



Enchanted Alchemies: Magic, Mysticism, and the Occult in Art

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Essay by Rachel Thomas

'That which is below is as that which is above, and that which is above is as that which is below.' Under the doctrine of signatures, planet and herb, metal and deity, beast and precious stone, the months of the year and the parts of the human body were linked in subtle communion, so that one could not indeed stir a flower without the troubling of a star.'

—Ithell Colquhoun

In his Surrealist manifestos and other texts, André Breton articulated methods for artists to unleash unconscious creativity and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and magical. He posited that art serves as a magical act, evoking mysteries beyond the visible world and turning the mundane into something wondrous. For Breton, the artist was something close to a magician, a conjurer of hidden wonders. Now, a century since the publication of his first *Manifeste du surréalisme* [Manifesto of Surrealism] in 1924, Breton's ideas carry renewed significance and invite the opportunity to look afresh at connections between magic, mysticism, and the occult in art.

The ways in which magical and mystical thinking have functioned as an impetus to art production is currently receiving growing recognition. Art created under the guidance of spirit influences, or in dialogue with otherworldly realms, offers a revisionist and alternative frame of reference for art history. Artists like Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988), who approached her work with a deep understanding of esoteric forces, remind us that art often extends beyond mere formal engagement with the canvas. Colquhoun, a visionary artist, occultist, poet, and writer, embodied a philosophy that seamlessly interwove the mystical and the creative. Her multifaceted oeuvre reflects the intricate interplay of magical forces. Colquhoun conceived of magic and art as fundamentally intertwined and believed that both magic and art could tap into hidden

aspects of existence, allowing practitioners to reveal and manipulate unseen forces. This belief was rooted in her conviction that both disciplines involved the transformation of one substance into another, whether it be physical materials in art or spiritual energies in magic. For Colquhoun, art was not just a creative process but a magical act that could access and express deeper levels of consciousness. Like Breton, she viewed the artist as a kind of magician, someone who could transmute inner visions into tangible forms that could influence the external world. This idea is evident in her Surrealist works, where she employed automatic techniques to access the unconscious mind, akin to how a magician might work with symbols and rituals to access spiritual realms.

Enchanted Alchemies: Magic, Mysticism, and the Occult in Art is a group exhibition that brings together artists who approach magic and the mystical from a range of distinctive perspectives. The exhibition explores how artists are reinterpreting and engaging with age-old occult practices, considering their complex, often hidden, forces capable of significantly shaping cultural and creative landscapes. Colquhoun, for example, challenged conventional perceptions of magic, urging us to see it not as a series of rituals or spell-casting acts but as all-encompassing and dynamic, permeating every aspect of reality. This can be noted in the painting *Alcove II* (1948), for which Colquhoun employed the technique of decalcomania to create compelling interrelationships between positive and negative imagery. Decalcomania, an automatic technique favored by many of the Surrealists, describes the transfer of paint, ink, or another fluid medium from one surface to another to produce spontaneous and unpredictable textures and shapes. Typically, the process involves the artist applying their chosen medium onto one surface against which another is pressed before being carefully peeled away. The result is unique patterns that often resemble organic forms such as veins, foliage, or rock formations. In *Alcove II*, Colquhoun uses this method to create a visual dialogue between presence and absence that speaks to her deeper exploration of the subconscious. For Colquhoun, building a cohesive image from the suggestions produced by automatic techniques constituted a profound endeavor to access hidden, esoteric meanings. Through such processes, her work reached beyond the material world, becoming a conduit for exploring alchemical secrets and magical notions resonating with mysteries of the unseen and the unknown.

Transcending temporal and geographic boundaries, *Enchanted Alchemies* surveys articulations of magic, mysticism, and the occult within the visual arts over the past century. The exhibition navigates the ethereal realms of Surrealism and its enduring legacy, placing historical figures like Colquhoun and others, such as Gertrude Abercrombie, Eileen Agar, Leonora Carrington, Elda Cerrato, Leonor Fini, and Monica Sjöö, in dialogue with contemporary practitioners, including Stacey Gillian Abe, Caroline Bachmann, Francesco Clemente, Jaider Esbell, Bracha L. Ettinger, Chitra Ganesh, Julia Isídrez, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Bharti Kher, Claire Lehmann, Linder, Goshka Macuga, Victor Man, Pascale Montandon-Jodorowsky, pascALEjandro, Rachel Rose, Lucy Stein, Francis Upritchard, Aleksandra Waliszewska, and Georg Wilson. These artists have created and are creating magical worlds that invite us to contemplate how seismic shifts in societal norms have catalyzed a reimagining of spiritual beliefs. Collectively, they urge us to reconsider our perceptions of beauty, mystery, and reality.

The current curatorial interest in art's intersections with alchemy, mysticism, and magic is far more than a passing preoccupation: it reflects a continuing engagement with themes that have evolved through a series of exhibitions over time. It aligns with a more general resurgence of esoteric practices, such as tarot, spells and spirit channeling, Wicca, and witchcraft, which, in turn, indicate a broader cultural shift towards alternative spiritualities and a deliberate move away from materialistic constraints. The mystical vantage point of Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977) captures something of this phenomenon. She stated, “I’m not interested in complicated things or the commonplace. I like to paint simple things that are a little strange.”² Abercrombie’s art, including her intimate painting *Lady with Black Braid* (1960), demonstrates this sentiment. Within its jewel-hued image, familiar motifs from the artist’s oeuvre can be found—such as the witch’s black cat—which evoke a sense of ritual and hint at the uncanny. Her work emerges from a deep well of personal introspection, illustrating how the simple and the strange intertwine in the representation of mystical and occult themes.

Enchanted Alchemies beckons viewers into a space where the lines between the tangible and the intangible blur and dissolve. Alchemy, historically a pursuit of turning base metals into gold, also comprised a deeper quest for personal and universal enlightenment. Here, we are

invited to reconsider familiar narratives, to weave a dialogue between the mystical and the mundane and to expand our ordinary perceptions. The exhibition is organized into three thematic chapters: “Occultism and Dreams,” “Magic and Mysticism,” and “Alchemy: Enchantment and Transformations,” with an introductory section of artists that span these configurations. The twenty-first century’s renewed attention to the intersections between art, magic, alchemy, and occultism will unfold within these chapters, between Surrealist women woefully overlooked in their lifetimes and new voices—and those, like Alejandro Jodorowsky (b. 1929), who worked with Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) in the 1950s and continue a practice dedicated to the esoteric today. Thus, the exhibition investigates the enduring allure of countercultural mysticism and alternative spiritual practices, illuminating how artists—over the span of nearly a century—have harnessed such themes to interrogate and redefine gender roles, cultural identities, and marginalized epistemologies. The works on display foster a nuanced dialogue, revealing how mystical traditions can disrupt conventional artistic narratives. Indeed, the notion of magic itself is powerfully reconceived as a tangible force that permeates the fabric of life and art alike.

Eileen Agar (1899–1991) once remarked, “I have spent my whole life in revolt against convention, trying to bring color and light and a sense of the mysterious to daily existence. ... one must have a hunger for new colors, new shapes, and new possibilities of discovery.”³ This determination is vividly embodied in her work. Agar’s evocative painting *Budding Figures* (c. 1967) is a captivating, abstract composition inspired by natural forms she encountered along the beaches of Cornwall. It reflects her enduring love of the natural world while presenting a rich tapestry of ambiguous meanings. Playful and dynamic, the composition reveals the artist’s exploration of acrylics during the early 1960s, a medium she relished for its vibrant pigments that could produce unique color combinations. Vivid green and yellow hues burst forth within circular motifs, cleverly framed by triangular sections. These forms evoke the sensations of life, manifesting and coalescing before our eyes. The title, *Budding Figures*, hints at the interplay of various stages of life—whether in nature or for human beings—lending the image an animated essence. Agar masterfully captures movement and growth, imbuing her painting with an otherworldly presence. It resonates with her relentless quest for the mysterious, which involved the process of transforming the

ordinary into something fantastical, alive with possibility. The viewer is invited to ponder intricate connections between life, nature, and the boundless realm of the imagination. *Enchanted Alchemies* underscores how artists, such as Agar, developed profound connections between their practices and the invisible forces that they envisioned governing existence. The exhibition challenges us to perceive magic as a dynamic and omnipresent influence that transcends the boundaries of the visible world and to seek engagement with the mystical unknowns that may lie beneath the surface of everyday experience.

The exploration of the occult is a field that has been historically enshrined in male-dominated artistic narratives. In accord with recent scholarship, *Enchanted Alchemies* offers a contemporary viewpoint that foregrounds female perspectives. This reclamation and recontextualization of the occult in art by women artists represents a movement within the arts that seeks to elevate marginalized voices and interrogate historical biases, bespeaking broader cultural shifts towards inclusivity and reexamination of previously excluded narratives. Contemporary women artists, in concert with their male counterparts, are redefining the occult, utilizing it as a means to explore themes of empowerment, spirituality, and self-discovery. By reclaiming esoteric traditions, these artists are not only challenging historical power structures but also opening up new pathways for understanding the relationship between the mystical and the material, the seen and the unseen in the ongoing interchange between art, the occult, and alchemy.

For Bharti Kher (b. 1969), magic and alchemy are not just themes but central forces that shape her artistic practice. This is particularly evident in *Alchemy drawing 19* (2019), where womb-like shapes and vibrant colors float in a subconscious realm, embodying a fertile collision of thought and form. Kher crafts a language of magic through her use of circles and mark-making, wherein tensions between materiality and spirituality resonate a sense of profound transformation. Her work navigates the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction, certainty and uncertainty, forging new meanings from objects and hybrid narratives. These creations invite us into a space where the tangible and the ethereal meet, embodying a transformative dialogue that is as elusive as it is profound, challenging our perceptions of reality and inviting us to explore the mysteries that lie beneath the surface.

In *Enchanted Alchemies* we see traditional symbols, such as the moon, the witch, and the goddess, imbued with new meanings that celebrate feminine power and resilience, fostering a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the occult that reflects the evolving attitudes of our time. The exhibited works include, among other things, alchemical, Kabbalistic, and Tantric imagery from various temporal and cultural contexts—multifaceted points of view that reveal the intricate relationships artists have found between nature and spirituality, self and other. We encounter a vibrant reinterpretation of occult symbolism, challenging entrenched stereotypes and patriarchal norms. An example of this can be found in the work of Chitra Ganesh (b. 1975). In *Breathing Water and Air* (2024), Ganesh immerses us in the dynamic interaction between a dancing figure and magical symbols, weaving together mythologies, iconographical traditions, and popular culture in a manner that defies linear constraints. In the words of one critical interlocutor, she “constantly attempts to challenge patriarchal norms and empower her female and queer subjects by constructing alternate visual narratives.”⁴ Traditional storytelling conventions are reimagined, giving rise to compositions and scenarios that are centered around women and queer subjects as dynamic forces. By extracting and reinterpreting themes of sexuality and power from established histories, Ganesh crafts a vision that challenges and transforms conventional narratives into richly layered, alternative expressions.

Offering a lens through which to view art as a reflection of humanity’s quest for meaning, understanding, and transcendence, *Enchanted Alchemies* delves into seismic sociological shifts that have reshaped notions of spirituality, alongside the development of gender discourses, prompting a reevaluation of our understanding of magic and the occult, beauty, and mysterious alternative universes. The exhibition considers how artists are drawn to the realm of magical practices as a means of confronting and subverting contemporary societal structures and how, through this engagement with magic, they explore new possibilities, envision alternative futures, and actively seek to effect change.

The relationship of magic and the power of envisioning alternative realities can be seen in an exchange between Breton and Carrington. Invited to answer a questionnaire produced for Breton’s publication *L’Art magique* [Magic Art], published in 1957, Carrington offered an

enigmatic and profound response. She declared her intent to provoke modern man to plunge headlong into “the primordial confusion,”⁵ which, she argued, was not mere fantasy but a necessary journey—a return to the very origins of existence. For Carrington, it was within the bizarre and boundless ocean of magic that humankind, and the ailing planet it inhabits, might discover the elusive salvation it so desperately seeks. Following her powerful image, magic, with its deep-rooted connections to humanity, nature, and the spirit world, can be understood to serve as a thread that weaves together past traditions with the creative act of shaping the future, according to our collective desires.

At the heart of *Enchanted Alchemies* lie insights into the expansive realm of the occult, encompassing visions of magic as fundamentally interwoven with the essence of reality. The exhibition posits that magic and occult thinking extend beyond ritualistic practices, permeating every facet of human experience. It asserts their omnipresence, inviting acknowledgment and engagement from those who yearn to unravel their mysteries.

1 Ithell Colquhoun, “The Prose of Alchemy,” in *Medea’s Charms: Selected Shorter Writing of Ithell Colquhoun*, ed. Richard Shillitoe (London and Chicago: Peter Owen, 2019), 209. In this essay, first published in *The Quest* vol. 21, no. 3 (1930), Colquhoun quotes from the medieval Hermetic text of the *Smaragdine Table*.

2 Gertrude Abercrombie quoted in Susan Weinger, *Gertrude Abercrombie* (Springfield: Illinois State Museum, 1991), 12.

3 Eileen Agar, *A Look at My Life* (London: Methuen, 1988), 232.

4 Meera Menezes, “Chitra Ganesh,” in *Art Asia Pacific* 133 (May/June 2023).

5 Leonora Carrington quoted in Susan L. Aberth, “Modern Enchantress: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Magic,” in *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, eds. Vivien Greene, Michael Philipp, Gražina Subelytė, Karole P. B. Vail, Ortrud Westheider, and Daniel Zamani (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2022), 81.

FURTHER READING

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RACHEL THOMAS

Rachel Thomas is the Chief Curator of the Hayward Gallery at the Southbank Centre in London. She has curated significant group exhibitions on themes of spirituality, revisionist art theory, postcolonialism, and ecofeminism, including the critically acclaimed *Dear Earth* in 2023. Notably, *Dear Earth* featured artists such as Otobong Nkanga, Agnes Denes, and Hito Steyerl, expanding representation for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ artists. Other group exhibitions include *As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits & Mystics* (2017) and *Desire: A Revision from the 20th Century to the Digital Age* (2019). Thomas is currently curating the large-scale outdoor commission *Target Queen* (2024) by Bharti Kher at the Hayward Gallery.

Previously, Thomas held the positions of Head of Exhibitions: Senior Curator and Chair of Long-Term Exhibition programming at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, where her innovative outlook transformed the institution's approach to contemporary art. Thomas is a Tate and Museums Association (MA) Fellow, a Trustee of Rediscovering Art by Women, and an assembly member of the New School of the Anthropocene (NSOTA).

Thomas has curated critically acclaimed solo presentations at international biennales, including of the artists Etel Adnan, Frank Bowling, Sophie Calle, Bharti Kher, Nan Goldin, Hélio Oiticica, Elizabeth Peyton, Doris Salcedo, and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, and organised an outstanding program of commissions by international artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Doris Salcedo.

She spearheaded the ground-breaking virtual retrospective of Jorge Pardo. She curated the 9th Lyon Biennale with Hans Ulrich Obrist and initiated the first Welsh Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale, with the artist Cerith Wyn Evans. Thomas also curated *New Territories* at ARCO, Madrid, in 2005.

Thomas's dedication to advancing the discourse of art extends to her scholarly pursuits. As a fellow at Trinity College Dublin and a contributor to its MA/MFA Art in the Contemporary World program, she explores a revisionist art history of women abstract artists and intersections between art and spirituality. A prolific writer, Thomas's work has been published widely in journals, exhibition catalogues, and art history publications. She has lectured at prestigious events such as TEDxOxford at Oxford University, where she shared insights on art and storytelling.

As stated by Ralph Rugoff, Director of the Hayward Gallery, "Rachel Thomas has curated some of the most inventive, adventurous, and engaging exhibitions in Europe over the past two decades."