations, if you like, of childhood fairy tales and fantasies that are of my own making. I still dream about them and get frightened by them, probably because anything, terrifying or joyful, or preferably both, can happen in them.²⁵

In 1953 the major works from this period were collected together and shown at the Alexander Iolas Gallery in New York. The invitation to the exhibition was a drawing of a window with surrounding frame and blind. Where the glass should be was a poem written by Tanning:

Interiors with
windows eggs loud
and soft music,
tables intruders
whole families
nighttimes day-
times and one
with sudden
joy

There is, indeed, a painting entitled *Interior with Sudden Joy* (1951), that depicts two young girls clothed only in their Edwardian lace underwear and little pairs of red, high-heeled court shoes, faces plastered with make-up, provocatively arm-in-arm and smoking cigarettes. It is a secretive interior reminiscent of a school room, with white chalked words and symbols on a blackboard in the background sporting notes quoted from Rimbaud's secret notebooks. There are little eruptions of activity in this room where the action looks suddenly stopped in time. However, other large paintings in the show display richly painted, highly naturalistic pictures in which nightmarish events take place in ordinary surroundings. *The Guest Room* (1950-52, Fig. 1) is dominated by a naked girl who stands at the open doorway of the "guest room." Her body is clearly on the cusp of pubescence, and she has no alternative other than to grow into the adult sized hands and feet the artist has given her. She looks directly, although passively, at the viewer, as if suggesting that she is ushering us into her private space. The figure is abject and sad looking rather than sexualized. A huge swathe of fabric is folded and draped into a frame for the scene, as if a curtain has been pulled back to allow us to see something otherwise hidden. Both Gen Doy²⁶ and George Banu,²⁷ in their respective books on the use of fabric in visual iconography, see the curtain in painting as a representation of a threshold between different kinds of perception. Doy in particular sees the use of curtains, drapes and drapery as a threshold between the real and the illusory, the seen and the unseen.²⁸ Inside the darkened room there is a double bed containing a girl embracing a life-sized doll, dwarves, broken eggs and other signs of a struggle. Outside is a shadowy, blindfolded double of the girl in the doorway. The picture conveys all the uncanny



Fig. 1. Dorothea Tanning, *The Guest Room*, 1950-52, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

and enigmatic elements of fairy tales, gothic narratives and strange dreamscapes full of menace and reference to sexual initiation. If the “guest room” is a metaphor for the unconscious, then is this an image of fear of sexual destiny? Speaking later of the *Guest Room* and another picture of the same period, *Guardian Angels* (1947), Linda Nochlin suggests that “in all Tanning’s iconography, women’s sexual initiation is depicted as at once ominous and attractive, and in either case inevitably implicated with death.”²⁹ This sentiment is reminiscent of Jean Christophe Bailly’s description of the way in which Tanning seems to depict a disturbing Otherness of childhood, “at once desired and dreaded.”³⁰ Nochlin goes on to describe the events of the scene as “oddly juxtaposed obscenity and coziness.”³¹ Not a bad description of the often frightening or excessive occurrences that may take place in the most banal, domestic settings.

Also included in the Iolas Gallery show was *Some Roses and Their Phantoms* (1952, Fig. 2), a very idiosyncratic example of a “still life” which combines the



Fig. 2. Dorothea Tanning, *Some Roses and Their Phantoms*, 1952, oil on canvas, Tate London, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

banality of everyday reality with a secretive other world. The image presents a domestic world transformed by mysterious eruptions and inhabited by nightmarish, anthropomorphic creatures. Here, the linen tablecloth suggests domesticity, family life, and the same middle class mores and conservatism so familiar to Tanning herself. The artist remembers the weekly domestic ritual of unfolding the crisp, white linen tablecloth in terms of its transformative possibility: “laying it over the family dining table, so smooth and cool and heavy. It was fascinating to me. The table was transformed by a pattern of sharp creases etched onto the surface, of peaks and troughs that fell over the sides and folded in and around our laps.”³² The theme of mundane domesticity is both reinforced and undermined by the single white plate in the foreground that appears to emerge from and recede into the cloth simultaneously. This is clearly a gothic tale: a domestic reality into which the supernatural threatens to invade. From the suggestive topography of the table top, three-dimensional avatars emerge half-formed, misshapen, in various stages

of etymological or botanical metamorphoses. In the background, disturbances, like stains, threaten to break through the wallpaper, now a familiar motif. Behind the table a large rose-like creature stares at the viewer with a somber, melancholy eye. According to Tanning, *Some Roses and Their Phantoms* contains “an almost primitive, fundamental acceptance of a primarily sensorial world, one in which powerful supernatural forces inhabit the eerie landscapes of both the natural environment and in the recesses of the imagination, particularly the childhood imagination, where the extraordinary can exist unhampered by disbelief or logic.”³³ Given that the painting is larger than usual for Tanning at this stage in her career, perhaps the intention is for it to be “life-sized.” The obvious question is whether this picture is actually meant to be *a child’s eye view* of the surrounding reality, one in which the tedium of daily dining has been replaced by an imaginary scene of confrontation: the open-eyed creature being a dining companion who stares back directly from the opposite side of the table. Reminiscent of Breton’s musings in “The Great Transparent Ones” at the end of the *Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto*, in which he suggests that a whole universe of “beings” unknown, and stubbornly unseen by us [adults] may in fact exist, hidden in secret camouflage until we consciously let go of our claim to a dominant viewpoint.³⁴

In 2000, *Some Roses and Their Phantoms* was shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of a retrospective of Tanning’s work. In the accompanying note for the picture Tanning conflates the images of the tablecloth with that of the canvas to describe the way the creative process emerges from the smoothed, white surfaces of both:

Here some roses from a very different garden sit? lie? stand? gasp, dream die?—on white linen. They may serve you tea or coffee. As I saw them take shape on the canvas I was amazed by their solemn colours and their quiet mystery that called for—seemed to demand—some sort of phantoms. So I tried to give them their phantoms and their still-lifeness. Did I succeed? Clearly they are not going to tell me, but the white linen gave me a good feeling as if I had folded it myself, then opened it on the table.³⁵

Tanning’s statement elucidates how opposing forces are reconciled in the imagination: still life has the capacity to dissolve into nothing but a ghostly, gothic miasma. Anchoring this strange vision is the simple sensuality of the rituals of family life, the smell of freshly laundered linen, the comfortable geometry of the crisp folds. Motifs from childhood are never very far away from these early works. The iconography of the confined interior as a stage where events lead to a kind of



Fig. 3. Dorothea Tanning, *Children's Games*, 1942, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

liberation of the imagination is repeated over and over again.

This co-mingling of high drama with fantasy is evident in two of Tanning's best known works produced early during this period: *Children's Games* (1942, Fig. 3) and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943). In the former, two little girls create havoc by tearing strips off the walls of a narrow corridor with a kind of frenzied energy. The shapes of their tangled and wildly flying hair is echoed in the lengths of torn paper which reveal both the sensual belly of a woman with just a fringe of pubic hair peeping over the ripped paper on the one hand, and on the other, what appears to be the belly of a flame-haired monster. A wide strip of fabric is also torn away from one of the girl's clothing, exposing the pale curve of her back from buttocks to a thick skein of sumptuous hair that begins at her nape and travels upwards above her head and into the 'navel' of the glossy red hair contained under the paper. Thus,

umbilically connected to it, *becoming* it, through the unstoppable wave of her own auburn hair, this child demonstrates a rich, visceral connection with her own creative, supernatural imaginings. Again we see possibilities and parallel worlds lurking just under the venerated surface of normality. The wallpaper serves as a symbol of middle class conservatism, torn off the walls to reveal a hidden world that is bursting with strange imaginings that were, perhaps, there all along. Here in the confines of an otherwise unremarkable domestic interior a seismic shift of reason is taking place. The sheer violence of the children's actions: tearing, stripping, ripping and assaulting stands in radical opposition to the notion of innocence, passivity and subordination so often attributed to the young. The vivid and powerful experience of her own childhood imaginings leads the artist to deploy young and adolescent girls as a symbol of a potentially powerful disruptive force.

This notion is again explored in *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. The girls now inhabit a shabby hotel corridor with cracked plaster, peeling wallpaper and numbered doors, the farthest of which is ajar, allowing a mysterious, glowing light to pour out into the dimly lit, narrow space. The image of doors and doorways is constant throughout Tanning's work, serving as a metaphorical threshold through which one can enter unknown other worlds or the unconscious. On the staircase of this landing, a giant sunflower lies broken and twisted on the blood-red carpet. One of the girls rests against a doorway, eyes closed, head back, clothing torn, her chest and stomach exposed. The other girl stands defiantly with her back to the viewer, fists clenched and hair streaming wildly upwards into the air. The tattered state of the flower and the clothing of the figures suggest that there has been a struggle or encounter and that the flower has been vanquished. In a letter to the Tate in 1999, Tanning states:

It's [the picture] about confrontation. Everyone believes he/she is his/her drama. While they don't always have giant sunflowers (most aggressive of flowers) to contend with, there are always stairways, hallways, even very private theatres where the suffocations and the finalities are being played out, the blood red carpet or cruel yellows, the attacker, the delighted victim ...

Similar to Tanning's reminiscence on the roughish "Lord Churlton," here again are the themes of menace and desire, psychological terrors and supernatural battles between good and evil transformed by the intensities of imagination and an emerging awareness of sensual experience. The picture is, she states, "like a dream, anything can happen. You might be confronted by your worst fears or greatest joys but you are awake ... so you must be vigilant."³⁶

Tanning uses the motif of the sunflower as a symbol of menace and

seduction in a number of pictures throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Ubiquitous throughout the farming communities in Galesburg, Illinois, Tanning recalls her early memories of the flower are highly anthropomorphized. In 1943 she painted *Sunflower Landscape*, one of only two existing portraits by the artist of Ernst. Curiously, the picture portrays an imagined Ernst at about ten years of age, exploring a rather sensuous stand of huge anthropomorphic sunflowers, most of which are over twice his height; the stems and faces of the flowers form a tangled throng of naked (mostly) female bodies. The child strolls through the moonlit scene arm in arm with one of the shorter flowers. Smiling enigmatically, he glances towards his companion's large, round (green) breasts and into the darkness of a thicket of large leafed flora. The tone is suggestive of secrecy and sexual exploration. According to Tanning, the flowers in this picture are both menacing and alluring at the same time. They are metaphors for the forces that can, at once, seduce and destroy. However, instead of the conspiratorial and adventurous atmosphere of *Sunflower Landscape*, the flower in *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* lies vanquished, implying that a more violent struggle has already taken place, leaving one of the figures in a swoon, doll-like, with clothing torn. Whilst eschewing any attempt to separate women artists from the mainstream by virtue of their sex, Tanning has suggested that that these two paintings produced in the 1940s "to some extent reflect the vastly different ways boys and girls experience early childhood desire and the relationships they have with their changing bodies which are primarily dictated by moralistic and religious views. Boys are encouraged to be sexually experienced and girls are supposed to be passive."³⁷ For the girls in *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* there is much more incipient threat and violence. I am reminded of Nochlin's comment about the pictures of this period, that women's sexual and emotional initiation is depicted as both ominous and attractive, "dread and desire." Where one girl in this picture appears to be in a kind of post-coital swoon, the other stands defiantly against the invader/flower, fists clenched, body erect, and the familiar motif of the seemingly alive tendrils of flying hair now appears more akin to the snake-like locks of a medusa that has turned her would-be attacker to stone.³⁸ In this ordinary setting an incident has occurred that defies reason, strange and supernatural, excessively sensual: it is a "little night music," whether a lullaby, nightmare or grand drama on an operatic scale, it is a scene of that which goes "bump" in the night.

Entrapment and emergence: Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202

Tanning carries the threads of this preoccupation with unexpected encounters in often fairly banal, domesticated settings through to a remarkable, room-sized installation entitled *Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970, Fig. 4), a three-



Fig. 4. Dorothea Tanning, *Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202*, 1970, fabric, wool, synthetic fur, cardboard, timber, ping-pong balls, rug and door, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

dimensional imagining of an hotel room where the walls and furniture are literally haunted by the ghosts of a thousand transient and unknown inhabitants. The installation is part of a body of sculptures made between 1969 and 1970, fashioned from fabric and stuffing and entirely constructed by sewing machine (no hand stitching was allowed in the original pieces).³⁹ As Tanning herself states, “at night one imagines all sorts of happenings in the shadows of the darkness. A hotel bedroom is both intimate and unfamiliar, almost alienation, and this can conjure a feeling of menace and unknown forces at play. But these unknown forces are a projection of our own imaginations: our own private nightmares.”⁴⁰ By creating a three dimensional installation of a fantastical haunted house, Tanning collapses the boundary between physical “place” and psychic space, providing the perfect metaphor for the unconscious or the imagination.

The work, now in the permanent collection of the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, consists of an open door in the left hand foreground sporting the

number 202. Instead of the typical furnishing of generic hotel accommodation, the room is “furnished” with two pieces of freestanding furniture, one a “table” entitled *Tragic Table* (1970), the other, a chair entitled *Revelation or The End of the Month* (1970). Both are anthropomorphic fusions of functional objects that appear to contain creatures that struggle under, or threaten to be swallowed up by, the fabric. Both pieces convey a sense of movement and the implication that what we see is actually time stopped in an unguarded moment, a fraction of a second in which the furniture lets slip its normal and “proper” appearance. My focus here is on the structure of the room itself, the walls and the chimney breast entitled *Time and Place* (1970), which is fashioned from dark brown wool and bares two breast shapes: one is a small rounded shape, the other is a more pendulous and maternal. Clearly there is a pun on the word “breast,” given the form and function of the piece. However, the opening of the hearth appears to be expelling something fashioned from the same fabric onto the bare wooden floor. The implication is that this is a birth, of sorts. The expelled object lies limp and frog-like on the floor. Alone in the anonymity of a (cheap) hotel room, it is suggestive of prostitution, unwanted pregnancy or “backstreet” abortions. The pieces of furniture, *Tragic Table*, *Revelation or End of the Month*, and *Time and Place*, are individual anthropomorphisms that imbue the setting with uneasiness and restlessness. There is a sinister poignancy about the entities emerging from or being absorbed into the supposedly functional, banal setting. The furniture sculptures in *Hotel du Pavot* add to the disquieting atmosphere of the piece; there is certainly the suggestion of violence in the abandoned and helpless object that has issued from the fireplace. Reminiscent of the strangely deformed roses in *Some Roses and Their Phantoms*, this object raises the same frightening possibilities of decay and death.

The most compelling addition to the room, however, are the two figures made from “flesh coloured” pink fabric—one is forcefully bursting through the wallpaper, emerging into the room, the other is caught disappearing, momentarily caught between two worlds. The phrase “just passing through” springs to mind. The figures symbolize both the anonymity of the hotel room with its endless procession of nameless, faceless visitors, and the extraordinary contained just underneath the mundanity of the surface. The figure on the back wall is being received or invited into the fur-covered arms and legs of some other-worldly creature threatening to consume it. Reminiscent of the fur-covered figure under the wallpaper in *Children's Games* or, more broadly, Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* (1532), both figures are locked in a mannerist-style embrace, overwhelmed by an unearthly and uncontrollable force. For the figure entering the room, Tanning presents a pregnant looking belly and thigh which seems to form a companion piece as perhaps two halves of a whole, front and back, entering and exiting. This figure too suggests a relationship with the

“new born” entity on the floor: one fecund with possibility, the other unwanted and lifeless.

This return to the wallpaper and that which moves beneath it is reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s gothic novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a book read and admired by Tanning. It is the story of a woman “suffering from nervous exhaustion” as a result of the death of a child, who is sent to the country by her doctor (also her husband) to recover. The tale is written in the first person—again a gothic device—in the form of a memoir by the protagonist herself as an alternative to the tyranny of “complete rest.” It is easy to see why Tanning liked the story. The central character is creative, sensitive and unconventional, and the book focuses on themes of creativity, maternity, patriarchal oppression, psychological trauma and madness. Confined in a former nursery complete with bars on the windows, separated from others and not allowed the comforts of drawing or writing, the narrator, Jane, slowly degenerates. Overwhelmed by her sense of physical, intellectual and emotional imprisonment, she becomes obsessed with the wallpaper (which has partially been stripped away) in her room; it is the color of nursery yellow, and both disgusts and fascinates her. Within it, Jane begins to see moving shapes, sometimes of “strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths,”⁴¹ and at other times the wallpaper consists of “lame uncertain curves ... that destroy themselves in unheard—of contradictions.”⁴² This resonates with Tanning’s evocation of wallpaper as a metaphorical escape from the banal and stifling tedium of growing up in Galesburg. Eventually Jane sees the faint outlines of women moving under the paper calling and calling for her to release them from their entrapment. At the end of the story the narrator has become animal-like, on all fours, gnawing at the bed-legs which are fixed in place to the floor like the furnishings of a psychiatric ward, and clawing at the paper in a desperate bid to free these entities, herself reduced only to grunts and moans. Thus she descends into madness as the only means of escape. As Rosemary Jackson states in the introduction to *What Did Miss Darrington See?, The Yellow Wallpaper* “is a classic example of a woman persecuted to the point of insanity, forced to occupy the position of her mad double in order to escape the intolerable pressures of a patriarchal marriage.”⁴³ This last image of the novella, the protagonist reduced to a series of sounds, is congruent with Tanning’s story that *Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202* was inspired by the lyrics of a song popular in her childhood:

In room two hundred and two
The walls keep talkin’ to you
I’ll never tell you what they said
So turn out the light and come to bed

Like the room in Gilman's story, this hotel room is far removed from an image of cozy domesticity, with its paneled wainscoting and striped wallpaper suggestive of imprisonment. Like the rooms of the traditional Gothic castle which are inextricably linked with the psycho-emotional states of those who inhabit them and continue to haunt them, the internal life of this space is confined and airless, yet paradoxically filled with a life-like ecosystem that might disappear if one should blink.

Contemporary Gothic: physical abstraction, fragmentation and postmodernism.

I have, in this essay, traced the confluences between Tanning's work and a gothic sensibility, both explicit and metaphorical, that pervades her work. By way of concluding, I would like to touch on one more point of connection that manifests itself in the artist's movement towards more abstracted imagery, and the way this intersects with a more contemporary reading of the gothic. According to the artist, a movement away from the precise and naturalist style of her early work was a deliberate attempt to share an imaginative experience with the viewer. As I mentioned in my introduction, there are parallels between this and some of the narrative devices used in gothic fiction in order to draw the reader intimately into the action. However in her works—and the effect is similar in the sculptures—from the 1950s onwards, Tanning uses the surface (in paint, ink, fabric etc) to submerge, fragment, contain and control the action in ways similar to a more contemporary, postmodern gothic that focuses on the fragmented body, on layering, deconstruction and psychoanalytic analysis. In works characteristic of this period such as *The Ill Forgotten* (1955, Fig. 5), Tanning distorts her figures, fragmenting them under a restless kaleidoscopic veil through which the action is splintered, and traditional perspective is folded into layers of texture and color, creating a tension between depth and distance that undulates across the surface of the works. Tanning saturates both works with an almost palpable golden haze that partially obscures objects that lurk behind. Yet the luminous colors of the surface do not distract from the disturbing array of misshapen body parts and other grotesque distortions that intermittently reveal themselves. There are bodily orifices dotted within the surrounding space and eyes that stare out at the viewer. This strange contrast between form and content makes the picture both repulsive and compelling: reminiscent of the "desire and dread" that Bailly comments on above.

The shift to abstraction is most obvious in Tanning's reference to the gothic author Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) in a number of works over time. In a direct reference to the influence of gothic literature, ghosts, hauntings and terror, Tanning painted *A Mrs Radcliffe Called Today* (1944, Fig. 6) as a reimagining of Radcliffe's brand of gothic terror that often evoked haunted houses and disturbing interiors.



Fig. 5. Dorothea Tanning, *The Ill Forgotten*, 1955, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

Rendered with the customary precision and naturalist style of the period, the picture is dominated by a large cross section of a gothic arch and buttress, exposing an architectural network of usually invisible spaces to us. A tightly tied tress of hair is found in each of these darkened, internal spaces, each reminiscent of both the end of a bell cord and the shape of a woman. They hang, floating and dislocated, like fetishes that populate the unconscious. Along the castle parapet a ghostly female apparition with familiar long, flame-like, golden hair flying up towards the sky, approaches two hybrid creatures composed of thick swathes of hair. Clearly influenced by an interest in dreamscapes and the unconscious, the painting conjures an imagined gothic akin to a storybook illustration. Much later, in 1988, in an attempt to reimagine a more contemporary engagement with “Mrs. Radcliffe,” Tanning produced two collages entitled *Mrs. Radcliffe Called Again (Left No Message)*, (Fig. 7), and *Still Calling Still Hoping*. This time, the meticulous naturalism of her earlier period has vanished and the artist constructs the images from torn paper, scraps of tissue and rough photocopies. In the former, the flowing gown and hair



Fig. 6. Dorothea Tanning, *Mrs. Radcliffe Called Today*, 1944, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

of the original ghostly apparition is replaced by a few painted lines and white tissue paper; the receding perspective of the parapet is now a strip of brown paper placed horizontally across the foreground. In *Still Calling Still Hoping* the “hair” tissue paper has been removed, leaving only a cut-out section that we can see “into,” as if the paper were multilayered with simultaneously existing realities, and between which a specter, or one’s imagination, might slip. Instead of the partial daylight of the original painting, both collages use black backgrounds to imply, rather than depict, a dreamscape, a metaphor for the unconscious. In the center of the darkness in both works is the photocopied inclusion of Tanning’s hand. This time, in both works the fingers are spread open, with a pair of slightly open scissors pressed firmly into her palm. The sharp blades are a symbol of both destruction and creation (in the case of collage), and we are reminded of the artist’s imaginative and practical part in the artwork.



Fig. 7. Dorothea Tanning, *Mrs Radcliffe Called Again (Left No Message)*, 1988, collage, graphite, and watercolor on canson, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

These two collages form part of a body of similar works all made from torn paper and watercolor. Originally when they were made in 1988, there were probably around 18 of such collages; of the 15 works that survive, 12 contain a photocopied image of Tanning's hand placed somewhere in the image. By including the shadowy black and white photocopies of her hand, she adds herself as both author (in control) and spectral presence. Perhaps this is not a dissimilar effect to the use of the third person when describing autobiographical events. In *Hotel* (1988, Fig. 8), the image of the hotel which she previously depicted from inside a room or corridor (*Hotel du Pavot, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* for example) is rendered here as a large, looming shape in a state of transformation, suggested by the torn and frayed edges of its rough, brown paper. Three arched, empty windows are cut into the frayed, fleecy stone. On the other side of the picture, another large piece of the same paper is floating out of the frame to reveal, yet again, the photocopied hand of the artist. This time, however, all we can see are the fingers under which is pressed a key, thus establishing the beginnings of a mysterious narrative that conjures images



Fig. 8. Dorothea Tanning, *Hotel*, 1988, paper and watercolour, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning, New York

from the tales *Bluebeard*. I am reminded again of Conley's suggestion of the house as an unsafe, confining space, possibly in which something precious is lost. In many of these collages, Tanning's photocopied hand is in fact shown bound tightly with string: an image that suggests confinement and excess. In *State of the Art* (1988, Fig. 9) Tanning's bound hand appears within layers of paper and card. The surface of the image is torn away in sections that look like they have been slashed with a knife. The result creates an illusion of a box-like structure containing the fetishized and disembodied hand. None of the collages containing the image of Tanning's bound hand is quite as violent in tone as this one. We are reminded of the shredded wallpaper, the images of torn and tumultuously folded surfaces that both separate and combine different realities throughout the work I have been discussing here.

In identifying the parallels between late-twentieth-century postmodernism and contemporaneous artistic and cultural trends, Christophe Grunenberg states that one of the "enduring characteristics of the Gothic can be found in its emphasis on fragmentation, inconsistent narratives, and an excess of morphological, disjoined



Fig. 9. Dorothea Tanning, *State of the Art*, 1988, paper and watercolour, private collection, courtesy of Dorothea Tanning

and decentralised forms and shapes.”⁴⁴ Certainly the anthropomorphic pieces in *Hotel du Pavot*, *Chambre 202*, *Children’s Games* or *Some Roses and Their Phantoms*, for example, have spirits and obsessions resurfacing, lingering or pushing through what we usually expect to be solid, rational boundaries. The act of cutting and tearing paper into fragments and reconfiguring them by folding and layering seems to be an inherently gothic activity. Using the texture of collage to reflect the way in which suspense is built up by the layering of seemingly unconnected and strange events is perhaps the *modus operandi* for many gothic works of fiction; it also seems to have been part of Tanning’s approach to imagery throughout her career. Perhaps it is also an activity that can explain the way in which Tanning, who was 78 when she made the collages, can synthesize the preoccupations and obsessions of a lifetime.

1 English translation from the transcript of an interview between Dorothea Tanning and Alain Jouffroy, Paris, 1974. Transcript, revised by Tanning in 1988, appears in *Dorothea Tanning* edited by

- Sune Nordgren and produced by the Malmo Konsthall Art Gallery, 1993. The revised interview with Jouffroy appears on pp. 48-67 in English and Swedish.
- 2 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London: Longmans, 1980).
 - 3 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy, The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).
 - 4 Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent, Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
 - 5 Susanne Becker, "Filiation," in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).
 - 6 Donna Heiland, *Gothic & Gender* (Malden: Oxford, 2004).
 - 7 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2009.
 - 8 Anne Williams, "Edifying Narratives, The Gothic Novel, 1764-1997" in *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*, ed. Isabella van Elferen (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 124.
 - 9 Williams, "Edifying," 124.
 - 10 Katharine Conley, "Safe as Houses: Anamorphic Bodies in Ordinary Spaces: Miller, Varo, Tanning, Woodman" in *Angels of Anarchy, Women Artists and Surrealism*, (New York: Prestel, 2009).
 - 11 Conley, "Safe," 50.
 - 12 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2009.
 - 13 Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: an Artist and her World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2001), 16.
 - 14 Dorothea Tanning, *Dorothea Tanning*, (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 341.
 - 15 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 16.
 - 16 Tanning, *Dorothea Tanning*, 340.
 - 17 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 27.
 - 18 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 49.
 - 19 Tanning has always maintained that it was not always easy being married to such a famous artist. This was again reiterated in conversation with this author, New York, 2009.
 - 20 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2009.
 - 21 Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), 82.
 - 22 Tanning, *Birthday*, 84.
 - 23 Tanning, *Birthday*, 84.
 - 24 Dorothea Tanning, *Chasm* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2004).
 - 25 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2009.
 - 26 Gen Doy, *Drapery, Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*, (London: I.B Taurus Press, 2002).
 - 27 George Banu, *Le rideau ou La fêlure du monde* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1997).
 - 28 Doy, 11.
 - 29 Linda Nochlin, "Reviews: Dorothea Tanning at C.N.A.C." in *Art in America* Vol. 62 (November, 1974): 128.
 - 30 Jean Christophe Bailly, "Image Redux: The Art of Dorothea Tanning" in *Dorothea Tanning*, (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 18.
 - 31 Nochlin, "Reviews," 128.
 - 32 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2001.
 - 33 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2005.
 - 34 André Breton "The Great Transparent Ones" in "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not (1942)" in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 293-294.
 - 35 *Dorothea Tanning: Birthday and Beyond*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, November 24, 2000 – January

7, 2001, exhibition brochure.

36 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2000.

37 Unpublished interview with the artist, New York, 2000.

38 I am referring here to Freud's theories on Hysteria as explained in his paper entitled "Medusa's Head," first published as an essay in 1922 and now in *Collected Papers, Vol. 5*, (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1956).

39 For an extended discussion on the sculptures and their connection to music and Tanning's relationship with fellow artist and musician John Cage, see Victoria Carruthers, "Between Sound and Silence: John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Sculptures of Dorothea Tanning" in *Art, History and the Senses, 1830 to the Present*, P. Di Bello and G. Koureas eds., (Burlington: Ashgate), 2010.

40 Unpublished interview with artist, New York, 2005.

41 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (Auckland: Floating Press, 1892), 34.

42 Gilman, 25.

43 Jackson, R., "Introduction," in *What did Miss Darington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction* Salmonson J., ed., (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989) xxvii. This is a common theme in other novels of the period and is explored in depth in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

44 Christoph Grunenberg, "Unsolved Mysteries: Gothic Tales from Frankenstein to the Hair Eating Doll," in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*, Christoph Grunenberg, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 162.