

# The Rise of the L.A. Art Witch

The etymology of the word magic comes from the Greek *magoi*, referring to people the Greeks saw as astrology-touting, talisman-bearing foreigners from the East.<sup>1</sup> By its very definition, magic has always referred to outsiders, others, and those whose practices and beliefs run contrary to Western orthodoxy. It follows then that witchcraft, as a form of magic most commonly associated with medieval hags or sorcerers from “the dark continent,” also implies a practice that operates against the hegemonic authorities of the West. More and more frequently, we’re seeing contemporary artists utilize the methodologies of witchcraft in their practice, largely because, by its very nature, witchcraft is a political and creative act commanding power back into the hands of people who have historically been banished from the inner circles of cultural authority.

Many methodologies used in witchcraft and other magical practices overlap those of art-making. Take for instance, the fashioning of talismans and amulets. For the maker, the aim is to transform an ordinary object into a physical catalyst to bring about a desired result: love, abundance, protection, etc. To create a talisman or amulet, the witch subjects the object to a series of manipulations with the intention of attaching meaning by praying over it, anointing it, inscribing sigils into it, piercing it with pins, binding it with cords, and so on. The work of the artist is also to manipulate objects with

the intention of attaching meaning through a similar kind of alchemy, bringing things together to create more than the sum of their parts. For both artist and witch, the function of their labor is to encourage objects to communicate something beyond their actual form. Today’s art world is so commercially driven however, that even objects made with the loftiest intentions are quickly transmuted into vehicles for capital as soon as they enter the magically charged field of the marketplace.

In a recent essay titled “The Broad: Class Hatred, Concentrated,”<sup>2</sup> an anonymous author using the pseudonym Demogorgon argues essentially that the contemporary art object is used as talisman to expiate the sins of capitalist accumulation. Drawing heavily from Marx, the article describes how capital is “dead labor” hidden and transformed, thus rendering invisible its system of violent social relations. Demogorgon accuses the Broad Museum of being a shrine to class hatred, saying that within its walls, “art takes upon itself the guilt of those who [cause] suffering and who think that art will discharge it. But it does not.” The author argues then, that when art is used by the wealthy as an uncrossing spell against the curses cast by suffering laborers, it fails.

But what about when art is used for magical purposes, not by “capitalist overlords”, but by the artists themselves? Given that many of the art witches practicing in Los Angeles

Amanda Yates Garcia is an artist, writer, witch, healer and the Oracle of Los Angeles. Recent performance rituals include *Capitalism Exorcism* at Human Resources and *Devouring Patriarchy* at the Women’s Center for Creative Work. Amanda hosts her bi-monthly show *The Oracle Hour* on KCHUNG radio; teaches the Magical Praxis monthly mystery school; and performs private rites of healing and empowerment at her magical studio in West Adams.



Feature

today are women, people of color, and/or LGBTQ, for them an interest in systems of power, who has it, and how that power operates is of particular consequence.

This past April, Christie Roberts Berkowitz curated an event at Human Resources called the *Brujaja*, bringing together artists of all mediums for a night of sorcery and performance. Rafa Esparza demonstrated both the physical risks inherent in deep spiritual commitment, and perhaps also the harm suffered through cultural appropriation, in wearing a headdress of sage and letting it burn to ash on the crown of his head. Sarah Gail Armstrong read a series of fierce poems, one of which took to task white witches who refuse to recognize the African origins of their Western Mystery traditions. The evening included many other performances including my own piece, a ceremonial working called *Capitalism Exorcism*.

Earlier this year, the Women's Center for Creative Work (WCCW) held a series of workshops, performances and residencies titled *Magic Spring*. It's no coincidence that many of the participating artists chose to focus on systems of power directly, with projects addressing patriarchy, institutionalized racism, the destruction of the ecosystem and the profit-driven medical establishment.

Working contra to Western medicine<sup>3</sup> and the system of dependency and debt it can generate, several of *Magic Spring's* contributing artists performed workshops<sup>4</sup> based on DIY alternative healing practices such as Taleen Kali's "Femme Punk Yoga: Magical Healing Powers of the Divine Feminine." Another program in the series, "Let the Earth Help You Hold It" was an herbalism workshop open to everyone but specifically focused on supporting women of color. Conducted by Melanie Griffin, a queer

black artist, the workshop demonstrated how, "we can use [plants] to help nourish and support us as we move through the stress we experience living with systemic oppression and trauma."<sup>5</sup>

Witchcraft and its relationship to medicine have a long and often ignominious legacy. According to critical theorist and witch icon, Silvia Federici, during the inquisitions of medieval Europe, folk healers were often persecuted. These witches cum female healers "were expropriated from a patrimony of empirical knowledge, regarding herbs and healing remedies, that they had accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation. This," she continues, "was the rise of professional medicine, which erected in front of the 'lower classes' a wall of unchallengeable scientific knowledge, unaffordable and alien, despite its curative pretenses."<sup>6</sup> Fundamentally, the question of power, who holds it, and how it is exercised, finds its answer through the body. The medical establishment erects a wall of scientific obfuscation around the processes of the body that many art witches are working to dismantle.

Witches are agents of disturbance within the symbolic order. Art witches know this, and many use the discomfort around the word to their advantage to advance their cause. As part of another performance event at Human Resources last spring (called *Yes Femmes*), Johanna Hedva crawled across the floor in her performance *Sick Witch*. Her black wig was draped across her face like she'd just crawled out of the television in the Japanese horror film *The Ring*. Utilizing horror film tropes and the power of the witch as an icon of agitation, Hedva's work is an act of defiance against a system that asserts that a person's value can be measured mainly through their ability to accumulate

1. Davies, Owen. *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

2. Demogorgon. "The Broad: Class Hatred, Concentrated?" [www.edicioneschafa.wordpress.com](http://www.edicioneschafa.wordpress.com). Ediciones Chafa, May 24, 2016.

3. For another artist working to elaborate the themes of witchcraft, medicine, and anti-colonial theory see the work of Candice Lin. The show *Sycorax's Garden* at the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Arts center in 2015 is of particular relevance. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/candice-lins-garden-of-earthly-delights>



more capital and direct it up the cultural food chain.

In her widely lauded essay, “Sick Woman Theory,” Hedva argues that, “The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, and caring. To take seriously each other’s vulnerability, fragility, and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it; to protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care.”<sup>7</sup> Again and again in surveys of the practices of art witches of Los Angeles and beyond, we see an explicitly stated allegiance to care for the body, and for the earth to whom it belongs.

There’s a myth about the “discovery” of the Americas that when Cortez showed up in his big ships off the coast of Mexico, because the natives had never seen such things before, they ignored them, as if the ships were ghosts. It seems an unlikely story to me. But the story reminds me of how power is operating in our world today: except in negative image. Today, we’re trained to *only* see the big ships. We recognize power as it moves through banks, through the State, is showered upon celebrities, or comes speeding out the barrel of a police gun. But we often don’t recognize the softer forms of power, the ones that surround us, like the sea *beneath* Cortez’s ships.

Fundamentally, magic is about power, and both art and witchcraft still have it, although the form may be different than most of us have been taught to recognize. When Starhawk, a founding mother of contemporary witchcraft, said that “Magic is a shift in perception,” being able to recognize power in its unsanctioned forms was part of what she meant.

4. Many Art Witches use the workshop as a performance model: workshops are educational, collaborative and participatory.

5. Griffin, Melanie. “Let the Earth Help You Hold It.” [www.womenscenterforcreativework.com](http://www.womenscenterforcreativework.com). N.p. Web.

Magic has existed in every post-industrial culture as a feature that demarcates through relief. Early anthropologists were tasked with designating magic as “a conceptual field—shared with such notions as *shamanism, fetishism, witchcraft, the occult, totem, mana and taboo*—that was predominantly made to define an antithesis of modernity: a production of illusion and delusion that was thought to recede and disappear as rationalization and secularization spread throughout society.”<sup>8</sup> A major project of the Enlightenment was the attempt to create an intellectual monoculture of positivism and scientific rationalism. Social and applied scientists developed epistemological tools to let them see what was rational and real and true.

Scientific—and thus infallible—tools, developed within the hegemonic infrastructures of the patriarchal imperialist West, verified that nature is a machine possessing no spirit and is therefore available for every type of exploitation imaginable. Working under the auspices of this hegemony, tools like the nuclear centrifuge, for instance, were invented by scientists to separate isotopes of uranium. Witches too use tools, like athames (ceremonial swords), to separate truth from falsehood and make distinctions of value. Artworks and athames may not be able to separate isotopes, but neither can a centrifuge distinguish the value of keeping uranium in the mountain.

Perhaps not unlike witches, social scientists also developed tools of divination to determine which kinds of epistemologies were effective. Working under the auspices of imperialist capitalist patriarchy these soothsayers shook their Scientific 8-Balls to determine whether the indigenous, brown, female, queer, or just generally “abnormal” magic-practicing peoples

6. Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2014. Print.

7. Hedva, Johanna. “Sick Woman Theory.” <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>. Mask Magazine, January 2016. Web.



of the world had value, epistemological or otherwise. Given the context, it's unsurprising the divination tools of imperialist patriarchy decreed, "All signs point to no."

Neither art nor science can be conducted outside the hegemony's metanarratives of value. Artists might want to make work that questions and challenges the oppressive value systems of the hegemony, but they still have to find ways to survive within a system that frequently requires their capitulation. Even the liminal figure of the art witch cannot operate outside the orbit of capitalism's great gas giant. As the ideology and aesthetics of witchcraft increase in popularity, so too does the likelihood of its being interpolated by the status quo—the threatening, rebellious figure of the witch used to hawk tote bags, crystal jewelry, and bougie craft fairs in Topanga Canyon. But as any experienced witch knows, practicing magic always involves a degree of risk.

Witches are travelers between the worlds. While art witches clearly do exist within the "consensus reality"

of advanced capitalism, they also live in and are creating a new reality based on the primacy of the imagination, care for each other and for the earth that sustains us. If magic is the practice of transforming reality according to one's will, then clearly the magic of the Los Angeles art witch is working.

1

Candice Lin, *Recipe for Spontaneous Generation: Baby Mice* (2015). Fabric, dried wheat, baby mice, alcohol, glass jar, airlock, copper pipe. 26 x 4 x 4 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

2

Rafa Esparza, *i just came to do brujeria on the artworld* (2016) (performance still). Image courtesy of the artist.

3

Rafa Esparza, *i just came to do brujeria on the artworld* (2016) (performance still). Image courtesy of the artist.

4

Amanda Yates Gracia, *Spell to Devour the Patriarchy* (2016) (performance still). Image courtesy of Women's Center for Creative Work.

8. Pels, Peter. *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. Print.