

art
exchange



i PUT A
SPELL
ON YOU
NEW MAGIC AND MYSTICISM



University of Essex

I PUT A SPELL ON YOU EXPLORES TODAY'S GROWING AFFINITY WITH MAGIC WHICH COINCIDES WITH A PROFOUND LOSS OF FAITH IN MODERN SOCIETY.

UNDERPINNING TODAY'S GROWING SYMPATHY FOR MAGIC IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE FEELING THAT OUR SYSTEMS OF POWER NO LONGER WORK FOR US AS THEY REVEAL THEMSELVES TO BE GREEDY, SELF-INTERESTED AND PROFITEERING AT THE EXPENSE OF MARGINALISED PEOPLE AND THE PLANET. RATIONALISM, SCIENCE AND 'PROGRESS' OF THE CAPITALIST ERA HAVE LEFT US LURCHING FROM ONE CRISIS TO THE NEXT, WHILE CLIMATE CATASTROPHE CALLS INTO QUESTION OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PLANET EARTH. THE IMAGE OF THE 'MAP OF REASON' AS THE FIXED CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE AND MEASURE OF ALL THINGS NO LONGER DESCRIBES OUR LIVED EXPERIENCE, OR HOW WE WANT TO RELATE TO NATURE AND THE WORLD AROUND US.

AGAINST THIS BACKDROP, MAGIC AND MYSTICISM OFFER US AN ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE – A SPACE WHERE WE CAN BECOME RE-ENCHANTED WITH THE WORLD AGAIN.

Magic has always been a strategy for living. It is a form of creative resistance, a way of understanding the universe and navigating it, and, in this sense, believing in magic is deeply rational. It often comes to the fore during periods of instability – such as the UK post-Brexit, post-Covid and now struggling with hyperinflation, culture wars and the government's disregard for ecology. But magic has always been present with people who lack resources and power, such as the marginalised, the oppressed and of course, women.¹

It is the figure of the witch that we turn to for support. She curses at injustice and through her magic protects us while breaking down oppressive social and cultural structures. Today's witches are shapeshifters that move through time and space. They are necessarily ubiquitous and are old, young, sexy and quirky, working alone or in a coven. But always marginalised by structures of power. Moreover, as Amy Hale reminds us, this cultural positioning of the witch becomes more relevant today as formal mechanisms of communal care and social responsibility are systematically devalued and worn away.²

Behind these empowering images of witches is a memory of the victims of the witch hunts that began at the dawn of capitalism, with hundreds dying and thousands left in a state of terror. We don't have to look far: places such as

Wivenhoe and Colchester were sites of the notorious Essex Witch Trials of 1645-47, when over a hundred women were killed in the most terrifying ordeals. At the gallows "not only were the bodies of witches destroyed, but also the whole world of social relations that had been the basis of women's social power and a vast body of knowledge that they had transmitted from mother to daughter over generations. Capitalism couldn't take hold without forging a new type of individual and a new social discipline for boosting the productive capacity of labour".³ Key to this process was the subjugation of women and the destruction of magic.

The artists in this show are 'staying with the trouble',⁴ as they respond to our lived reality. Magic and mysticism are not a route for returning to some romantic vision of a bygone era, but rather, they are mechanisms for re-evaluating our times and imagining our future. The artists in this show explore feminism, forgotten folklore, ancient myths and religions, as they critique the violent superstructures of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.⁵ It is through creative acts of resistance that magic and mysticism allows us the space to imagine a better world, build our resilience and come up with strategies for coping, individually and through collective action. And it's a spell that's best not broken.

NEW WITCHES

How do we reconcile the all-powerful almost mythical portrait the inquisitors painted of their victims – as creatures of hell, terrorists, man eaters, servants of the devil wildly riding their broomsticks – with the defenceless figures of the actual women who were charged with these crimes and then horribly tortured and murdered?⁶

It is worth pausing to look back to the dislocations caused by the development of capitalism, including the privatisation of communal land, which picked up pace between 1450-1640. Women were victimised because they were the most 'disempowered' by these changes, especially older women who often rebelled against their new-found impoverishment and social exclusion. They were left with no resort but dependence on charity at a time when communal bonds were disintegrating, thereby often building up resentment within communities.

Artist Susan Pui San Lok explores the persecution of 'witches' and refuses to let them be forgotten. She commemorates the unnamed women accused of being 'witches' in East Anglia between 1560-1751 with a red ribbon for each of them, turning these individual acts of remembrance into a single column that dominates the exhibition.

Freddie Robins doesn't have to look far for her research, with nearby Wivenhoe bringing her one of the women accused of being a witch – Alice Dixon – in 1644. She deploys used objects worn and

shaped by human hands such as walking sticks or a glove to provide the catalyst to take us directly into the domestic realm of the home, where we are reminded of the everyday lives of women accused of witchcraft. This is further compounded by her inclusion of found objects, such as finger shaped stones, suggesting the votive power we imbue everyday objects with, and how they can stand in for the presence of others.

Serena Korda's work also reviews historic narratives through a feminist lens with her *Jug Choir* that is inspired by ancient 'witches bottles', often buried in the corner of homes to ward off evil spirits. During the witch hunts of the 17th century vessels – often using the 'bearded men' Bellarmine bottles commonly available – were filled with urine, bent nails and votive offerings such as cloth heart and buried under floorboards in the belief that they would keep witches and evil spirits at bay. Serena Korda uses these as the starting point for her joyously inventive artworks where toads overwhelm, a 'beard face' pukes down his front and, in another, gender is questioned as numerous breasts form upon the bearded figure, possibly for suckling familiars, but also for the next generation of bottles that the figure is giving birth to.

NEW MAGIC

Chiara Fumai creates a portal to marginalised women, who despite gaining recognition through vociferous dissent have since been overlooked. She belongs to a tradition of female psychics serving as mediums during seances, where she invokes the spirits of various radical women: German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof from the Bader-Meinhoff gang, the bearded lady Annie Jones, and socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. At her 'Book of Evil Spirits' séance in 2015, one of the women anonymously channelled themselves through Chiara Fumai, spelling out 'WARNING' in International Sign Language.

Juno Calypso warns us to be mindful of the multiple interpretations of femininity and feminism. She creates a universe of solitude, desire and despair – all with an about-to-crack edge. In a honeymoon hotel we find her alone, dressed as her alter ego Joyce. It is as Joyce that she can explore the laboured construct of femininity. Slathering herself in green clay, Calypso performs scenes of preparation and anticipation, acting out rituals of beauty and seduction to an absurd degree. In response to a question about feminism, she asks herself "Can you be a feminist when your camera is aiming at your ass? If so, my answer is yes".⁷ At the end of the film *Dream in Green* Joyce disappears into the bathroom's mist. The power to decide when to leave is set alongside the power of patriarchal society to silence. Joyce's haunting gaze leaves us to decide.

Leonora Carrington also asks us to rethink our relationship with feminism through her personally designed tarot cards. Her unique imagination and way of seeing are revealed in this deck which provides an occult roadmap to her vision of the world. She reveals her ambition for a shift away from the power of patriarchy as she explores a return to female based and led spirituality. Carrington further suggests that only through an alchemical union of male and female genders can equity occur. One example is her tarot of the Devil, where she creates an image that is both male and female, turning to the medieval figure of Baphomet, rather than the traditionally Christian images of a devil as half-man, half-goat.

NEW MYSTICS

Alice Bucknell uses the idiom of magic as a vehicle to engage with the legacy of colonialism, racial injustice and to empower the de-voiced.⁸ She tells us, "my interest in magic as a kind of technology stems from its ability to break apart, or break down, certain systems of thinking that have led us into [this] multi-pronged crisis [...] it also proposes a speculative and open-ended way out of the mess of the present towards multiple possible futures."⁹ Her film *The Martian Word for World is Mother* offers three proposals for the future habitation of Mars: Red Mars, Green Mars and Blue Mars. These explore different possibilities for the planet's future – such as whether to continue the extractive

industries that have contributed to planet Earth's ecological destruction, or to give life back to Mars, without taking anything in return.

Akinsola Lawson's film *Bosode* opens up new worlds which critique the legacy of colonialism by taking us on a journey into the Yoruba spirit world. Taking inspiration from Nollywood, Ifá religion and Sci-Fi, we travel with *Bosode*, who picks up a shell in the local market and is sent on a quest. Now able to move between our world and the spirit world, *Bosode* consults with Orunmila, god of wisdom, and Eshu the trickster god, as she decides which path to take on her journey. The film refuses the binary of Christianity's good vs evil, and *Bosode* has three alternative routes to choose from, reminding us of the agency we have when we take up the choices on offer to us.

In 'I Put a Spell on You', Tai Shani's witches are trapped inside the lightbulbs of a contorted candelabra,

where we imagine them muttering spells that will bring down the patriarchy. Her witches are inspired by women from the Italian island of Alicudi whose poverty-stricken residents lived off a diet of ergot (a fungus which infects crops and turns them into hallucinogens) contaminated bread, causing them to exist in a constant visionary state. Out of these hallucinations grew tales of flying women – the Maiara – who flew off to mainland Italy to steal food to feed their starving families. Like all the 'witches' in this exhibition, "they possess no earthly authority but through magic they are the righter of wrongs"¹⁰ and as such, are figures of resistance and revolution.

Jess Twyman

I am indebted to Matt Bowman who sent me articles on magic and mysticism, and Gisselle Giron who always engaged enthusiastically with the ideas behind the show.

1 Amy Hale, 'Communist Witches and Cyborg Magic: the Emergence of Queer, Feminist, Esoteric Futurism' in *Burlington Contemporary*, n. 6, June 2022
2 Ibid.
3 Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women*, 2018, PM press, pg 32

4 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, Duke University Press
5 JJ Charlesworth, 'The Return of Magic in Art' in *Art Review*, May 2022 (Accessed 29.05.23)
6 Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women*, 2018, PM Press, pg 25

7 Juno Calypso Interview, www.junocalypso.com/text. (Accessed 25.05.23)
8 Amy Hale, 'Communist Witches and Cyborg Magic: the Emergence of Queer, Feminist, Esoteric Futurism' in *Burlington Contemporary*, June 2022,

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.



Artist's BIOGRAPHIES

ALICE BUCKNELL

Born 1993. Lives and works in London and Los Angeles.

Working primarily through game engines and speculative fiction, Alice Bucknell explores interconnections between ecology, magic and non-human and machine intelligence.

Recent exhibitions include *Fiber Festival*, Amsterdam (2023); *I'll Be Your Mirror*, The Modern, Texas, USA (2023); *Swamp City*, Art Project Space, London (2022); *Freeport*, Epoch Gallery, LA (2021); B3 Moving Image Biennial, Germany (2020); *Scrolling the Arcane*, Porto Planetarium, Portugal (2020); *Tomorrow: London*, White Cube, London (2020).

www.alicebucknell.com



JUNO CALYPSO

Born 1989. Lives and works in London.

Juno Calypso works with photography, film and installation, creating a female universe of solitude, desire and despair. Working alone, Calypso comments on the construction of femininity.

Recent exhibitions include *The Horror Show*, Somerset House, London (2022); *Role Play*, Prada Foundation, Milan (2021); *What to Do with A Million Years*, TJ Boulting, London (2018); *Juno Calypso: The Honeymoon*, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland; *The BJP IPA Winners' Show*, TJ Boulting, London (2016).

www.artsy.net/partner/tj-boulting/artists/juno-calypso



LEONORA CARRINGTON

1917–2011. Born in UK, lived and worked in Mexico.

Leonora Carrington was a British-born surrealist painter who lived and worked in Mexico. Biblical stories, Irish fairy tales and Aztec culture alchemically blend to equip her with a unique way of approaching the world around her.

Recent exhibitions include *Leonora Carrington: Revelation*, Fundacion Mapre, Madrid (2023); *Objects of Desire*, Design Museum, London (2023); *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, Museum Barberine, Germany (2022); *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (2021) and *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, Tate Modern, (2022).

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonora_Carrington



CHIARA FUMAI

1978–2019. Lived and worked in Italy.

Chiara Fumai's practice interrogates radical feminism, media culture and repression through performance and works that explore psychic abilities, anti-spectacle strategies and counterculture icons.

Recent exhibitions include *I Will Never Release*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (2020); *Not Without My Ghosts*, Drawing Room, London (2020); *Less Light* at ISCP, New York, 2017; the Italian Pavilion, Venice Biennale (2019); *The Book of Evil Spirits*, Waterside Contemporary, London (2016) and Documenta 13, Kassell, Germany (2012).

www.waterside-contemporary.com/artists/chiara-fumai/



SERENA KORDA

Born 1979. Lives and works in London.

Serena Korda has a multi-media, installation-based practice with 'world building' at its core. She looks afresh at historic narratives, channeling them through a feminist lens to create her own mythologies.

She has exhibited widely, including *Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, Hayward Gallery, London (2022); *Maidens*, London (2022); *The Horror Show*, Somerset House (2022); *Daughter's of Necessity*, Hepworth, UK (2028); *The Jug Choir*, Camden Arts Centre (2016) and *Missing Time*, Baltic (2010).

www.cookelathamgallery.com/artists/71-serena-korda/biography/



AKINSOLA LAWANSON

Born 1992. Lives and works in London.

Akinsola Lawanson is a British-Nigerian artist working with moving image, video game engines and motorised sculptures. Their practice examines relational systems, colonialism, digital technologies and process philosophy.

Recent exhibitions include *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, South London Gallery, London (2022); *Schemes and Schemas*, hARTslane, London (2022); *Celestial Gestures*, U10 Gallery, Belgrade, Serbia (2022); *Ghost Show*, hARTslane, London (2021) and *Move Festival*, Pompidou Centre, Paris, France (2020).

www.kinsola.net/



SUSAN PUI SAN LOK

Born 1972. Lives and works in London.

Unearthing ancient histories, susan pui san lok explores ideas of history, myth, collective witnessing and resistance.

Recent exhibitions include *Rewinding Internationalism*, (Netwerk Aalst, Belgium; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and touring (2022); *Found Cities, Lost Objects*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and touring (2022-24); *seven x seven*, Glasgow International (2021); *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND*, Firstsite, Colchester (2019) and *Diaspora Pavilion*, 57th Venice Biennale (2017).

www.susanpuisanlok.com



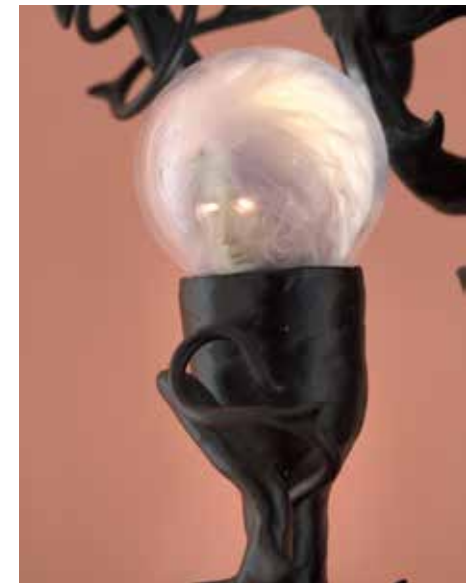
FREDDIE ROBINS

Born 1965. Lives and works in Essex and London.

Freddie Robins uses knitting to explore contemporary issues of the domestic, gender and the human condition. Playfully subverting meaning and making, her work disrupts notions of knitting as passive and benign.

Recent exhibitions include *If Not Now, When? Generations of Women in Sculpture in Britain, 1960 – 2022*, The Hepworth, Wakefield (2023); *Creature Comforts*, JGM Gallery, London (2022-23); *Kette und Schuss*, CC binder, Puurs, Belgium (2020) and *We are Commoners: Creative Acts of Commoning*, Oriel Davis Gallery, Wales and touring (2020).

www.freddierobins.com



TAI SHANI

Born 1976. Lives and works in London.

Tai Shani's practice encompasses performance, film and installation. Taking inspiration from forgotten histories, she explores capitalism, patriarchy and feminism as she creates dark, fantastical worlds brimming with Utopian potential.

Tai Shani was a joint winner of the 2019 Turner Prize. Recent exhibitions include *Your Arms Outstretched Above Your Head, Coding With The Angels, Gathering*, London (2022); *The Neon Hieroglyph*, Manchester International Festival (2021); *Dark Continent: Psy Chic Anem One*, Athens Biennale (2018) and *Glasgow International* (2018).

www.gathering.london/artists/30-tai-shani/overview/

EVENTS

TAROT CARD READINGS

Thurs 26 October

6:00 – 8:00 pm

Art Exchange

An evening of tarot card readings with expert psychics. Step into Art Exchange for an evening full of intrigue and insight.

RE-IMAGING WITCHES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Tues 31 October

6:00 – 7:00 pm

Art Exchange building – 5N.151

What did people in previous centuries believe about witches and their powers, and how did this fit into wider beliefs about magic? Join Professor Alison Rowlands (UoE) as she explores how 'witches' have been imagined and presented through history.

Followed by Q&A and a drinks reception.

CURATOR'S TOUR: I PUT A SPELL ON YOU

Wed 1 November

2:00 – 2:45 pm

Art Exchange

Join curator Jess Twyman for a tour of *I Put a Spell on You* and the works on show.

ARTISTS' TALK: JUNO CALYPSO AND SERENA KORDA

Thurs 9 November

6:00 – 7:00 pm

Art Exchange

Artists Juno Calypso and Serena Korda join us for an evening of conversation about their work on show in *I Put a Spell on You*. They will offer insights into their practice, including the ideas and inspiration behind their work.

Followed by Q&A and a drinks reception.

CALIBAN AND THE WITCH

Wed 15 November

6:00 – 7:30 pm

Art Exchange

An evening of food and conversation about Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, an incredible book that is the inspiration behind *I Put a Spell on You* exhibition. Led by Professor Stephen Shukaitis (UoE).

ADMISSION FREE
no need to book in advance

To find out more,
visit artexchange.org.uk