OCCULTURE
THE DARK ARTS
THE TERM ‘occult’ does not deserve its bad reputation. It simply means that which is hidden or concealed—like when the light cast by a star is blocked by an object passing in front of it, known in astronomy as ‘stellar occultation’. It’s our projection onto what happens in this state of darkness that grants such phenomena portentous possibilities, as well as the hubristic assumption that humanity observes this darkness from the correct vantage point. Throughout history, occult beliefs and practices have been shunned, banned, and driven (or have driven themselves) underground. Yet, certain moments have welcomed their alternative possibilities. We live in one such time that reaches into the dark.

British academic Christopher Partridge coined the term ‘occulture’ to account for this process of contemporary ‘re-enchantment’. He argues that, as the influence of traditional religion wanes, a confluence of secularisation and sacralisation has seen western culture embrace the occult, and remake it in its own image. Occult, esoteric, and spiritualist practices have stepped out from behind the veil to take on new forms and devotees, becoming accepted, even respectable. They no longer represent, in occult historian James Webb’s classic formulation, ‘rejected knowledge’.

Occulture is as secular as it is sacred and is largely disseminated through popular culture. It is fuelled by many things, including political disenfranchisement and the rejection of existing power structures, systems, and binary identities. It’s propelled by cybertecture’s access to alternative worlds, as well as to sources of knowledge long hidden. Many everyday activities are occultural, from eco-enchantment retreats (updating pagan nature worship) to notions of personal wellbeing (emphasising the discovery of holistic, spiritual pathways). Thomson & Craighead satirise this condition with their work in this exhibition, Apocalypso (2016)—a luxury perfume made from the olfactory materials listed in the Book of Revelation. What was once sacred, blasphemous, or countercultural is now commodified and marketed back to us. Kenneth Anger’s recent release of bomber jackets emblazoned with the logo from his film Lucifer Rising (1970–81)—replicas of the one worn by its titular character—plays into this new condition. This is countercultural occult merchandise reissued for the occultural moment. This is occulture.

Art and the occult have a long, intertwined history. There have been too many occult revivals to name. Key moments include nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle Europe, when the technological and scientific advances of the industrial revolution sent the symbolists and others scrambling in the opposite direction. Kandinsky, Mondrian, and other modernists famously sought ‘the spiritual in art’, but their explorations were often masked by their formal emphasis—just more squares and circles. Poet André Breton would call for ‘the profound, the veritable occultation of surrealism’ in the movement’s second manifesto of 1930. Surrealism embraced the occult as a means to shatter the boundary between interior and exterior worlds, and was carried through into the shaman-based conceptualism of artists like Joseph Beuys. Sol LeWitt would later write, ‘Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.’ Led by Anger’s films and, later, by Genesis P-Orridge’s art and music, from the late 1960s to the 1990s countercultural practices harnessed the occult as a force of opposition to hegemonic cultural paradigms and bourgeois morality. Taking nineteenth-century occult
artist Austin Osman Spare as a guide, P-Orridge coined the term ‘esoteromorphism’ to explain the occult’s potential to ‘infect’ a corrupt mainstream culture.3

Contemporary occulture is not counter-cultural. Occulture has become a central, even clichéd dimension of the cultural landscape. If anything, contemporary culture has infected the occult. According to Partridge, pop culture is its chief propagator. Television, cinema and music are constantly feeding on, remixing, and disseminating it. Contemporary art is another agent of this process.

One sign of art’s current occultation are exhibitions exploring connections between contemporary art and the occult. Our show runs concurrently with *As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits, and Mystics* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. *Language of the Birds: Occult and Art* (2015) at WAX Gallery, New York University, offered art as a form of magic. Australia has given us *Believe Not Every Spirit, But Try the Spirits* (2015) at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne. *Windows to the Sacred* (2015) at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne. Some are practitioner-curators—occult, rather than, or as well as, occultural. Robert Buratti, curator of *Windows to the Sacred* (and a contributor to this publication) is a member of Ordo Templi Orientis and the A.A.* He said, ‘I tend to keep my professional life apart from my personal, but this exhibition has seen a very happy and fruitful crossover.’4 Pam Grossman, curator of *Language of the Birds*, is a writer, academic, and teacher of magical practice. She calls herself ‘a pragmatic witch.’5 Both bring a deep understanding of esoteric practice to their curatorial projects. Both invoke exhibition making as a magical act, and build ritual into the experience. Far from speaking just to the initiated, Buratti and Grossman share the larger occultical interest in bringing esoteric art and culture into broader consciousness. By comparison, the objectives of (and marketing campaigns behind) the contemporary art curators can feel a touch more classically occult than occultural—playing into or hamming up the subversive promise of this art to confront mainstream values.

The same goes for artists. Some artists in the esoterically generated exhibitions are unlikely ever to cross over to the contemporary-art context. Similarly, some artists in the contemporary-art–focused exhibitions would be dismissed by the initiated as dabblers or tourists, stepping into sacred territory with ignorance or disrespect. While most of the *Occulture* artists are believers, some are sceptics; several were surprised by the invitation to participate. Such variance represents the vastness of occulture—it is a threshold where diverse practices meet and mix. Contemporary art feeds occulture and feeds from it. Occulture not only plays into or feeds into the experience, another brand of dark tourism.

As a small sample of this recent interest, these exhibitions map the overlapping territory of the occult and contemporary art. While sharing some artists and concerns, they represent a variety of approaches to the subject and its possibilities. Most of the curators are contemporary-art specialists. We stand with Lars Bang Larsen, co-curator of the MUMA exhibition, ‘as a non-expert whose fascination for the occult comes from popular culture rather than from the lore of initiated practices.’6 Some are practitioner-curators—occult, rather than, or as well as, occultural. Robert Buratti, curator of *Windows to the Sacred* (and a contributor to this publication) is a member of Ordo Templi Orientis and the A.A. He said, ‘I tend to keep my professional life apart from my personal, but this exhibition has seen a very happy and fruitful crossover.’7 Pam Grossman, curator of *Language of the Birds*, is a writer, academic, and teacher of magical practice. She calls herself ‘a pragmatic witch.’8 Both bring a deep understanding of esoteric practice to their curatorial projects. Both invoke exhibition making as a magical act, and build ritual into the experience. Far from speaking just to the initiated, Buratti and Grossman share the larger occultical interest in bringing esoteric art and culture into broader consciousness. By comparison, the objectives of (and marketing campaigns behind) the contemporary art curators can feel a touch more classically occult than occultural—playing into or hamming up the subversive promise of this art to confront mainstream values.

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have returned to them. Mikala Dwyer’s spell paintings connect with this history of women artists and the occult. They particularly invoke nineteenth-century Swiss artist Emma Kunz, who used a divining pendulum to determine the geometric configurations in her abstractions. Her paintings were used as tools within healing rituals, where they were laid between Kunz and her patients. Dwyer seeks to establish a similar vibrational energy which can open portals to invisible realms.

Exhibitions are now built around these artists. *As Above, So Below* takes af Klint as its guiding presence. *Believe Not Every Spirit, But Try the Spirits* used Houghton’s drawings ‘as its departure point’ to chart the deployment of spiritualist methodologies in contemporary art, including the work of Dwyer and New Zealanders Dane Mitchell and Kathy Barry. The invocation of these historical figures is an occultual echo of Houghton’s earlier channelling of artistic spirits.

This exhibition has a key historical presence in artist and neo-pagan occultist Rosaleen Norton. Born in Dunedin in 1917, Norton moved with her family to Sydney, where she would gain notoriety as the ‘Witch of Kings Cross’. Norton was familiar with various occult and mystical belief systems, and was drawn to the Kabbalah, Theosophy, and western magic, particularly the writings of Crowley. This knowledge was directed towards the veneration of the ancient nature god Pan. Norton described herself as ‘the High Priestess at the Altar of Pan’ and led a small coven of followers devoted to the elemental deity.12 Norton’s drawings and paintings were made through a trance-induced mode of ‘extra-sensory perception’ that allowed her to leave her physical body, enter a ‘plasmic body’, and access the astral plane. From there, she could encounter the energies of various deities and transmit them through her art. Some of her works depict her encounters with these deities on the astral plane. Others convey their energies—often through heightened colour and a Vorticist-like fragmenting of the picture plane—to break through the illusions of the material world.

Norton constantly battled, what she called, ‘the fig leaf morality’ of conservative, postwar Australia.13 She only exhibited or published her work a few times and each time it brought controversy. In one case, the police saw the depiction of a woman coupling with a panther as ‘a carnal celebration of bestiality’. Norton countered, describing it as ‘the mystical experience of the union with the night’.14 Obscenity charges were laid against Norton and the owner of the Kashmir café who displayed this and other ‘blasphemous’ paintings ‘likely to arouse unhealthy sexual appetites in those who saw them’.15

At a time when witchcraft was illegal in Australia, Norton, her libertine occult beliefs, and her sexually graphic work were hauled in front of the courts on several occasions. In 1955, she was charged with ‘performing an unnatural sexual act’, after stolen photographs showing her and poet Gavin Greenlees in a flagellation rite found their way into police hands. Later that year, New Zealand witch Anna Hoffmann told the courts that, guided by Norton, she had participated in a ‘black mass’ ceremony involving devil worship and orgies. Hoffmann later retracted her story, apologised, and was sentenced to two months in prison. In 1956, English composer Sir Eugene Goosens was arrested at Sydney airport, and charged with importing pornographic materials and ‘occult paraphernalia’. The cache included books, photographs, prints, ritual masks, and sticks of incense—some marked ‘SM’ for sex magick. It transpired that, after contacting Norton to express admiration for her work, Goosens had joined her coven and the two...
developed a relationship. While abroad, he would source occult items for her, including Crowley’s books. The high-profile trial destroyed his career and furthered cemented her notoriety. These controversies bolstered media interest, while hampering Norton’s reputation as an artist.

In recent years, Norton’s art has found a new prominence. We can see new trajectories for it, including an alignment with those of af Klint, Kunz, and Houghton, whose art was also channelled through higher powers and condemned by earthbound ones. It is in direct conversation with the vision-inspired paintings and drawings of Marjorie Cameron, another witch and Crowley follower. It was Cameron who introduced Anger to Crowley. Anger would bring Crowley, Norton, and Cameron together in a 2016 exhibition, and he started but abandoned a film project on Norton (another is currently in production). It is not only Norton’s occult artistic achievements that are now admired. Her challenge to restrictive patriarchal cultural values is now seen as proto-feminist, while her worshipping of Pan makes her an early environmentalist.16 She has returned as a key figure for the present.

This is the first time Norton’s work has been exhibited in the country of her birth. She has a central role in Occulture, where she is presented alongside paintings by Crowley (whose writings were so important to her) and Dwyer (a contemporary artist who sees Norton as a touchstone for her own practice). Dwyer’s wall painting reaches out across the exhibition space and across time to embrace the work of Norton and Crowley, then follows its path in opening thresholds into other realms. Crossing thresholds is a recurrent theme in the exhibition. Voids and portals are opened up inside some works (like Norton’s) and through others (Dane Mitchell’s sculptural astrological charts as ‘wayfinding’ devices). Both modes offer the promise of the unknown.

Witchcraft is a constant presence in the exhibition. Eighteenth-century Swiss artist Henry Fuseli’s oil study illustrating Macbeth was instrumental in cementing the popular image of the witch as malevolent old crone, a danger to normative society. This stereotype carried through to the frenzied media response towards Norton. She embraced the trope, shaping her public persona as a witch. In one interview, she pointed out ‘the Devil’s marks’ on her body, including the ‘widow’s peak’ pointy ears, two blue dots on her left knee, and ‘the witches’ teat’—a pair of muscles reaching from her arm pits to her pelvic bone.17

Centuries ago, these signs were used to prove a pact with the devil. Now Norton’s persona looks performative, anticipating the flood of contemporary artists, musicians, and others reclaiming the witch as a powerful, female occultural force. The old idea of the witch as evil crone, reworked for centuries in art, has been exposed as an expression of patriarchal fears surrounding female bodies and power. These fears resulted in women being persecuted throughout history—exemplified but not limited to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century witch hunts. Witches are now less visible as subject matter in contemporary art. They are more often invoked (or performed) as cultural agents, harnessing powers and energies to extend the boundaries of art and transform the experience of the physical world. In the exhibition, these possibilities pass between Dwyer’s spell painting and Fiona Pardington’s conjuring of unseen presences through the photographic still life. Both invest traditional art forms with occult powers. Both do so through the invocation of a maternal line—Pardington’s photographs connect with her grandmother, her first guide into the occult. Dwyer’s various
references to jewellery speak to or through her mother, who was a silversmith.

Witches, shamans, and magicians are present in this exhibition—sometimes as artists, sometimes engaged by them. Dane Mitchell has worked with various occult practitioners to test the cultural boundaries of art and the occult. His work in the exhibition developed out of communication with a self-proclaimed Korean shaman, who only sent and received ‘spiritual letters’ via the astral plane. Embracing this shamanic communication method opened the artist and his process to ritualistic elements, rather than just forcing these onto the experience of the viewer. Yin-Ju Chen collaborated with an astrologer in the making of the charts that form the basis of her work Liquidation Maps (2014), which looks to the stars and planetary movements in an attempt to understand recent atrocities in Asia. In her installation, Chen’s drawings and the astrologer’s writings are presented side by side as different forms of speculative enquiry—one rooted in conceptual art, the other in astrology.

Neither Mitchell nor Chen engage occult practitioners with irony or nostalgia, but as a means to invest the making and experience of contemporary art with alternative possibilities. Both leave the viewer uncertain as to where the power resides—whether the art guides the occult, or the occult is guiding the art. When pressed in an interview about whether her findings support or challenge the notion of free will, Chen replied ‘I don’t know.’ The follow-up question—‘Could we say that the role of the artist is to bring the unconscious into consciousness?’—was brushed off with, ‘That’s too much of a burden for an artist. That’s for Shaman to do.’

Other artists in this exhibition seek out experiences with the unknown. For his photo-book Earth Magic (2014), Rik Garrett went deep into the woods to commune with witches. His use of anachronistic photographic processes draws on the long relationship between photography and spiritualism. The hints of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Cottingley Fairies are not incidental. Garrett’s project is premised on the coincidence of the invention of photography and the final executions of witches in Europe, and delves into the forms of knowledge these beginnings and endings represent. Similarly, Lorene Taurerewa’s charcoal drawings lift the veil between worlds, allowing shadowy presences to pass between them. Simon Cuming offers up visual and audio field recordings from a ghost-hunting expedition to Wellington’s Bolton Street Cemetery.

For this exhibition, Pardington exhibits a photograph and an altar featuring various magical items used in her still lifes. The
conventional logic of her work is reversed: the photograph anticipates the experience of the altar and its objects. A different kind of spell is cast. Both altar and photograph explicitly nod to the occult tradition and magical intentions with the inclusion of cards from Pardington’s first-edition Thoth Tarot deck, designed by Crowley and Lady Frieda Harris.

Leo Bensemann also looks different from an occultural perspective. His book Fantastica: Thirteen Drawings (1937) resists being located within mainstream New Zealand art traditions. Its drawings and texts offer a web of allusions lifted from a variety of cultural sources. Here, magic, enchantment, and possession are more than themes, they are modes of invocation. Art historian Peter Simpson has been engaged in a lengthy, almost Faustian, struggle to break Fantastica’s code. Pointing out the visual similarities between some depicted characters and Bensemann himself, Simpson has ascribed an allegorical, self-portrait dimension to the book. This carries over to other Bensemann works, notably the ‘Fantasy’ portraits where he and Rita Angus painted themselves and each other in various guises.

This element of Fantastica shares strategies of performance and possession with a broad range of occult art practices where identities are shifted and exchanged. Anger appears (uncredited) as the spell-casting Magus in his film Lucifer Rising. This recalled French director Georges Méliès, who appeared as the devil, Mephisto, and Faust in his own films. Both directors invest in film’s ability to transfix its audience—Anger has described himself as a magician casting a spell on his audience and the camera as his ‘magickal weapon’. Similarly, Bensemann’s semi-veiled presence in Fantastica—as Dr Faustus (twice), the Mad Prince (likely based on a poem by occultist Walter de la Mare), and the demonic Mask—can be taken as an invocation of art’s power to bewitch and transport his audience. This becomes another form of the possession magic that is a theme of the book.

Simpson suggests that Fantastica may also embody Bensemann’s complex relationship with Angus. Their relationship is often explained through the artistic and cultural context of 1930s nationalism. Yet, it also echoes the search for the unity of opposites found in magical and creative occult practices. This exhibition includes Crowley’s portrait of Ninette Shumway, one of his ‘scarlet women’—an embodiment of his belief in the magickal union of male and female principles. Marjorie Cameron was the ‘magickal-partner’ of rocket engineer and Thelemite Jack Parsons—a symbolic union of art, science, and the occult. Parsons wrote to Crowley that Cameron had been summoned through an invocation ritual. Cameron would even play ‘the Scarlet Woman’ in Anger’s film Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (1958). The creative and romantic relationship between Norton and poet Gavin Greenlees also shared these characteristics. Magic and occultism play an underexplored role in both Bensemann’s and Angus’s works, and perhaps, as this occult lineage may suggest, in the transformative potential Bensemann saw in its union.

Bensemann’s ‘Black Notebook’ from this time includes references to religious and magical practices, including quotes from J.W. Wickwar’s Witchcraft and the Black Art (1925). Bensemann, Angus, and their circle are said to have flirted with spiritualism, attending a spiritualist church and participating in séances. New Zealand nationalism may not have been as straight laced as we have been led to believe. Perhaps we could ask Angus? When he was artist-in-residence at the Rita Angus cottage in 2008, Dane Mitchell used a clairvoyant to commune with her spirit. She spoke in

Leo Bensemann Doctor Faustus 1936–7
collection Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.
unusual ways—a squeaking door that seemed to utter the younger artist’s name. When alive, Angus also spoke to the dead. In a 1942 letter to composer Douglas Lilburn, she recounts a visit to the same cemetery frequented by Cuming fifty years later. She wrote of having ‘a pleasant time conversing with the dead, they tell me a lot about the living and are sometimes very amusing’.24

Norton, Bensemann, and Angus are key historical figures in the local occultural tradition. There is also Whare Ra, the Havelock North house (with its hidden temple) built by noted architect (and professional astrologer) James Chapman-Taylor in 1915. It was made for ceremonial magician Robert Felkin, founder of Stella Matutina, an offshoot of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. There was also The Blue Room in Dunedin; a centre of late nineteenth-century spiritualism, where medium Clive Chapman would conduct séances with his young niece Pearl.25 Crowley never stepped foot in New Zealand, but it reached out to him. Katherine Mansfield smoked hashish with Crowley at a party in Chelsea in 1911.26 While she was purportedly unimpressed by ‘the Great Beast’, there’s lingering speculation as to whether her writing manifests the encounter with the occult this meeting at least suggests.27 She was a friend of Leila Waddell, another of Crowley’s ‘scarlet women’. An Australian-born violinist, who has been described as of Māori heritage, Waddell was a magician in her own right. She performed rituals with Crowley, and also transcribed his writings. Another connection can be found with artist Lady Frieda Harris, who, before collaborating with Crowley on the design of the Thoth Tarot cards, had lived in New Zealand. Such practices and connections can sit within an occultural tradition, as it’s a willfully speculative, imaginative, and ahistorical one. Connections are forged across diverse works and practitioners, times and places. When artists are working on the astral plane, harnessing astrological powers or communing with the dead, geographical and historical boundaries become less important, less interesting. In this sense, the occultural offers an alternative to the prevailing concept of the ‘New Zealand Gothic’, which internalises and localises these concerns, often by projecting them onto the landscape and its painful histories. One of its familiar devices is transplanting gothic tropes and stories into a New Zealand setting—to bring them home, with added unease. The artists in Oculuture, however, tend to project themselves outwards or upwards. Bensemann does it in Fantastica, as does Jason Greig in Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, a series of monoprints after Robert Louis Stevenson’s cautionary tale. In another echo of Méliès playing the devil, Greig inserts himself into the story, the streets of Victorian London, and especially into the titular characters—in this case to address his personal demons. Other artists have attempted to capture this transformation—with varying levels of success. Photographer Henry Frederick Van Der Weyde drew on spiritualist techniques when commissioned to take a promotional shot of actor Richard Mansfield for the first stage adaptation of the story in 1888. He used a crude double exposure to show a deranged Jekyll almost climbing out of Hyde’s body. Both Bensemann and Greig have been claimed as key figures of the New Zealand gothic, but strive to locate their work within a longer and darker imaginative tradition—‘the creepy continuum’, as Greig describes it.35 American artist Tony Oursler certainly resides here, and is even a card-carrying member of the official Méliès fan club.36 Oursler has scoured Parisian museums for Méliès’s
surviving props, special effects, and film sets as inspiration for his equally phantasmagorical films and sculptural installations.

The book as form and source of hidden or magical knowledge plays a central role in Occulture. In 1992, publisher Robert Ansell established FULLGR after encountering ‘the mesmeric qualities’ of Ahab and Other Poems (1903) by Crowley, who saw the book as a talismanic object charged with magickal powers. FULLGR has revived the esoteric book as a medium for esoteric artists. Ansell’s ultimate quest, to capture ‘the genius libri—the spirit of the book’ by bridging ‘the gap between the book-subject and the book-object’, articulates how many of the artists in this exhibition approach the occult potential of their medium. Leo Bensemann sought such a union with Fantastica. He used photolithography to turn his drawings into metal blocks, which were inked up for printing. He printed texts to accompany the images as overlays on tissue, which he passed by hand through the cylinder press.

A technical marvel in its time and place, Fantastica pales next to the achievements of FULLGR publications, such as the epic cosmic maps presented as foldout diptychs, triptychs, and quadriptych in David Chaim Smith’s Sacrificial Universe (2012). Simpson calls Fantastica ‘a kind of proto-graphic novel’. It can also be considered part of a long esoteric-book tradition, based, like much of the art in this exhibition, on reviving ideas of craft, investing the act of making with extended powers.

John Milton’s epic poem Paradise Lost (1667) is central to the occultural tradition. Its star, Lucifer, is not the devil of Christian theology. He is the rebel angel, the angel of light, an archetypal modern anti-hero in whom humanity—and many artists from the seventeenth century until today—can see themselves and their world. His presence reverberates around the entire exhibition. He is depicted in the historical illustrations of Gustave Doré, Fuseli, and John Martin. Lucifer’s personal spiritual quest crosses over into Crowley’s The Sun (Auto Portrait). Crowley had earlier written a ‘Hymn to Lucifer’ in honour of Milton’s poem. Lucifer is a key figure in Norton’s magical cosmology (appearing in one painting here with the Goat of Mendes) and is the source of inspiration for Lucifer Rising, where Anger relocates the rebel angel to countercultural America. The Light Bringer is invoked in many of the contemporary works. Jason Greig paints him. He’s a guiding presence in Pardington’s photographic rituals and lurks in the dramatic shadow play of Taurerewa’s drawings. He is there when Brendon Wilkinson collects dead moths that flew too close to the lamp, and in Oursler’s luring of viewers towards a light bulb that illuminates a dark room while whispering secrets—perhaps the most demonic work in the exhibition. William Blake summed up the strange workings of this occultural tradition in his assertion that Milton ‘was of the devil’s party, without even knowing it’.

The diverse works in Occulture share a set of touchstones and concerns, played out across different mediums, periods, and levels of belief. What is at stake here is the power we invest, or want to invest, in art—what we think art can be or do, and what impact it can have in shaping the experience of the material and immaterial worlds. Partridge argues that occulture is in the process of ‘re-enchanting’ the West. Art is both an agent of this re-enchantment and a vessel for it.
NOTES


10. This essay follows his convention when discussing Crowley and Crowley-derived practices.


13. ‘She Hates Fig Leaf Morality’, *People*, 29 March 1950: 20.


15. Ibid, 41.


25. Artists have already been here. Curator/artist Pippa Sanderson commissioned twelve other artists to ‘join me in channelling the idea of the Blue Room’ for the exhibition *The Blue Room* at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin, 2008.


27. This possibility is most obvious played up in the *Mansfield with Monsters: The Untold Stories of a New Zealand Icon* by Katherine Mansfield with Matt and Debbie Cowens (Auckland: Steam Press, 2012). This is a local take on the occultual genre of the ‘mash-up’ novel, where literary classics are rewritten infected with horror and monsters.

28. Interview with the author, Christchurch, 10 July 2016.


31. Ibid.


IN 2008, the Global Financial Crisis sent the world’s art market into downturn. The art-market boom of the 1990s had created more galleries, dealers, and artists, more collectors and curators, than ever. Nearly two-thirds were wiped out. The survivors had to consider how art should now be valued and what purpose it could serve, if not profit. In the Crisis, many artists looked back to their original motivations for making art. This saw a renewed focus on the spiritual. In one of history’s great repetitions, we found ourselves in similar circumstances to the 1890s, when European artists rejected mainstream mechanisms to rediscover a higher purpose for art. The current renaissance of ‘esoteric art’ is part of this shift.

Esoteric art is little understood. It offers a magical view of the universe. It understands the artistic process in terms of initiation, the work as ordeal, and attainment as self-realisation. As the works of Aleister Crowley, Xul Solar, Rosaleen Norton, and Hilma af Klint demonstrate, it is not created in response to a market, an audience, or external social influences. It is a spiritual practice aiming to manifest a change in the consciousness of the artist and, in some cases, in the world itself. Primarily concerned with the inner journey, the artist utilises symbols and esoteric sigils stemming from our earliest spiritual languages to conjure pure, experiential understanding, without the political limitations and restrictions of common (exoteric) language. Unfortunately, esoteric art can be confused with clichés about demons, magic circles, and black cats, but, in reality, it sits closer to a disciplined and rigorous form of creative yoga.

Esoteric symbolism is present in all cultures and speaks to the magical history of those who have embarked on self-realisation. When we look at early cave paintings, we find images created not for decoration but for communication and self-realisation. Early man used art to understand his place in the world, where he existed in relation to the sun, the lake, the mountain, animals, his community, and his rituals. Cave-painting sites remain sacred, as locations of humanity’s first exploration of the unconscious and the birth of the tribe. Similarly, Ancient Egyptian culture combined art, writing, and magic under a central deity, Thoth. The execution of art was a function solely of the priesthood. All art was magick and capable of joining man to the godhead. This philosophy flowed into the classical Greek and Roman mystery schools, Renaissance painting, Freemasonic temples, and important eastern movements, including Sufism, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. Esoteric art continues these processes.

It’s vital to separate occultists who also happen to create art from those who create art specifically as part of this continuation. It is the difference between a musician who writes a song about God and a musician who finds God in a song. If a Buddhist monk likes to draw mandalas for hours as a break from his meditation, it’s different to the Sufi who draws countless circles to train his mind toward stillness. Esoteric practice demands a focused intent that unites conscious and unconscious, microcosm and macrocosm, to arrive at a true creative consciousness. It is a duplexity—undertaking an inner journey in tandem with an outer one. It is the practical execution of the Royal Art of the alchemist and the Great Work of the initiate. As the English artist Aleister Crowley wrote:

The Artist is a creative genius; that is, he is of the nature of Godhead which devised the Soul as a medium for self-realization. Also, as History assures us, the Artist is
of the caste of the initiated rulers of Mankind; he understands the
type of the Universe, he is an
Epopt of the Mysteries of Nature,
and an Hierophant of the Inviolable
Sanctuary.1

The Hierophant travels between planes of consciousness, just as the esoteric artist
moves between the inner and outer. While operating his private retreat in the quiet
village of Cefalù, Sicily, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Crowley made this quest the
basis of his art. The retreat was a school for
his disciples and offered Crowley an escape
from the savaging he was receiving from the
British press. He drew inspiration from the
temporal religious order of which he was
Grand Master, the Ordo Templi Orientis,
whose manifesto called for ‘a hidden Retreat,
Collegium ad Spiritum Sanctum, where
members may conceal themselves in order to
pursue the Great Work without hindrance’.2

Crowley’s Cefalù period was one
of his most important and prolific as a
painter. In 1920, he established the Abbey
of Thélème in a small farmhouse. It became
his realisation of the Abbey of Thélème,
imagined by the Renaissance humanist and
satirist Francois Rabelais in Gargantua and
Pantagruel. Crowley called the main room ‘La
Chambre des Cauchemars’ (the Chamber of
Nightmares) and decorated it with grotesque
murals. ‘The purpose of these pictures’, he
wrote, ‘is to enable people, by contemplation,
to purify their minds.’3 They were designed
to assault the ego, evoking repressed
anxieties and fears, memories, desires, and
all expressions of the unconscious archetype
of the Shadow. This descent into hell was
necessary training for Crowley’s students. An
indication of what they encountered there is
given in his description of the murals:

Crowley’s paintings at the Abbey show
his familiarity with the French painter Paul
Gauguin, who sought to paint what subjects
felt like rather than simply what they looked
like. Painting a landscape or a flower was no
longer a decorative distraction but a perceptive
and, if need be, destructive assault on the truth
of the form. Gauguin was searching for the
‘will’ of a subject, its essence or purpose in
existing—the reason for its sojourn on earth.
Crowley extended and refined this:

… one should absolutely discover
the true subconscious Will (of the
detail of Work for the time being)
before starting; the Operation will
then help to manifest in form.5

Crowley’s art was grounded in his
magickal view of the universe and the religious
philosophy of Thélème (Greek for ‘will’). Its
key doctrines were ‘Crossing the Abyss’ and

Gross desires may be compelled
to supply themselves with morose
satisfaction, while their object is
in the power of bestial lust. But
equally ‘God helps those who help
themselves’, and services to others
nourish oneself; while Beauty
delights both by actively informing
unenlightened Nature, and passively
awakening ecstasy in merely animal
instincts. The perfected Ideal of
Human Beauty may be the prey of
shameless degradation both as to
the satisfaction of its active desire to
creation, finding itself sterilised by
the greed of society and of its passive
aspiration to receive the Grace of
God, in whose stead the Goat of
Obscenity defiles it wantonly with
agonising abominations.4

Aleister Crowley Untitled (The Coast of Cefalù) 1922
Aleister Crowley La Nature Malade 1922, Abbey of Thélème, Cefalù.
‘the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel’, which Crowley described as ‘our Secret Self—our Subconscious Ego, whose magical Image is our individuality expressed in mental and bodily form—our Holy Guardian Angel.’ The artist must discover the will of the work to make it real, just as the magician must experience the angel to discover their true will and enact it. In Crowley’s process, the role of the artist is inseparable from that of the magician, whose central purpose is to make the invisible visible and actualise the subconscious expressions of the true self. Do what thou wilt.

For decades, Crowley’s painting has been considered a sideline to his writing, but he used painting in a way that few ever had. His paintings stand as a true magical diary of his spiritual experience. When one considers the vast extent of his creative life—including costume design, temple design, ritual performance, and writing—it is clear that he was an artist realising the true possibilities of creative consciousness. By the end of his time painting in Cefalù in 1922, Crowley had attained a true knowledge of himself, his universe, and his future, having progressed to the highest initiate grade of A’.A’. that of Ipsissimus (meaning ‘own very self’). The painting now titled The Sun (Auto Portrait) is perhaps less to do with the tarot card its imagery suggests, and more to do with a reconciliation of the artist, his secret higher self, and the concept of V.V.V.V in Thelemic doctrine. Similarly, another Cefalù painting, The Moon, commonly understood as a preparatory study for the Tarot, addresses a key experience in the initiate’s progression—entering the Abyss and passing through crisis to find the city of pyramids.

Crowley’s art and writing has influenced artists all over the world, including a young New Zealand artist, Rosaleen Norton. Born in Dunedin in 1917, Norton moved with her family to Sydney in 1924, where they established themselves in the middle-class suburb of Lindfield. Norton was expelled from the Church of England Girls’ School at the age of fourteen, for producing ‘depraved’ drawings of vampires, ghouls, and werewolves considered likely to corrupt the other girls. She studied for two years at East Sydney Technical College, where her lecturer, sculptor George Rayner Hoff, became a key influence. His pagan vitalism would enter the Australian art mainstream. But, despite her admiration for Hoff, Norton found it hard to take direction and preferred to follow her own path rather than the college curriculum.

In December 1933, while still at college, Norton submitted a short story to Smith’s Weekly, drawing the admiration of its editor, Frank Marien. He saw promise in her ‘vivid imagination’, which was ‘quite beyond the ordinary’, and offered her a cadetship as a writer and illustrator. However, her illustrations proved controversial, and soon she lost her job at the paper. At the age of twenty-three, Norton began to seriously study the occult, starting with Eastern and theosophical texts, then moving on to the Western esoteric tradition, practicing the Qabalah and ritual magic, and reading Crowley, Eliphas Levi, and Dion Fortune. Her focus remained developing and exhibiting her art, but the Australian art world was far from responsive. She found it impossible to have work accepted by serious galleries. Her life would be punctuated with media attention and high-profile legal cases. In 1949, her first public exhibition at the University of Melbourne was closed by the authorities after two days. Police seized four of the pictures and laid charges, claiming her works were decadent, obscene, and likely to arouse unhealthy sexual urges. One of the confiscated paintings was the well-known Aleister Crowley The Sun (Auto Portrait) 1920

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Black Magic, depicting a black panther copulating with a naked woman. The charges against Norton were dismissed and 4 pounds 4 shillings costs were awarded against the police. However, her 1952 book, The Art of Rosaleen Norton, would be banned.

Norton’s work is grounded in her natural inclination toward trance states. She had the draughtsmanship to record her visions and the knowledge to decode them. Since Austin Osman Spare, it’s hard to remember another who crossed the planes so effortlessly. Having said that, not every work was successful, and, like many trance-oriented artists, Norton sometimes found it hard to separate delusion from attainment. Norton’s early experiments with self-hypnosis yielded evocative imagery that would fuel the art to come. Through it, she learned to transfer her attention at will to inner planes of awareness in what could be termed ‘astral projection’. She wrote in her diary that this ‘produced a number of peculiar and unexpected results ... and culminated in a period of extra-sensory perception together with a prolonged series of symbolic visions’.9

In 1949, she explained:

I decided to experiment in self-induced trance, the idea being to induce an abnormal state of consciousness and manifest the results, if any, in drawing. My aim was to delve down into the subconscious mind and, if possible, through and beyond it. I had the feeling (intuitional rather than intellectual) that somewhere in the depths of the unconscious, the individual would contain, in essence, the accumulated knowledge of mankind; just as his physical body manifests the aggregate of racial experience in the form of instinct or automatic reaction to stimulus. In order to contact this hypothetical source, I decided to apply psychic stimulus to the subconscious: stimulus that the conscious reasoning mind might reject yet which would appeal to buried instincts as old as man, and which—I hoped—cause psychic ‘automatic reflexes’. (Religious cults use ritual, incense etc for the same reason.) Consequently, I collected together a variety of things such as aromatic leaves, wine, a lighted fire, a mummified hoof etc ... all potent stimuli to the part of the unconscious that I wished to invoke. I darkened the room, and focusing my eyes upon the hoof I crushed the pungent leaves, drank some wine, and tried to clear my mind of all conscious thought. This was a beginning (and I made many other experiments which were progressively successful). Following a surge of curious excitement, my brain would become emptied of all conscious thought: my eyes would shut, and I was merely aware that I was drawing on the blank sheet of paper in front of me ... I seemed, while experiencing a great intensification of intellectual, creative and intuitional faculties, to have become detached in a curiously timeless fashion from the world around me, and yet to be seeing things with a greater clarity and awareness than normally ...10

As the ferocity of her visions increased, Norton began to feel a personal connection with the beings, seeing them not as psychological manifestations but as
living entities. The god Pan was a regular visitor to her trances and became her focus. By worshipping him, she believed she was connecting to the Earth as a sacred, living organism. While she occasionally depicted other deities, including Lucifer, Baphomet, and Hecate, they would only appear to her if it pleased them and couldn’t be conjured. Her art documented these interactions. This type of work is often categorised as surrealism. As Barry Kavanagh explains:

Carl Jung argued that ‘at a deep layer of the psyche lay a rich and varied source of archetypal images which were the very basis of religion and mystical expression, irrespective of the culture of the society involved’ and that the archetypes were ‘deep, universal levels of one’s own being but not as entities with their own separate existence beyond the psyche’.11

However, esoteric artists believe that their visions are not about the archetypal, but are direct communion with the ‘other’. Norton said, ‘the archetypal gods and cosmic beings contacted in trance states existed in their own right. In their realms they were the master.’ Norton, however, suggested the potential of the unconscious to unlock a deeper collective truth.

Unable to reach a wider audience and needing to find some sort of income, Norton relied on selling paintings to friends and acquaintances. She died on 5 December 1979 at the age of sixty-two, having spent her last years as a recluse. She found it impossible to rid herself of the dubious honour of being the first Australian artist censored by the government. While the tag, ‘The Witch of Kings Cross’, made her famous, it also kept her marginalised and poor. While Norton was a target for gossip magazines and tabloids, her legacy is as a symbol of radical change for women in the 1950s and 1960s. Postwar Australia under the Menzies government was highly conservative; a woman’s place was in the home, attending to husband and children. In the 1960s, immigration was the beginning of the multicultural and multi-faith proliferation that continues today, but, in 1947, over 80 percent of Australians were Christian and there was suspicion of other religions.12 Similarly, a deeper appreciation of Norton’s work has been stifled due to the sensationalist ‘Left-Hand Path’ explanation of her creative process. Even her biographer, Nevill Drury, presented her as a practitioner of the ‘Left-Hand Path, a branch of Western magic associated mainly with Crowley and his followers’.13 This couldn’t be further from the truth, and demonstrates an ignorance of both art and magic. From Crowley’s perspective, black magic is any magic not aligned to the Great Work. So, this reductionist sensationalism subverts a proper understanding of the processes at play for both artists.

Norton’s and Crowley’s fates are not unlike that of Paul Gauguin, one of the most influential painters of his age. Self-taught, Gauguin’s idea that art could succeed where organised religion had failed inspired the Pont-Aven school, the symbolists of the Salon de la Rose-Croix, and Les Nabis. In his diary of the period, Crowley related a similar fascination:

11:40 P.M. I feel easier, but over excited. Gauguin literally torments me. I feel as if by my own choice of exile rather than toleration of the bourgeois, I am invoking him, and this painting of my house seems a sort of religious-magical rite, like
the Egyptian embalmers’, but of necromancy. I would he might come forth ‘his pleasure on the earth to do among the living’. I gladly offer my body to his Manes, if he need a vehicle of flesh for new expression. I could never have done quite that for any other spirit—I have been faithful to my own Genius.

It is maddening to think that I might have known him in the flesh; he died in 1903, May 8, eleven months before the First day of the Writing of the book of the Law. Just six months after I had met Rodin.

I feel very specially that I should consecrate my house to him, not to Beardsley, a quite inferior type deriving from pifflers like Burne-Jones, and the over-elaborate school of Japanese, while he snivelled and recanted disgusting when his health gave way.

So, by the Power and Authority invested in Me, I baphomet 729 ordain the insertion of the name of PAUL GAUGUIN among the More Memorable Saints in the Gnostic Mass.¹⁴

The relationship between Crowley and Gauguin is interesting. Although the two men never met, they followed similar paths. At the age of forty-three, Gauguin abandoned his job as a stockbroker for art and Tahiti, where he established his House of Carnal Pleasure. Crowley, at the age of forty-four, abandoned England for Sicily, and immersed himself in his art at the Abbey of Thelema. The paintings created at the Abbey show his familiarity with Gauguin’s synthetist method, and, like Gauguin, Crowley covered his home with images designed to stimulate the unconscious. Both suffered abominable press during their lifetimes and felt the stings of local authorities. Sensationalism obscured Gauguin’s art and prevented a whole generation from understanding his philosophy. In time, perhaps people will understand the importance of Aleister Crowley, Rosaleen Norton, and the esoteric-art movement without the unfortunate media mottos of ‘Left-Hand Path’, ‘wickedest man in the world’ or ‘witch of Kings Cross’.

¹ The A...A... is a spiritual organisation described by Aleister Crowley in 1907. Its members are dedicated to advancing humanity by perfecting the individual on every plane through a graded series of universal initiations.
² A skilled sculptor, Hoff is credited with transforming Australian sculpture by adopting art-deco principles and redirecting monumental statuary in Sydney towards classicism. His most significant contributions were his large sculptures for public memorials, including Dubbo War Memorial, National War Memorial, and ANZAC Memorial. During his short tenure at East Sydney Technical College, Hoff taught Norton, James Gleeson, and others who were inspired by his openly pagan approach.
⁵ D. Cahill, G. Bouma, H. Della, and M. Leahy (eds.), Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia (Melbourne: Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2004), 188.)
Leo Bensemann Fantastica: Thirteen Drawings 1937,
Lucifer Rising (1970–81) is Kenneth Anger’s magnum opus, the summation of his nine-film Magick Lantern Cycle. By the time it premiered simultaneously at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum, New York, in December 1980, it had been ten years in the making and subject to many revisions.

Anger’s Lucifer is not the devil of Christian belief, but the pagan ‘light bringer’, summoned to call forth the new age of youthful countercultural rebellion of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Lucifer Rising jumps between cultures, historical moments, mythologies, and esoteric concepts to chart the dawning of this new consciousness. The film roams across diverse locations, including Germany’s Black Forest, Stonehenge, Iceland’s volcanic plateau, and the pyramids of Giza.

Director Martin Scorsese describes its effect as ‘hypnotizing, a dream atmosphere that seems to put the viewer in a state of trance’.1

Anger distrusts film’s ability to ‘fool’ audiences into accepting its illusions as realities, especially its dependence on linear time—‘the World’s Illusion’.2 Lucifer Rising offers an alternative experience of time, space and the divine centred on a magical understanding of the universe.


Leo Bensemann's Fantastica: Thirteen Drawings was published in an edition of 125 in 1937. The title is a neologism, which derives from the Greek for ‘to make visible’ or ‘to have visions’. Its drawings encompass various cultural sources, mythologies, and folklore traditions, invoking themes of magic and enchantment, witchcraft and possession.

In the book, individual drawings are sequenced, but the order belies any clear narrative. It remains uncertain whether Fantastica was planned as a whole or is a collection of unrelated drawings. The relationship between image and text is equally confounding. Most of the drawings are accompanied with a quote from their original source, printed as a transparent overlay on a tissue paper. The text hovers over the image, which is first glimpsed through it.

In this exhibition, the thirteen drawings are presented as they have never been shown—salon hung, with a new sequence and visual logic. The aim is to generate new relationships both within and beyond the set of drawings. Fantastica is here positioned within a broader occultural tradition, rather than the nationalist-orientated New Zealand art one that has always struggled to absorb it.
Yin-Ju Chen's speculative projects question accepted beliefs about the relationship between human consciousness and unseen cosmic events and phenomena. Her work confronts our relation to the unknowable contradictions of existence, which are masked by ideals of scientific progress and assumptions of linear history.

*Liquidation Maps* presents hand-drawn astrological charts representing five genocides or massacres from recent Asian history. These mandala-like drawings mark the alignment of planets and stars when the events occurred. Chen provocatively questions whether the atrocities can be explained through human behaviour or through inexorable laws of the universe that operate beyond our comprehension. At the heart of her project is the question of whether we have free will or follow predetermined paths—a question asked by philosophy, science, religion, art, and various occult practices since the beginning of time.

Chen often works with occult practitioners. This project was made in collaboration with an astrologer.

With their reference to mandalas, alchemical symbols, sacred geometries, and astrology, Chen's drawings allude to various attempts to understand the cosmic laws of the universe. The videos of the planets Mars and Pluto are sourced from NASA satellite footage—another of humanity’s efforts to harness and control the cosmic forces that may ultimately control us.
Eleanor Cooper seeks to build a ‘sensory rapport’ with isolated natural environments that goes beyond the conventional experience of natural phenomena and the art that is often charged with this task.

Cooper works for conservation agencies (she is currently living in the Kermedec Islands). This grants her access to isolated protected environments where she observes, listens and forages for objects and patterns that open up these possibilities. Unable and unwilling to remove anything from these sites, Cooper makes hand-cast sculptural replicas of objects she finds or gives material form to her immaterial experiences. A series of pinhole photographs taken on Raoul Island sought to capture the movements of the wind, or let the wind represent itself.

The sculpture in this exhibition was triggered by the discovery of an ancient kōauau (flute) in the leaf litter on Hauturu (Little Barrier Island), known by Ngātiwai as ‘the resting place of the winds’. Cooper’s instrument-sculptures are silent yet performative, both in and out of the experience of history, nature, and mysticism.

ELEANOR COOPER
(NEW ZEALAND)

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British occultist Aleister Crowley considered the roles of the artist and the magician inseparable. Both pursuits seek to make the invisible visible and actualise the subconscious expressions of the true self. Most of Crowley’s surviving paintings date from 1920 to 1922, when he was establishing the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù, Sicily.

The Abbey’s ‘chamber of nightmares’ featured large murals painted by Crowley to force initiates to confront their subconscious and purify their minds. They were whitewashed after Crowley was banished from Italy by Mussolini in 1923. Kenneth Anger would later restore the murals, which he described as ‘witty and fun’, and make a film about them.¹

The paintings in this exhibition were sold around that time to Paolo Cicero, an artist in a neighbouring village. In storage for decades, their recent rediscovery has expanded understanding of Crowley’s art and its connection to his magickal thinking. They include an auto-portrait as the Sun God and a portrait of one of Crowley’s ‘scarlet women’, Ninette Shunway. There is also an image of ‘The Hierophant’. A key figure in Crowley’s magic, the Hierophant can travel between planes of consciousness—a power that Crowley also recognised in the act of painting. The Hierophant would reappear in similar form in the Thoth Tarot deck that Crowley executed with artist Lady Frieda Harris twenty years later.

Simon Cuming’s field recordings made in Wellington’s Bolton Street cemetery update Victorian spirit photography and the pseudoscience of electronic voice phenomena via Poltergeist and The Blair Witch Project. We peer into the depths of the photograph and listen to white noise seeking signs of life (after death) and may even find some ‘friends’.

Cuming’s installation balances visual and audio forms of ‘evidence’. It is an exploration of pareidolia—finding patterns and presences in random stimuli—and the cultural forms that have exploited this phenomenon. The sound recordings are experienced intermittently and bodily via a parabolic speaker directed at a single point in front of the photograph—an effect that updates the fakery and manipulation that encouraged Victorians to see the dead in photographs. Cuming knows how to ham up the experiences of the other side and of contemporary art. But this is not to say he doesn’t believe.
Mikala Dwyer casts spells in the form of wall paintings or makes wall paintings in the form of spells. They are site-specific, being made for particular corners. However, as portals to other realms or states, they are decidedly site unspecific—liberating us from the experience of our physical bodies grounded in space and time. Dwyer continues to test the boundaries between ‘rational’ forms of art and ‘irrational’ forms of magic.

*Balancing Spell for a Corner (Aleister and Rosaleen)* has been made for this exhibition. It reaches across the gallery to embrace the work of Rosaleen Norton and Aleister Crowley—literally and symbolically balancing their contributions to the exhibition, and art and magical thinking. The forms, colours, and references in Dwyer’s work are manifestations of this occult union. All three artists are Libras, born under the ruling planet of Venus.

*Where Balancing Spell* opens a portal to another realm, *Charm for Wall* protects the gallery from outside forces—or from itself. It is a magical sculptural assemblage—an accumulation of found and made objects strung together as an oversized charm bracelet or votive offering. Some of the objects hold inherent magical properties: there is a stone which draws down the elemental forces of the moon and another connected to alchemical transformation. Others become magical through Dwyer’s artistic alchemy. Reflective or mirrored surfaces throw light across the gallery or bind viewers to the work by capturing them within it. Some objects feel like totems imbued with animistic energies or ritualistic leftovers. The bottle of Midori is all of these things—a light-reflective container of spirits.
Publisher Robert Ansell established FULGUR in 1992 after being struck by ‘the mesmeric qualities’ of Ahab and Other Poems (1903) by Aleister Crowley, who thought of the book as a talismanic object charged with magical powers. FULGUR’s first book was dedicated to the influential English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare. It contains two unpublished texts and automatic drawings. The texts were printed tête-bêche—head-to-tail and tail-to-head. Their meeting at the centre of the book is marked by sigils representing the union of masculine and feminine principles central to modern magical thought. According to FULGUR, this is ‘the first book of the modern era that was issued with an explicit talismanic intent’.

FULGUR is the leading publisher of contemporary esoteric books. As well as projects on historical artists like Spare and Songs of the Witch Woman (2014)—an exploration of the creative partnership and tension between Marjorie Cameron and John Parsons—FULGUR has revived the esoteric book as an artistic medium. Rik Garrett’s Earth Magic (2014) explores the entanglement of historical photographic processes and the end of the European witch hunts, and Barry William Hale’s Legion 49 (2009) evokes the demon Beelzebub’s hoard of forty-nine cloven-footed servitors through cut-out paper silhouettes based on Mexican magical tradition.


So wither'd and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' yhe earth  
… You seem to understand me.  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.  
— Macbeth, Act I, Scene III (1606)

Trained as a Zwinglian minister, the Swiss-Anglo artist Henry Fuseli shaped the European taste for the gothic and the supernatural. He often drew on literary and artistic predecessors. His work in Occulture depicts the three witches of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and Milton’s description of Satan, Sin, and Death meeting at the Gates of Hell in Paradise Lost.

Fuseli’s take on Macbeth helped cement the popular image of the witch as hideous crone. He made multiple iterations of this subject and prints were made of his originals. Widely distributed and incredibly popular in his time, this image has contributed to the western stereotype of the witch that has been both challenged and re-appropriated in contemporary—especially feminist—culture.
Victorian literature is a touchstone of Jason Greig’s art. Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, and Robert Louis Stevenson are regular presences. Even when he is not directly invoking these writers, Greig’s work resembles Victorian parlour portraits. Shadowy figures stare out at us from different times, dimensions, or predicaments.

Greig’s retelling of Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic tale *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* returns us to an increasingly secular Victorian world struck by the growing realisation that evil lives within us all. Greig’s medium of the monoprint—with its almost alchemical combination of printmaking, painting, and drawing—is particularly attuned to the transformative elements of the story. In Stevenson’s book, the power to transform the individual and culture comes from progressive science. Greig claims it for backwards-looking art.

Stevenson’s account of the battle between good and evil took on personal significance when Greig was recovering from alcoholism. He initially ignored the warning of his sister—her gift of Stevenson’s book, inscribed ‘a cautionary tale’. Coming to understand its relevance to his situation, he eventually embarked on this series. He folds his own transformation into this story of transformation, finding Jekyll and Hyde in himself, projecting himself into them.
The Wormwood Star is Curtis Harrington’s tribute to his friend, the witch and artist Marjorie Cameron. The film provides an important historical record, as Cameron would later burn all the work seen in the film in an act of ‘ritualised suicide’. It was art made then destroyed as part of a cycle of creation.

The film’s subtitle ‘Concerning the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel’ refers to Cameron’s husband Jack Parsons, the famous rocket researcher and the American head of Ordó Templi Orientis, who had died in an explosion in his garage in 1952. Cameron would emerge from self-imposed exile in the Californian desert following Parsons’s death to play ‘the Scarlet Woman’ in Kenneth Anger’s film Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (1954), which also featured Harrington.

Cameron had little interest in the art world. Her ambitions were magical. Following her death in 1995, her work has featured in major exhibitions, including Songs for the Witch Woman at the Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, in 2015.
Dane Mitchell works with self-proclaimed occult practitioners—witches, shamans, sorcerers, and spirit guides—to make work that unsettles the forms and logics of both contemporary art and the occult. A work from 2013 saw a single visitor to his exhibition opening hypnotised and able to experience an object perceptible only to them.

This exhibition reconfigures three Mitchell projects. Large silk banners are printed with images of the artist’s hands performing a series of ‘non-verbal’ gestures drawn from various belief systems. These are said to activate magical powers and open up possibilities for astral perception and the experience of subtle currents and flowing energies—the building of an ‘odic mist’. The banners are paired with a three-dimensional astronomical chart in the form of a network of minimalist sculptures resembling museum stanchions—a coming together of celestial and earthbound ‘wayfinding’ devices. It is also a three-dimensional drawing in and of space. The twelve ceramic objects are imbued with hallucinogenic plant material and etched with astrological configurations. They were made in collaboration with a shaman for the 2012 Gwangju Biennale. The groove running along the bottom half of each was created by pressing a cast of the artist’s tongue into the wet clay. Imbuing objects with animating breath and words through incantation is central to many magical practices and also to Mitchell’s artistic one. He fused his breath with the shaman’s in the delicate blown-glass forms held within the installation.
Rosaleen Norton was ‘born under a thunderstorm’ in Dunedin in 1917. She claimed this bound her forever to dark elemental forces. Through the 1950s and 1960s, she would be sensationalised as the ‘Witch of Kings Cross’ in the Australian press and court system, where she regularly had to defend her bohemian lifestyle and sexually graphic art against claims of obscenity, indecency, and even Satanism.

Norton was no Satanist. Strongly influenced by the teachings of Aleister Crowley, she was a neo-pagan occultist who worshipped the ancient nature god Pan. Art and magic provided her with ways of connecting with Pan and other deities. Through self-induced trance, she would enter the astral plane via a ‘plasmic body’—an astral counterpart to her physical body. Energies would filter through her, and, if the Gods willed it, they would manifest in her automatic drawings and paintings.

The two drawings in this exhibition depict figures held within a vortex of energies, deities, and forces, moving between inner and outer worlds. These are presumably representations of her trance ‘episodes’ or ‘visions’. The paintings summon key figures from Norton’s magical cosmology: the ‘light bringer’ Lucifer and Hecate (the Greek goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, and the moon). Norton described Hecate as a fearsome goddess who ‘frightened and protected her’. Here, Hecate sits atop an inverted triangle (an occult symbol for ‘maiden, mother, crone’).
Tony Oursler mashes the predominately rational forms and experiences of contemporary art with the ham-fisted, parlour-game effects of spirit photography, mesmerism and ouija-boards. *Incandescence* is a talking light bulb that speaks to us from the dark—uttering mystic truths or mad ramblings. Oursler’s talking lights are a kind of ventriloquism. Now laughable, ventriloquism had its origins in necromancy—the ancient art of spirits speaking through the necromancer.

The invention of the electric light bulb is often credited with ending the sway of spiritualism by lighting all corners of a room, banishing the shadows and exposing the tricks of the trade. Oursler steals them back.

Oursler’s obsession with the occult was the subject of the exhibition *The Imponderable Archive* (2016), at Bard College, New York. It drew from Oursler’s collection of 2,500 occult artefacts dating back to the eighteenth century—including a piece of starched gauze used to fake ectoplasm in spiritualist photographs. The collection includes a glass-negative portrait of Aleister Crowley, photographs of his Boleskine House manor and the Abbey of Thelema, and an original set of Thoth Tarot cards.
Fiona Pardington arranges her still-life photographs as altars. These collections of objects are charged with meanings through ritualistic acts of gathering, arrangement and representation. She reinvests photography with the power to go beyond both what the eye can see and what its mechanistic function is generally thought to allow—connecting artist and audience to invisible forces and entities. Pardington was first drawn to photography as a child, reading her grandmother’s *Man, Myth, and Magic* magazines and learning of the camera’s powers to capture spirits and take souls.

Pardington’s grandmother is ever-present in her work. *Still Life with the Knight of Cups, the High Priestess, and My Grandmother’s Pearls, Ripiro* contains her pearl necklace—the found object meets sympathetic magic. It sits within an arrangement based on occult symbols, objects, and practices. There are references to plant and herb magic, protection spells and Tarot—including cards from Pardington’s first edition of Aleister Crowley’s Thoth Tarot deck that hold particular importance to her own spiritual, artistic journey.

Pardington’s photograph is presented alongside an altar featuring items used within her still lifes. She set up the altar with Elizabeth Swampwitch, a High Priestess and practitioner of Voudoun magic.
Lorene Taurerewa's charcoal drawings are not bound to the physical world. They are about the confrontation with the void that ultimately defines art and human existence. Taurerewa’s conjured spaces are psychological and existential. Mark-making becomes a form of invocation, of bringing forth.

Taurerewa draws on multiple art traditions that reach into that void. She links Victorian photography to Chinese ancestral-portraiture and landscape traditions that give abstracted form to elemental powers and hidden forces.

Like the writing of Neil Gaiman, Taurerewa’s work is mythopoeic. Both mix fairytales with historical narratives, cultural beliefs, and esoteric references to re-enchant contemporary experience. Ashley Crawford says that she turns viewers into ‘wee children listening to a fairy story at night ... You can’t quite eradicate these images ... they burn into the retina and they return, often at night, uncalled for ... unbidden, but always there ... waiting.’

The history of art shows us what the apocalypse might look like, but what will it smell like? Thomson & Craighead offer a chemical portrait of the apocalypse in the form of a perfume. Using the Book of Revelation as a set of instructions, they identified all its references to olfactory elements. These include: smoke, brimstone, wormwood, thunder, flesh burnt with fire, the blood of a dead man, and every living soul [who has] died in the sea.

Working with a perfumer, they replicated each of these smells and then mixed them into a single, wearable scent.

The smell has been described as ‘a sort of musky, dank, almost-sexy tang—quickly [giving] way to something probably best described as digestive ... There was a sharp mineral blast that seemed to coat the back of my throat and stick to my fingers. Eight hours later, the smell of end times was still clinging to my coat pocket, knuckles, hair and nails like a shadow.’

The perfume is presented in a limited-edition bottle in a velvet-lined box. A secondary scent associated with material decay was sprayed into each box lining. This scent was based on the smell of the old King James bibles used as research materials.

Some people will never kill moths as they say they are angels. If a moth flies around a light, it is a sign that the immortals are watching the watchers well. If moths flying into a candle succeed in putting it out, it foretells the putting out of some life in the house.

—Encyclopedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences, 1903

The moth is a creature under the dominion of the night. In many cultures, it symbolises death and metamorphosis. Witches are said to send their spirits out of their bodies in moth form. The amassing of dead moths beside a bed aids psychic enhancement and encourages lucid dreaming.

The moth is a perfect symbol for Brendon Wilkinson, whose art combines beauty and death, repulsion and attraction. He works late into the evening in his studio—a converted school house in rural Masterton. It is often open to the elements and he has bowls to collect dead moths that have flown too close to the lights. *Inner Wing* is a portrait made entirely of moth wings. Wilkinson draws with the dead.
Simon Cuming and Jason Grote, improvised noise performance, in Occulture, City Gallery Wellington, 12 August 2017.
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FRONT COVER Yin-Ju Chen Liquidation Maps: East Timorese Crisis, East Timor, 1999-2014 (detail)
BACK COVER Rosaleen Norton The Vision c.1970