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baroque taste of decadence and opulence. The Scary Room ("Heaven and Hell") has some poignant works, most notably the bas-relief chaise longue and lamp, where one reclines midway between Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. But the taxidermy art gives me the shudders.

Contemporary design in *Telling Tales* that no home should be without:

Proust Chair by Mendini — a pointillist abstract turned into a plush, comfy throne of mosaic colours, looking like candied sunlight, prism-ing from dawn to sunset.

Fig Leaf Wardrobe by Boontje (pictured left) — resembling big green angel wings of 616 cascading copper leaves, opening on to an inner stage where *Waiting for Godot*'s solitary naked tree waits against a blue silk Magritte sky. Who could bear to hang clothing on that beauty?

Sculpt Wardrobe by Maarten Baas — as when you put on wet glasses to look at a hand-crafted walnut wardrobe, and it melts into a gorgeously wonky shape. Want it, want it, want it.

Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend by Crasset — wouldn't be out of place in old Hollywood. This suspended art deco-like lantern is a cut diamond pendant within which dangles a smaller diamond. Marilyn Monroe would've loved it.

Aluminium Table by Fredrikson Stallard — a big red puzzle-piece shape, red lacquered steel, turning an enlarged Rorschach inkblot from a psychological test into a seemingly levitating table.

Sensory Deprivation Skull by Joep van

From The Times

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Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design, at the V&A

No home should be without these seductive fusions of art and design: works of art with a supposed functional value

Ken Russell

What's the deal here? I'm beginning to think that contemporary designers who fuse art and design have more than their fair share of geniuses in the field. I'm kind of cross about it. For one thing, I can't afford any of it — and neither can you.

It can't hurt to look, though, can it? To look is free. At the elaborate V&A exhibit *Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design*, you can stroll through the magical "Forest Glade", into the "Enchanted Castle" and conclude in the pretty dungeon, with its romanticised bloodletting — the room called "Heaven and Hell". Tales of innocence, experience and freefall. A sensual pilgrim's progress through modern re-imaginings of Rackham, Dore and Blake.

These are pieces of designed art with real or supposed functional value — furniture, ceramics, a bathtub, slippers — but with the pristine rarity that only European master craftsmen can give them. Each piece a limited or single edition (owing to the cost of materials and process), these sculptural hybrids are an imaginative marriage of storytelling and psychology, of fantasy and utility. This is a most seductive exhibition.

I ploughed through the curator Gareth Williams's rich book on the exhibition, sweat forming on my brow. Art criticism can be so hyper-intellectual that it makes my teeth ache. Still, I bet he'd be good company for a cup of tea in the Garden of Eden of his exhibit, sitting on those flyaway scissor-cut chairs — perfect for a Wonderland mad tea party. We could pour from the exhibition's pig-skull teapot.

Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* is my second favourite film of all time. The candelabra with human arms, the tear that becomes a diamond — that's what this exhibit is. The near-repulsion of otherwise familiar forms reshaped as if by animal power or alchemy, combined with the delicacy of beauty untouched. One feels sad when the Beast becomes the handsome prince — something is lost, he's too ordinary. Cocteau's merger of beauty and the threat of the otherworld is where we come to feel at home by the end of the film — and by the end of the *Telling Tales* exhibit, too.

The elite designer art objects on display are narratives, each implying a story — whether a timeless fairytale, a modernist fable or a postmodern myth. The "Forest Glade" is full of pieces re-envisioning innocence, lace and woodland havens. The "Enchanted Castle" has a Bluebeard and baroque taste of decadence and opulence. The Scary Room ("Heaven and Hell") has some poignant works, most notably the bas-relief chaise longue and lamp, where one reclines midway between Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. But the taxidermy art gives me the shudders.

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Aluminium Table by Fredrikson Stallard — a big red puzzle-piece shape, red lacquered steel, turning an enlarged Rorschach inkblot from a psychological test into a seemingly levitating table.

Sensory Deprivation Skull by Joep van Lieshout — a giant white fibreglass skull with a doorway for entry, lined in luxuriant fur, big enough for two. New possibilities for any sequels of my film *Altered States*.

Mushroom Cloud, Nevada '57, red stuffed toy by Dunne & Raby with Anastassiades — every grown-up child should have one. Cosy up to the possibility of nuclear disaster.

Robber Baron cabinet by Studio Jobs — though a revision of a 1700s armoire, it reminds me of a gorgeous brass and tortoiseshell bank vault, with a hole blown through its door for easy access. Made entirely of gilded bronze.

Cinderella Table by Verhoeven — Brad Pitt bought one. I prefer the plywood version, its cut layers like a topographical map, folded around space into a gorgeous table.

Honeycomb Vase by Libertiny — who placed wire in a hive and actually tricked bees into building a vase-shaped honeycomb around it. Fragile, imprecise and butterscotch-luminous, it's a life cycle of flowers serving bees serving flowers.

This exhibition will give you disturbing nightmares — those gold maggots in the ear of the fox — but the most beautiful dreams, too. Like any good dream, you can analyse each art piece for meta-meanings, but hugging the image close without conclusion is the better medicine. To drift through the hologram deck of this fairytale exhibit is my idea of good sex.

Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design at the V& A Museum (020-7942 2000; vam.ac.uk) Until Oct 18.

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