

Pulled, Stitched,
and Stuffed: Materiality
and the Abject in
Dorothea Tanning's
Soft Sculpture

Sienna Freeman

In the first years, I was painting on our side of the mirror—the mirror for me is a door—but I think that I have gone over, to a place where one no longer faces identities at all.¹
—Dorothea Tanning, 1974

¹ From Tanning's 1974 interview with Alain Jouffroy in: *Dorothea Tanning* (Sweden: Malmö Konsthall, 1993), 57.

If we take the word of American Surrealist painter, sculptor, and writer Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012) that early in her career she was painting on “our side of the mirror,” while in later works she created from a place where identity is unconstrained by specular representation, we can identify a clear division between her early and late approaches to confronting alterity. Her initial approach is contained within paradigms of the imaginary, linked to the symbolic law of language and Modernist ocularcentrism in painting. By contrast, her later method evokes an ambiguous sense of otherness that is fostered in the realm of the abject, beyond the restraints of the reflected self-image. Tanning’s nearly thirty works of soft sculpture, created between 1965 and 1982, are emblematic of this pivotal change.²

² “Tanning Sculpture List,” PDF provided by the Dorothea Tanning Foundation in an email to the author, October 4, 2015.

Although sixteen pieces from this series can be found in museum collections worldwide, Tanning’s cloth objects are largely absent from critical discourse, overlooked or marginalized as avatars for her painted figural elements.³ While earlier themes of

bodies, boundaries, self-portraiture, and the female muse persist in her soft sculptures, I argue that the latent meanings attached to their construction from textile—a medium generally associated with corporeality and functionality—activate transgressive possibilities that are otherwise limited in her paintings. I propose that Tanning's soft sculptures break the metaphorical picture plane associated with the Lacanian imaginary, entering into the borderland territory of the abject as defined by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Deviating from the canonical ideology of André Breton's founding version of Surrealism, Tanning's soft sculptures become experiential forms of matter in bodily terrain, aligning instead with the alternate surrealist platform established by Georges Bataille.⁴ By focusing on these fundamental shifts, we can see that Tanning's cloth works demand a revisionist reading, one that establishes them in material terms specific to the abject.

³ Tanning spoke of her soft sculptures as "avatars, three-dimensional ones, of the figures in my two-dimensional universe." See: Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 282. For other sources that echo this sentiment see: Dorothea Tanning, Jean-Christophe Bailly, and Robert C. Morgan, *Dorothea Tanning* (New York: G. Braziller, 1995), 302; and Anna Lundström, "Bodies and Spaces: On Dorothea Tanning's Sculptures," *Journal of Art History* 78, no. 3 (2009): 121.

⁴ Julia Kristeva credits Georges Bataille with providing one of the foundations for her theories on abjection. See: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64.

Born from a cultural arena defined by the horrors of World Wars I and II and the profound effects of the industrial revolution, Surrealism aimed to disrupt social norms on a global level by tapping into the collective unconscious and unleashing repressed desire.⁵ Breton's ideals for Surrealism are characterized as "crystalline and lyrical," propelled by goals of collective transcendence and utopian hope for intellectual freedom.⁶ In contrast, Bataille's path to liberation is charted not in transparency and light but through lowness, as it aims to expose an anti-dialectic experience of otherness beyond the symbolic realm.⁷ A conceptual split between the mind and body is evident in the relationship between these two ideologies, with Breton finding truth in the majestic, cerebral, or sublime and Bataille locating potency in baseness, physicality, or abjection. Hal Foster suggests that work by Tanning's husband Max Ernst—the historically more celebrated artist of the couple—typifies Breton's ideology, which focuses on exploring the imaginary and unconscious as opposed to the material or corporeal.⁸ While Tanning's early paintings functioned similarly, her later soft sculptures no longer perform these ideals.

⁵ Matthew Gale, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 6.

⁶ Michael Richardson, "Introduction," in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth, Writings on Surrealism*, trans. and with an introduction by Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 2006), 5.

⁷ Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, 125.

⁸ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 110.

In a 1976 interview, Tanning discusses her material motivations in the soft sculpture series: "These sculptures represent for me two or three kinds of triumph: The triumph of cloth as a material for high purpose...the triumph of softness over hardness...and the triumph of the artist over his volatile material, in this case living cloth."⁹ In her view, "living cloth"—i.e., the cloths or coverings we associate with corporeal experience—is "volatile," subject to sudden change and unpredictable degradation, like the body itself. In using cloth as a material for a "high purpose," Tanning recognizes that, unlike her painted figural elements, her cloth works not only challenge preconceived notions about the rigidity of fine art, but also draw on associations generated by the Modernist positioning of textiles as a "low" art form, historically associated with craft or women's work, rather than as fine art. We can see that Tanning's strategic use of materiality in her soft sculptures stands in contrast to Modernist ocularcentrism, which regards the flatness of paint on canvas as the purest and highest form of art.¹⁰

⁹ Monique Levi-Strauss, "Dorothea Tanning: Soft Sculptures," *American Fabrics and Fashions* 108 (Fall 1976): 69.

¹⁰ Contemporary craft theorist Glenn Adamson explores the binary opposition between the optical and the material with regard to substances and forms embraced or rejected by fine art. He posits that the application and exploitation of craft materials and techniques have been coded as low, other, or not even art, as a result of a Greenbergian privileging of the purely optical. See: Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 40-1.

A comparison between Tanning's 1942 painting Children's Games (fig. 1) and her multi-part soft sculpture installation Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202 (fig. 2), from 1970-73, illustrates the implications of Tanning's late approach. Demure in size at less than a foot tall and half that in width, Children's Games depicts two wild-haired young girls viciously ripping at the seams of periwinkle wallpaper. This activity takes place in a dimly lit and seemingly endless hallway where a third body lies on the floor, chopped at the waist by the bottom of the picture plane. Two rectangular wounds have been made in the wallpaper, their torn edges exposing strange, sinewy, sagging masses. The room's papered interior seems to serve as a mask for some muscular entity, alive and writhing as its fragile boundary is compromised.

Children's Games depicts female figures interrupted in action within a fantastic domestic space. However, though the



fig. 1 Dorothea Tanning, *Children's Games*, 1942; Oil on canvas, 11 x 7 1/16 in.; Private collection; image courtesy the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.

fig. 2 Dorothea Tanning, *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202)*, 1970-73; fabric, wool, synthetic fur, cardboard, and Ping-Pong balls; 133 7/8 x 122 1/8 x 185 in.; Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; image courtesy the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.



fig. 3 Photograph of Dorothea Tanning in *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (*Poppy Hotel, Room 202*), 1977; collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Unknown photographer; Image courtesy the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.

scene is surreal in its representation of a dreamlike narrative, the manner in which it is illustrated allows for a sense of visual familiarity. Overall, its execution is quite traditional in terms of symbolic realism or Bretonian Surrealism.¹¹ The image is contained within the canvas's mirrorlike picture plane. Interior structures take on exaggerated but identifiable forms; endless hallways, open doors, and architectural thresholds serve as visual metaphors for transitional spaces of consciousness. The figures are recognizable as young girls, and the structure is believable as a house, regardless of the bizarre transformation that occurs within its boundaries. In Tanning's soft sculpture, however, this rational legibility falls apart.

¹¹ As exemplified by Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Hans Arp, and others.

In Tanning's installation Hôtel du Pavot, a series of domestic objects lose control of their proper formal boundaries. Five life-size anthropomorphic forms sheathed in chocolate brown and bubble-gum pink fabric emerge from and meld into the walls and furniture of a Victorian-inspired interior, their skins stitched from textile panels and their bodies stuffed with carded wool. Dismembered parts resembling limbs, backbones, and bellies meld with utilitarian items such as chairs, tables, fireplaces, and wallpaper, their haptic materiality and humanesque forms evoking uncanny connections to our own corporeality. Unlike the figures in Children's Games, these bodies fuse into the environment that contains them, seemingly leaking from and being absorbed into its furnishings.

Individual works from Tanning's Hôtel du Pavot, alongside others from her soft sculpture series, have previously been exhibited both as singular objects and as multipart works alternately configured.¹² In each setting, viewers have encountered the work in different phenomenological iterations, ranging from traditional pedestal arrangements within a white-walled gallery space to dimly lit and dramatically staged museum displays.¹³ Hôtel du Pavot, as curated and historicized by the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1977, presents a life-size tableau of objects in which viewers encounter the installation much as they would a diorama at a natural history museum. Yet despite these differences in exhibition style, when viewers encounter Hôtel du Pavot in each of its iterations over time, their individual bodies enter into phenomenological dialogue with Tanning's uncertain bodies (fig. 3).

¹² Works from Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202, alongside other pieces from Tanning's installations, were previously exhibited at Dorothea Tanning: Sculptures, Le Point Cardinal, Paris, May–June 1970, and Dorothea Tanning: Sculpture, Galerie Alexandre Iolas, Milan, February 23–March 18, 1971.

¹³ Images of alternate iterations and arrangements of works from Hôtel du Pavot, as well as three pieces from Tanning's soft sculpture series, were viewed during the author's November 5, 2015 trip to the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.

The split between the imaginary-visual and the material-haptic that separates Tanning's early and late work can be further understood through the relationship between the psychological paradigms of Lacan's mirror stage and Kristeva's theory of the abject. Recapitulating the relative position of Bataille's "low" approach to Surrealism, which embraces physical baseness, vis-à-vis Breton's "high" goals of intellectual ascension, Kristeva's notion of the abject—as a developmental stage, and as a trope that operates both psychoanalytically and aesthetically—can be understood as the underside of the Lacanian symbolic.¹⁴ Developmentally situated before the mirror stage, the abject offers a counterapproach to patriarchal psychoanalytic theory by considering a confrontation between self and other before a child takes up a permanent position in the symbolic order of language.¹⁵ Kristeva's theory accounts for an experience of otherness that is rooted in the Lacanian real, a prelinguistic state in which a child experiences self and world as continuous and whole. Direct access to the real is lost upon entering into the symbolic through the mirror stage, after which a permanent separation between the inside and outside, or body and image, is established.¹⁶ The image of the Ideal-I, located within the imaginary, is thus established, where "the order of surface appearances... are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure."¹⁷ However, in Kristeva's narrative of the abject, a sense of ambiguous otherness persists in the material realm, as fusions and fissures between inside and outside of the body, or self and other, cyclically repeat.¹⁸

¹⁴ Elizabeth Gross, "The Body of Signification," in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990), 89.

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

¹⁶ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 114-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 64.

Tanning's use of cloth in her soft sculptures exemplifies the polymorphousness of Kristeva's theory of the abject. The medium of textile functions between polarities, as it formally and culturally folds together notions of birth and death and experiences of life in between. Cloth serves as cover and container for the mortal body, taking the form of clothing, upholstery, bed sheets, blankets, funeral shrouds, or wedding veils.¹⁹ Humans are born naked but wrapped in cloth upon entering the social world. Dead bodies are ritualistically wrapped in cloth during mourning ceremonies or preservation rites such as mummification. Cloth can be used to swaddle or suffocate,

constrain or comfort, celebrate or shame.²⁰ The medium simultaneously joins and separates nature and culture, maintaining a distance and connection between the body or self and the outside world.²¹

¹⁹ Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 179.

²⁰ Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockney, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 117.

²¹ Claire Pajaczowska, "On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth," in *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 3 (May 2005): 233.

The individual elements that construct Tanning's soft sculptures—each with its fabric skin stretched around a furniture-armature—can be considered broadly as craft forms, defined by contemporary craft theorist Howard Risatti as "containers, coverings, and supports."²² Through the lens of prevalent Western cultural ideologies, craft objects have typically been hierarchically categorized as "feminine" and "low," the dialectical "other" to fine art.²³ These objects, which include vessels, clothing, and furniture, serve physiological needs, mediating bodily interactions with the world at borderland sites of the body such as the skin and mouth—thresholds for the experience of the object, per Kristeva.²⁴ Craft objects can thus be read as coded interfaces, metonymic for the boundaries of the body. Because craft objects serve the physiological needs of the body, they are also reminders of our volatile corporeality: liminal and destined to degrade.

²² Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Appreciation* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 32-3.

²³ Two sources expand upon this point: Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 40 (see note 10); and Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: A Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 62-3.

²⁴ Risatti, *A Theory of Craft*, 29.

Such considerations become particularly fruitful in light of Tanning's assertion that her soft sculpture series is "fragile on purpose, bound to decay. Like the human body." The pieces' formal and material associations cultivate a disruptive power that is amplified by the works' address to viewers' bodies.²⁵ Take, for example, Tanning's Time and Place (fig. 4), one of the individually-titled works that comprise Hôtel du Pavot. The piece figures as a central hearth, like a fireplace with an attached interior chimney vent. The speckled milk-chocolate tweed of Time and Place reveals itself, on closer inspection, to be made up of tiny fibers in blood red, tan, cream, and dark brown. These are colors of both the inside and out-side of the body. From its obtuse midpoint, the base of the sculpture resolves into the shape of a standard hearth. Yet instead of a rectangular opening



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fig. 4 Dorothea Tanning, *Time and Place*, from *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (Poppy Hotel, Room 202), 1970–73; Wood, tweed, wool, metal, and synthetic fur; 66 1/8 x 47 1/4 x 51 1/4 in.; Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; image courtesy the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.

fig. 5 Dorothea Tanning, *Révélation ou la fin du mois* (Revelation or the End of the Month), from *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (Poppy Hotel, Room 202), 1970–73; Upholstered chair, tweed, and wool; 31 1/2 x 47 1/4 x 33 1/2 in.; Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; image courtesy the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York, NY.

leading to its interior, a large tumorlike mass bulges from its façade. The extrusion appears trapped in mid-transmutation, stuck within the process of growth or expulsion. *Time and Place* calls to mind concurrent visions of birth, afterbirth, miscarriage, or pregnancy, states that, like Kristeva's abject, mark a "borderline phenomenon...blurring yet producing one identity and another."²⁶ The hearthlike object appears at once active and passive, alive and dead, crawling and sprawling horizontally and vertically, frozen in concurrent states of degradation and transformation.

²⁵ From Tanning's 1974 interview with Alain Jouffroy, who asks: "Your sculptures-Ouvre-toi, for instance-are fragile on purpose, bound to decay. Like the human body. Are you detached from the notion of 'duration,' from the survival of your work?" Tanning's response: "These sculptures do show such a detachment. They will, in effect, last about as long as a human life-the life of someone 'delicate.'" See: *Dorothea Tanning* (Sweden: Malmö Konsthall, 1993), 59.

²⁶ Gross, "The Body of Signification," 94.

At nearly six feet tall, *Time and Place* performs in still motion for the installation's viewers, who seem to enact the role of the painted protagonists in Tanning's *Children's Games*. As viewers, we no longer peer into a tiny painted scene; we have become active participants in a physical borderland space. The stitched cloth surface of each piece reads as a skin, just as the viewer's own skin is encased in cloth garments. Eliciting thoughts of our own abject corporeal fusions and divisions, the sculptures evoke the presence of a material "other" that is disturbingly like ourselves.

A close look at Tanning's 1970-73 soft sculpture *Révélation ou la Fin du Mois* (Revelation or the End of the Month) (fig. 5), also from *Hôtel du Pavot*, expands upon these ideas. *Révélation* is a supple object, its exterior casing machine-sewn from fuzzy brown tweed. Wool batting and a modified parlor chair serve as the body's internal skeleton, an amalgamation of folds, lumps, orifices, and extremities, like an exaggerated female body trapped within the seating that supports it. Blurring the line between functional furnishing and figure, the object appears at once active and passive, phallic and feminine, erotic and grotesque. *Révélation* looks as if it is being consumed, digested, and ejected by itself, reinforcing the knowledge that, like Tanning's cloth bodies, our own bodies will eventually lose their definition and decay.

Even the wallpaper in *Hôtel du Pavot* serves as a threshold, a physical and metaphorical location for the cycle of fusion and division that constitutes abjection. Since the work's original installation, the wallpaper has been updated more than once; as with the body or a textile, it is apt to fade, wear, and degrade.²⁷ Various iterations of the wallpaper have ranged from cluttered floral blooms to grid-like filigree. Across these changes, a faded horizontal rectangle has

continually appeared upon the wallpaper's surface, as if a painting had been removed from the room. Perhaps pointing to Tanning's shift from painting to soft sculpture—or from the imaginary to the haptic—this faded rectangle lingers as a ghost of her earlier approach to confronting alterity, on our side of the mirror.²⁸

²⁷ Pamela Johnson, Director of the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, in conversation with the author, Photographic Archives, New York, NY, November 5, 2015.

²⁸ Tanning specified that the wallpaper was meant to be "vintage" in the installation. However, there are no records stating whether or not she made an effort to create this effect of a picture frame having been removed when she reinstalled the piece in various iterations. Pamela Johnson, Director of the Dorothea Tanning Foundation, email correspondence with the author, March 22, 2016.

While Hôtel du Pavot and other works from the soft sculpture series can undoubtedly be seen as a continuation of Tanning's investigations of borders, the figure, and the self, they are more than simply avatars for her painted figures. They are bodies that devour corporeal space, constructed using historically charged, functional materials that share material connections to the bodies of their viewers. As we encounter these objects, our own bodies pulse and move before the stationary scene. The installation stages frozen transitions between the biological and the social, illuminating unfixed positions of the self in a borderland of embodied contradictions. In her soft sculptures, Tanning offers a transgressive address to otherness and selfhood relevant in her historic surrealist context and still fruitful today. The material "other" serves to remind us that, like the world around us, we are made from liminal matter, destined to age, sag, and eventually decay. But in the meantime—while we all exist as subject and object, autonomous but dependent, on the verge of creation and destruction—the space in between is open for growth, revelation, and revolution.