

Bitch Magic

26 January – 2 March 2024

Private view: Thursday 25 January 2024, 6 - 9 PM



Renate Bertlmann, *Magic Tower - The Unicorn - Model*, 1990.

Alma Pearl is pleased to present *Bitch Magic*, an exhibition curated by gallery founder Celeste Baracchi. The exhibition brings together a cross-generational group of women and non-binary artists who align with 'the feminine' and whose work offers radical feminist perspectives through themes associated with folklore, the magical, or the esoteric. The works in the exhibition span a variety of media—sound installation, performance, painting, drawing, photography and sculpture.

"Can she alone feel the music of the air trembling between the wings of the angels, and make or remake a body from it?"

—Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover: Of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1976

Recent interpretations of a resurgence of magical thought in historical and contemporary art practices position these tendencies as an escapist projection, or withdrawal from present realities. While offering perhaps an insight, such readings flatten out the diversities of positions around art practices engaging with magical thinking. *Bitch Magic* explores links between 'the feminine' and magic, which I believe can lead to novel and more inclusive directions for feminist discourses.¹

Far from being restricted to the binary structure of sexual difference in which the term originates, 'the feminine' here becomes a conceptual tool subject to a magical transmutation of meaning. This

¹ 'The feminine' or *le féminin* is a term mostly known within the context of French Feminism (Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, amongst others). The term is much contested within academia. Not only because it is traditionally linked to a binary notion of sexual difference but also because it is historically linked to an essentialist notion of womanhood (i.e. white, Euro-centric), while excluding other differences. The meaning attributed to 'the feminine' in this exhibition is different and it becomes a marker of difference able to generate new strategies of inclusion. In many respects, there are strong similarities with Bridget Crone's elaboration of the 'feminine' in the introduction to Tai Shani's *Our Fatal Magic*: "What constitutes the feminine? It is this question that demands a broader address and *queering* to approach gender beyond the binarism [...] in order to expand the boundaries of the feminine.", p. XI. See Bridget Crone, "Wounds of Unbecoming: an introduction to the work of Tai Shani", in *Our Fatal Magic*, (Cambridge, MA: Strange Attractor / The MIT Press, 2019).

materialises in an unfixed approach to both form and language, a critique sharpened by humour, celebrations of fluid and hybrid subject positions, desire, and the ecstatic uncanny. While using the idiom of magic, the works in *Bitch Magic* offer positions where 'the feminine' might be enacted at the service of feminist and queer theory.

Magic is also tragically associated with forms of historical repression, particularly against women and those not identifying with white and patriarchal heteronormativity. In her *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Silvia Federici talks extensively about the correlations between capitalism, gender and the weaponisation of witchcraft in the 15th century. The witch-hunts in Europe and later in colonial North America specifically targeted individuals based on the categories of race, class and gender. Signal works in the exhibition touch upon these historical conjunctures, while also generating a healing response to traumas they have produced.

Tai Shani's *The Passion I*, 2023, a work based on the architecture from the sets made for Carl Dreyer's epically beautiful silent film, 'The Passion of Joan of Arc', references the architecture of the courthouse where Joan of Arc's convictions and faith were tested and condemned. Overturning the limits imposed by both class and gender, Joan of Arc rose to the highest rank of the power structures of her time to become one of France's most renowned mystics and heroes. She, however, paid a hefty price. Burnt at the stake, Joan of Arc was accused of heresy, witchcraft and violating divine law for dressing like a man. Centuries later, she was formally canonised as a saint. The figure of the mystic stands here to symbolise 'the feminine' in an infinite, if not divine state of becoming, collapse and rebirth.

Similarly, Penny Slinger's photo-collages from 'An Exorcism' also address a state of transformation through a rejection of the symbolic order and the liberation of feminine jouissance. Set within an abandoned country house in Northamptonshire, Slinger's photo-collages such as *Through the Glass*, 1970-1977 tell the tale of a woman going through a tenacious battle with her own fears and repressive context resulting in an exuberant and liberating eruption of feminine ecstasy and excess.

Renate Bertlmann's humorous papier-mâché sculpture *Zauberturm - Das Einhorn - Modell [Magic Tower - The Unicorn - Model]*, 1990 displays a hybrid form that rises from a hairy phallic base where the perspex box is here conceived as a cage for all that is inside it. Bertlmann casts a spell on the phallus and puts it under lock and key, thus opening the doors for all that is other, foreclosed, dominated and prohibited.²

Unyimeabasi Udoh's work is structured around the deconstruction of language and form. Their *eve after the fall (eve pleine)*, 2018 is inspired by Rodin's 19th century sculpture by the same name. Resembling an alchemical act, Udoh transforms white marble into a black feminine body and returns Eve to Eden through the superposition of the two prints.

Rebecca Parkin's mermaids and hybrid creatures stand as eroticised tropes of the demonic feminine while also alluding to a symbology associated with fluidity and water. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) and *Marine Lover* (1991), Irigaray specifically addresses the metaphor of fluids and its link to the feminine. In *Medusa*, Parkin draws from both marine metaphors and the myth the female monster associated with voracious maternal power—the hair covers her monstrous mouth, symbolically hinting at the presence of the "Vagina Dentata", a folk myth of toothed female genitalia.

² In the 15th century, the German Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer wrote his *Malleus Maleficarum* which effectively initiated the witch trials in Europe resulting in countless women dead. In a passage of the treatise, these women were risibly accused of stealing penises, putting them into a bird's nest, and feeding them oats.

Permindar Kaur's *Black Curtain*, 2015 conjures up the magical within the more known terrain of the domestic space. Her black 'teddies' climb across the fabric support. Mysterious and disturbing, these beings conjure uncanny and contrasting feelings of both domestic comfort and an ominous threat. Engaging with Freudian notions of the *unheimlich* (i.e. the uncanny, but literally 'the unhomely'), Kaur's work operates at the intersection of identity and gender conjuring intimations of a return of the repressed. What generally resides behind the curtain is here brought forward.

The spirit world is evoked in the work of Georgina Starr. In Starr's vinyl record and multisensory audio installation *I am the Medium*, 2010 fragmented voices and sounds recorded during seances with psychic mediums are drawn from the spirit world and captured within 250 locked grooves. Viewers are invited to play the record and place the stylus where they wish, activating a discrete message. In Starr's installation, the visitors find themselves inside a darkened room. While unable to see the terrestrial world, they gain access to another realm through the engagement of listening and touch.³ Communing with what is other to them, they become the medium.

Ayla Dymterko's series of paintings titled 'Sun-Based Materialism' draws from Ukrainian folklore and vernacular tales. The paintings combine visual fragments from a myriad of sources—ranging from personal photographs to archival images culled from online—which collapse past and present and referential practices of divination and matriarchal ancient civilizations. Her works explore a moment where the gendered split between culture and nature had not yet been imposed. They propose not only a return but a reclamation of that produced in a feminine context and culture that has been usurped by others.

Cullinan Richards' works in *Bitch Magic* comprise multiple objects including painting, installation as well as a performance. These works revisit and subvert Francisco Goya's 1798 painting *The Bewitched Man* (also known as *The Devil's Lamp*).⁴ The two groups of paintings by Cullinan Richards—*Bewitched*, 2021 and *Black Paintings*, 2020—refer to a state of mind verging on the possessed, where the two artists explore the collapse of form into abstraction. In the installation titled *Upright chandelier in two sections with their shadow*, 2024 melted wax from candles has dripped onto the slotted angle profiles—remnants of an unfixated temporality in which a bewitched state approaches its climax.

Cullinan Richards' performance—*A staged event in three unstable parts*, 2024—will take place at 7:30pm during the opening.

Celeste Baracchi

³ The primacy of vision over the other senses is often associated with dominant positions of power. As Irigaray puts it: "More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality." Luce Irigaray, Interview in M-F. Bans and G. Lapouge, *La Femme, La Pornographie et L'Erotisme*, (Paris: 1978), 50.

⁴ Goya depicts a scene based on a satirical play originally performed in 1698: *The Forcibly Bewitched*. The priest believes that a slave, Lucia, has bewitched him, and that his life will last only as long as the lamp in her room remains alight. Dancing donkeys in the background generate a sense of mystery, but the play is ultimately a comedy mocking the priest's gullibility.