

Lotus: group exhibition

13 October – 25 November 2017

Anna Hughes, Beatrice Loft Schulz, Holly White, Candida Powell-Williams, Mary Hurrell, Wanda Wieser, Miriam Austin

Magical Thinking by Kathy Noble

When something is described as occult, it usually means that it is something magical, mystical, spiritual, or perhaps even supernatural. Occult experiences alter perception, as they exist outside of the ordinary realm of our everyday experiences. The exhibition Lotus reimagines histories through an occult lens. The artists in the exhibition— Miriam Austin, Anna Hughes, Mary Hurrell, Holly White, Candida Powell-Williams, Beatrice Loft Schulz, and Wanda Wieser—have played with traditions of myth making, magic, ritual, and performance, to create a dialogue with the rich feminist artistic and literary history that explores the presentation of the self.

Magical thinking is a term used by psychologists to describe the belief that our internal thoughts and desires can influence the external world. Magical thinking is to think, or to will something into existence. It is to make the imaginary realm into a reality. It is often used in relationship to young children, who actively create and imagine unreal places, spaces, things, or entire people. For adults, the act of magical thinking is considered to be more unusual, occurring when people seek to create meaning from the events of their lives. To see these events as a series of signs, or signals, to weave a pattern through what might otherwise feel confusing, meaningless, or even intolerable. Magical thinking is to feel power over the trajectory of our lives, over our own destinies. This type of thinking, which is inherently creative in its nature, is often dismissed or discouraged in adults, as it is considered irrational and unrealistic. Yet most of us think magically in some way.

Magic is a form of power, albeit it an invisible one. A power that creates a shift in perception. And this shift in perception can, in turn, affect the events of our lives. Until the Enlightenment, or the age of reason, the use of magic, and of magical thinking, was a common system of thought, used to support, and alter, people's everyday lives. The Enlightenment encouraged a system of rational thought, based upon the scientific revolution and empirical evidence, presented as a system of "true" fact. This mode of thought still forms the basis of nearly all the patriarchal institutions of the West—democracy, freedom of expression, separation of church and state, and the rejection (often resulting in persecution) of other more esoteric modes of thought such as magic. The concept of truth was the new power. And this truth was a male domain. Religion was allowed to co-exist with this truth—even though based entirely on a system of magical thinking that relies on historical myths, magical figures, and special objects and places, to create meaning—because, for the most part, it supported the patriarchal social structures.

Prehistoric humans moved society forward by imagining new things, by creating basic tools that allowed them to do more with their lives. Alphabets, then languages, were new technologies long before any printed matter existed. Humans created these objects, patterns, and new systems via experimentation with their imagination. This was also a form of magical thinking. Witchcraft has, for most of human history, used its own tools, processes and patterns—taking the cycles of the moon and systems of nature as a blueprint—to harness power to affect human lives. What we consider scientific absolutes today were once inexplicable beliefs. Magical thinking allows us to view the world in a way that is not absolute, and to imagine alternatives. The recent technological revolution would not have occurred without magical thinking—all inventions require humans to imagine things that previously seemed impossible. It also requires a form of prophetic thinking. I believe in telepathy and premonitions. I cannot explain why I think the same thoughts at the same time as certain people in my life, or sometimes imagine something before it happens. But I know that these are real experiences to me. That this is my version of the truth.

The psychotherapist Donald Winnicott studied the relationship between creativity, play, and fantasy in his book *Playing and Reality*, 1971. In the chapter “Dreaming, Fantasying and Living”, he describes the role of fantasy in a female patient’s life: “What has now become clear is that there is an essential difference for her between fantasying and the alternatives to dreaming, on the one hand, and of real living and relating to real objects, on the other. With the unexpected clarity, dreaming and living have been seen to be of the same order, daydreaming of another order. Dream fits into object-relating in the real world, and living in the real world fits into the dream-world in ways that are quite familiar, especially to psychoanalysts. By contrast, fantasying remains an isolated phenomenon, absorbing energy, but not contributing-in either to dreaming or to living.” He goes on to analyse the patient’s fantasy life as a kind of separate entity to what he sees as “real”. But I wonder if, for this woman, and for many of us, fantasying is a way of creating an alternative reality—a form of magical, even prophetic thinking that allows us to imagine a different version of reality, and sometimes, even create it.

Chris Kraus begins her literary biography *After Kathy Acker*, 2017 by stating that Acker lied a lot. “She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not. Perceptive readers of Acker’s work have observed that the lies weren’t literal lies, but more a system of magical thought.”¹ Yet personal mythology is inextricable from Acker’s work. Acker reimagined the ghosts of her own past in a future constructed via the pirated (she used this term as opposed to the art historical term appropriation) words of others—thus inserting herself into a version of literary history. Her process seemed ritualistic, a kind of exercise in poetry and pattern forming, that was originally influenced by the poet David Antin’s teaching methods (copy the work of others in order to find your own voice) and artist Eleanor Antin’s work (to rewrite history and include yourself), whom she was close friends with throughout her life. Acker died of cancer at fifty. After a double mastectomy, instead of continuing with Western medicine, she investigated alternatives, working with several healers amongst others. A healer advised that to cure herself she needed to

¹ *After Kathy Acker*, 2017, Semiotext(e), MIT and Penguin, p.14

discover why she got cancer in the first place. Later they told her she was cured. Yet the cancer never completely left her body. Instead it metastasised and she died in a palliative care centre in Tijuana. Perhaps she would have lived longer with further treatment using Western medicine. Perhaps not. Her choices—to seek out other, less-normative, ways of addressing her illness—were in line with the way she worked as an artist and lived her life. There was never one linear narrative truth for Acker. There is never one linear narrative truth in life.

Art is a magical entity. One that allows for ritual, fantasy, animism in inanimate objects, and the creation of patterns, languages, and systems of meaning out of seemingly random, or mundane things. The advent of conceptual art gave artists the freedom to imagine anything as art. In most art history classes Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917 is hailed as the watershed moment for conceptualism. Yet it has been suggested that this iconic work was, in fact, created by performance artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven—who created bizarre rituals that played with gender roles in her own brand of (very) early twentieth century punk. Duchamp apparently once said, “[The Baroness] is not a Futurist. She is the future.” The baroness had been finding objects and declaring them to be works of art before Duchamp did—such as *Enduring Ornament*, 1913, a rusted metal ring she found on her way to her own wedding; or a piece of wood entitled *Cathedral*, 1918, or a cast-iron plumber's trap attached to a wooden box, which she titled *God*. Around the time of his (rejected) submission of *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists, New York (who stated they would show every work of art submitted) Duchamp wrote to his sister: “One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; since there was nothing indecent about it, there was no reason to reject it.” There is no specific record to prove that this friend was von Freytag-Loringhoven. Yet her previous ready-mades point to this conclusion.

The history of art is filled with visions of extraordinary woman positioned as mythical, magical, sometimes witch-like figures and goddesses—Mary Magdalene, Lady of the Lake, Ophelia, Athena and Venus to name but a few. But, of course, most of these renditions were created by men. Even in the 1960s, long after von Freytag-Loringhoven's death in 1927, the act of being taken seriously as an artist, whilst also being a woman, was in itself an act of magical thinking. A miniscule percentage (less than 1% in the US) of exhibitions in museums and galleries were by women. Being an artist as a woman was akin to being a witch: to forge a life as an artist in a world that barely tolerated women was, at the time, a form of magical thinking. These women were pioneers, forging into unknown territory via their persistence, and via the work that they made. The history of performance, video, and interdisciplinary art is, for a large part, a history of artists who were also women. Of course, men experimented with these mediums too. But these mediums allowed women to make and present work outside the traditional gallery and institutional systems that placed value on objects. The history is also a history of women creating new meaning via ritualistic actions, which includes Lygia Clark, Rose English, Maren Hassinger, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Joan Jonas, Ana Mendieta, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady, Suzanne Lacy, Adrian Piper, Carollee Schneeman, and Barbara T Smith, amongst many others.

In 1997 I saw an exhibition of the work of Ana Mendieta. I was seventeen years old at the time, but the imagery I encountered is still burnt on my brain, as if a scar in my memory. In particular I recall entering a dark room and seeing the work *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973. This is a photograph of a woman bent over a table with her trousers and underwear round her ankles. She is wearing a checked shirt and her arms are stretched out on the table above her head. Her bare bottom and legs are covered in smears of blood which drip down to a pool of it on the floor by her feet. This is the documentation of an action that the artist performed in her apartment in Iowa City whilst a student at the University of Iowa. It was created in response to the brutal rape and murder of the nursing student Sara Ann Otten by another student in March 1973. Mendieta invited her fellow students to her apartment where they found her in the position in the photograph, through the door she left ajar. The framing of the encounters she staged is as important as the action as it gives the viewer permission to look—the doorway through which the audience entered shaped this live encounter and similarly the documentation repeats this perspective. It was the first of three works in response to this incident—the other two were similar performances staged on campus, in which Mendieta lay semi-naked and covered in blood in outdoor locations. Mendieta died age 36 in 1985, after falling 34 floors from her Mercer Street apartment window in Manhattan. Her partner, Carl Andre, was arrested and charged with her murder. After three indictments, he was later acquitted as there was insufficient evidence to support the belief that he pushed her. A doorman heard a woman scream “no” three times before her body thudded onto the roof of the deli below. According to friends, Mendieta had an extreme fear of heights, so it was very unlikely she would have been leaning out the window to fall accidentally. Andre claims he remembers nothing, as they were extremely drunk. His version of a truth for which there is no empirical evidence, yet this was the one that was institutionally sanctioned. In her short life Mendieta went on to create ritualistic symbolic scenes, often performed outdoors, creating a special alchemy between her body and nature. Only images of these performances remain; but they retain a powerful magic.

Mendieta’s student works were embryonic, using many of the elements of her later work. And, more strangely, were prophetic of her own death.

History is a story first told by the people who lived it, then retold by people who were never there. No two people remember it, or retell it, in quite the same way. As such, history is an intricate collage of facts, truths, myths, and, quite often, some magical thinking. The artists in the exhibition Lotus explore feminist histories of magic and myth via the lens of the present, creating their own personal interpretations of occult thought and practice. Miriam Austin’s objects and tools are “performed” in a ritual that draws connections between female folkloric figures and bodies of water, whilst also navigating the oppression that can accompany Western interests in folk religions and cultures. Anna Hughes uses divination and scrying practices to consider how the surface pattern of objects can connect to the unknown, seeing signs using water, mirrors or crystals, in order to contemplate existential issues with new clarity. Mary Hurrell will address the duality of the self through two sculptures installed intermittently in the space, akin to the state of *Eros* in Ann Carson’s *Eros: The Bittersweet*, where pleasure and pain coexist. Holly White’s tent like structure,

created from hand-crafted flags, will interweave her own experiences with fictional worlds, to contemplate a post-apocalyptic world as a metaphor for enduring emotional difficulty. Candida Powell-Williams plays with divinatory systems by applying their logic to digital culture in order to navigate ideas of absurdity. Beatrice Loft Schulz's performance *Sally* reveals the story of a single white female looking for love in the 1990s, and an artificial intelligence robot in the future that has abolished women by learning how to fake an orgasm. Wanda Wieser explores the alchemical properties of natural materials, such as copper, wax, and Himalayan rock salt, to consider how these principals resonate with sentient, and spiritual, life. Via these objects, rituals, and performances, the exhibition Lotus seeks to reanimate ghosts of past, and to emphasise the importance of alternative modes of thinking and acting, in the increasingly digitally structured world of the present.

Kathy Noble