

I'm Really a Witch.*

Curated by Christina Battle for LOMAA – Saturday, October 22, 2016

In the spring of 2015 I was invited to curate a program for LOMAA's 2016 visiting artist season. Dedicating their year of programming to a focus on female and gender non-conforming perspectives, *I'm Really a Witch.** screened on Saturday, October 22, 2016 at Satellite Project Space in London and featured works by: Christina Battle, Laura Conway, FASTWURMS, Rachel McRae, Nicole Rayburn, Leslie Supnet, and Gwen Trutnau. The program was preceded by an episode from the web series *Bwitches* (Johanna Middleton & Martine Moore).

If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful. You can be invisible or evident in how you make your witch-self known.ⁱ

The role of the witch has been around for as long as humans have dealt with disease and attempted to avert disaster but with the rise in monotheism and male centered creation stories the witch's once prominent position began to decline. These women, once powerful members of communities providing important contributions including healing and midwifery, became ostracized and deemed pagans with practices in cahoots with the devil. With the rise of plague across Europe in the 14th century, where it is estimated that 1 in 3 died because of the disease, hysteria fuelled the call for these previously known healers to be tried and killed as practitioners of witchcraftⁱⁱ.

In 1486 the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or "Hammer of [the] Witches," by German Monks who believed that women were sexually vulnerable and thus easy prey for the devil, directly tied the fear of lust and the female body with demonology and witchcraft. As a result, for the next 200 years, witch hunts took place across Europe. By their peak in the end of the 1600s, it is estimated that anywhere between 60,000 to 300,000 individuals – primarily women – had been killed because of the hysteriaⁱⁱⁱ.

This fear of the power of witches, that is, of women, continued to shape popular culture's vision of the witch through the 20th century. The rise in policies against women and women's rights that we've watched unfold across recent years, especially in the United States, has been coupled with a surge of both men and women vocally identifying as feminist. Along with this, a reclaiming of the role of witch with its original meaning of female power and body has also seen an escalation within popular culture. Identifying as a witch is now frequently embraced as an indicator of strength, especially of female power. Fuelled by social media, hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic - started in 2013 as a way to draw attention to positive achievements of black women, have helped reframe the concept creating more direct links between ideas of witchcraft and female empowerment^{iv}.

This shift in cultural reference from that perpetuated since the 15th century has slowly caught on in Hollywood with a rise in representations of witches as strong female characters - consider *American Horror Story's* third season *Coven* (2013) whose overall theme of "girl power" contributed to the further popularizing of this updated image.

Hollywood though, still often gets it wrong, and although it is capitalizing on this popularization, many of their witches continue to drown in petty, worn out female stereotypes encased in narratives of overarching religious vigor. An example is a recent storyline from WGN's *Salem* (2014-ongoing) where a young tormented girl unwillingly turned witch castrates men as a form of control. This overarching fear of the power women might hold is the same fear responsible for the persecution and killing of women across Europe throughout previous centuries. The scenario visualized in the episode of *Salem* (S02 E01) mimics the fears propagated during the time: of those who "believed that witches could control fertility and bring about male impotence—suspicions that speak less of witches and more of patriarchal anxieties around the female body and its 'powers.'"^v Considering the present-day fight to control women's bodies by American Republicans, this narrative reflects a real fear within the current cultural landscape.

Hollywood has never really been at the cutting edge of social change but stories like American Horror Story's *Coven*, where a younger generation of witches fight to insert themselves as authorities within society, indicate that the shifting of perspectives is catching on. "You girls need to learn to fight. When witches don't fight, we burn."^{vi}

An alternative example that twists the Hollywood model of the episodic comedy is *Bwitches* (2016-), a feminist comedy series on YouTube created by and starring collaborators Johanna Middleton and Martine Moore. Offering a funny commentary on experiences the characters deal with daily as women, *Bwitches* infiltrates the archetypal television narrative in a funny and digestible way while continuing to challenge stereotypes. The fresh and relatable show has a DIY sensibility that empowers its overtly feminist perspective – there's no more feminist way to take on the status quo than by circumventing the powers that be and producing a show yourself!

I'm really a witch.

— Azealia Banks (@Azealia Banks) January 8, 2015^{vii}

Given the strength of the reaction, you would think that Banks was the first woman to cross over to the dark side. You would be wrong. Witchcraft – and the embrace of "magical" practices, like reading tarot cards – has recently experienced a resurgence of sorts among young, creative, politically engaged women.^{viii}

Looking closer to ways in which artists embody concepts of witches and the occult, this program lifts its name directly from pop culture. In 2015, rap/pop star Azealia Banks outed herself as a practicing witch further challenging the status quo of mainstream sensibilities.^{ix} Banks, known for her highly controversial and often reactionary opinions, was banned from Twitter because of them but not before offering thousands of followers a sort of schooling on the strength that the role of witch has played across history. Separating this from some of her more problematic opinions, it's her transmission of the idea of -witch as powerful woman- that I'm interested in. In a culture where entertainers define what's popular and play a role in shifting cultural norms, often in ways that are hardly in our collective best interest, when they get even one part of it right I'm thrilled.

She may be joking, but her objectives – to identify with persecuted ancestors, to reclaim lost ways of seeing the world, to claim the ability to be powerful and scary – are part of a

long tradition. Images of witchcraft call to so many women – straight and not, white and of color, religious and devoutly atheist – because the task of reclaiming the witch is a fundamentally poetic one.^x

We can no longer see how many times Banks’ “I’m really a witch” tweet was shared since her twitter account was shut down, but we can be sure it had an impact based on the reactions at the time: “...simply by calling herself a witch in public, Banks had managed to evoke real fear. Rightwingers treated her as if she were actually planning to blight crops and hex her enemies, all the while claiming that they didn’t believe in witchcraft.”^{xi}

The utilization of fear as a form of empowerment is in itself a thoroughly feminist act, something that Banks was surely quite aware.^{xii} As conservative politicians and religious zealots continue with their misogynist laws and rhetoric, women and their allies are fighting back – and the image of the witch is a powerful emblem that can be rallied around.

*“To reclaim the word witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful,” wrote Starhawk, in her seminal 1979 book *The Spiral Dance*.*^{xiii}

This reclaimed identity is not new to artists and those identifying with perspectives tied to witchcraft enact a deliberate attempt to empower. In the culture of experimental film and video which continues to be dominated by cis white males, incorporating imagery of female ceremony and power remains an impressive action. Whether serving as a call to ritual, recalling the history of witches directly or placing females within roles of power, works in *I’m Really a Witch*.^{*} highlight ways that artists not only reclaim the identity of witches but also work to empower it.

The history of the plight of women at the hands of zealots across time are laid bare in Rayburn’s *How to Identify a Witch* (2014) and illusions to this bigoted and hateful persecution being applied across centuries to ‘the other’ through to contemporary times in my own *hysteria* (2006).

McRae’s *When I was 14 (working thru workin thru)* (2015) offers insight into the power one can gain through self-othering. The diaristic format of her tumblr entry read live for the audience offers insight into personal dealings within a culture ruled by fear and hate.

Supnet’s energized *sun moon stars rain* (2009) and FASTWURM’s repetitive and spellbinding *Blood Clock* (2005) call us to ritual and transform the space of the cinema into one that is ready for ceremony.

The fear of women having power over men delicately unfolds in Conway’s *They Run!* (2015), a meticulously drawn animation challenging male-centred creation myths.

The program ends with the rock-n-roll energy of Trutnau’s *Cloven Sunset* (2015) offering a call to action. In it a group of women take control with beer and blood and without apology. The film’s raw energy instills a collective ‘fuck yeah!’ as a reminder that we are powerful.

^{*} Embedded within the program’s title *I’m Really a Witch*. ^{*} is a reference to a tweet by rap/pop star Azealia Banks on January 8, 2015.

ⁱ From a pamphlet for New York Covens of W.I.T.C.H. cited from: The Occult Activism of 1960s Group WITCH is Still Relevant By Ashera Buhite - May 1, 2016

ⁱⁱ A&E Ancient Mysteries. "Witches - Incredible History Documentary." *YouTube*, Uploaded by Occult Mystery, 26, April, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG4EH3FQjnI>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Witches - Incredible History Documentary."

^{iv} The hashtag #BLACKGIRLMAGIC was started in 2013 by by CaShawn Thompson. Thomas, Dexter. "Why everyone's saying 'Black Girls are Magic'." *Los Angeles Times*. 9 Sept, 2015. Web. Oct 2016.

^v Scott, Izabella. "Why Witchcraft Is Making a Comeback in Art." *Artsy*. 6 Sept, 2016. Web. Oct, 2016.

^{vi} Fiona to Zoe, Madison, Nan & Queenie, AHS Coven S03 "American Horror Story, Season 3: Coven Quotes." *Quotes.net*. STANDS4 LLC, 2016. Web. 20 Oct. 2016.

^{vii} Doyle, Sady. "Season of the Witch: Why Young Women Are Flocking to the Ancient Craft." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 24 Feb. 2015. Web. 05 May 2016.

^{viii} Doyle. "Season of the Witch."

^{ix} Azealia Banks has actually been tweeting about being a witch since April 2014, January 2015 is just when the media began paying attention to it.

^x Doyle, "Season of the Witch"

^{xi} Doyle, "Season of the Witch"

^{xii} Although, she would likely disagree with referring to herself as a *feminist*, seemingly preferring the term *womanist* – from a tweet on April 1, 2016: "honestly, as a black woman I don't have the luxury of being in line with mainstream (white) liberal feminist ideals."

^{xiii} Doyle, "Season of the Witch"

Program Description:

I'm Really a Witch.*

Curated by Christina Battle

Presented in partnership with Satellite Project Space

Saturday October 22, 2016 / Screening from 8-9 PM / Doors open @ 7:30

Satellite Project Space / 121 Dundas Street

FREE / ACCESSIBLE / OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

LOMAA's Visiting Artist Program is pleased to host our final curated event, and final program of our 2015-2015 Visiting Artist Program, presented by Christina Battle. Battle, originally from Edmonton AB is currently living in London ON and working toward a PhD at Western University. Along with the screening, Battle will have a companion text available for free download on LOMAA's website. Artist Leslie Supnet will be in attendance. This event is presented in partnership with Satellite Project Space.

“If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules. You are free and beautiful. You can be invisible or evident in how you make your witch-self known.”**

The contemporary image of the witch, one that has reclaimed its original identity of female power and body, has seen a rise within popular culture fuelled by a strengthening of feminist perspectives within society at large. This shift in cultural reference from that perpetuated since the 15th century has been appropriated by Hollywood with representations of witches as strong female characters - consider American Horror Story's third season Coven (2013) whose overall theme of “girl power” contributed to the further popularizing of this updated image. This reclaimed identity is not new to artists and those identifying with perspectives tied to witchcraft enact a deliberate attempt to empower.

Works in I'm Really a Witch.* position perspectives of witchcraft and the occult within a strong feminist politic. The program includes works by: Christina Battle, Laura Conway, FASTWURMS, Rachel McRae, Nicole Rayburn, Leslie Supnet, and Gwen Trutnau. Preceded by an episode from the web series Bwitches (Johanna Middleton & Martine Moore). Curated by Christina Battle for LOMAA.

* The program's title “I'm Really a Witch.” references a tweet by rap/pop star Azealia Banks on January 8, 2015. As noted in an article by Sady Doyle: ...simply by calling herself a witch in public, Banks had managed to evoke real fear. Rightwingers treated her as if she were actually planning to blight crops and hex her enemies, all the while claiming that they didn't believe in witchcraft. [Doyle, Sady. "Season of the Witch: Why Young Women Are Flocking to the Ancient Craft." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 24 Feb. 2015. Web. 05 May 2016.]

**from a pamphlet for New York Covens of W.I.T.C.H. [cited from: The Occult Activism of 1960s Group WITCH is Still Relevant By Ashera Buhite - May 1, 2016]

The Program:

Bwitches (Episode #1) - Johanna Middleton & Martine Moore – 6.20mins - 2016

I'm Really a Witch.* (trailer) – Christina Battle – 0.30mins - 2016

How to identify a Witch - Nicole Rayburn – 3.34mins - 2014

When I was 14 (working thru workin thru) - Rachel McRae (performance) – 10mins - 2015

hysteria - Christina Battle – 4mins - 2006

sun moon stars rain - Leslie Supnet – 3.20mins - 2009

Blood Clock - FASTWURMS – 11.55mins - 2005

They Run! - Laura Conway – 7.27mins - 2015

Cloven Sunset - Gwen Trutnau – 3.14mins - 2015

Descriptions of Works (from the artists):

Bwitches Episode #1 - Johanna Middleton & Martine Moore - 2016

Bwitches is a feminist comedy series about two friends who use their magic powers to vanquish the sexism and racism they face in modern Hollywood. Starring and co-created by Johanna Middleton and Martine Moore, *Bwitches* is a smart and goofy cross between *Broad City* and *Bewitched*. The heart of the show is about our experiences as women who are also of different races. It's a witches brew of comedy, camp, and commentary. You'll also see some talking cats, floating objects, and magic spells. [<http://www.bwitchesthseries.com>]

How to Identify a Witch, Nicole Rayburn, 3:34mins, 2014

How to Identify a Witch references historically documented methods used to identify and prosecute a witch. The methods presented in the video, although seemingly bizarre, are sourced from witch hunting manuals, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), which were commonly used reference texts throughout the European justice system during the witch craze.

Simple animations created from illustrations and woodcuts derived from this period serve to emphasize the absurdity and popular prevalence of the witch craze event, but also gesture towards the problematic belief systems that fostered the emergence of this frenzied phenomenon that targeted primarily women and the socially vulnerable as 'others'.

The continued relevance of this historical topic is manifold. Persecution in the form of repression, exclusion, torture, and execution, premised solely in intolerance of difference, be that physical, behavioral, or spiritual, is still prevalent. As Joseph Klaitz poignantly states in *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts*, "Plainly, we are not dealing with obsolete issues when we consider such problems as the roots of intolerance, manifestations of prejudice against women and minorities, the use of torture by authoritarian rulers, and attempts by religious and political ideologues to impose their values on society". The witch is a scapegoat blamed for random misfortunes, but more so persecuted for social position, difference, and otherness – emphasizing the continued importance as an issue of contemplation today.

When I was 14 (working thru workin thru), Rachel McRae, performance, 10mins, 2015

Simultaneously confessional, sermon, and essay on queer occult practice written in reverse, Rachel McRae's *When I was 14 (working thru working thru)* is read aloud from its online Tumblr-blog source, as if newly discovered and re-lived by both audience and reader. Cemented

by the testimonial of a teenage witch in a hostile small town, the performance acts as a spell in itself, navigating the ways narratives and rumors can cloak the subject in a conjured protective barrier of language.

hysteria, Christina Battle, 4 mins, 2006

made with the support of lift & the new directions in cinema series 2006

An unstable community leads to accusations and panic. Re-considering the Salem witch trials of 1692. Then doesn't always seem so far off from now.

In *hysteria*, Christina Battle refers more obliquely to the contemporary political climate using schoolbook illustrations of the Salem witch trials. She works the surface of the film in distinctive ways, lifting the emulsion to add new wrinkles to the image one frame at a time.- Chris Gehman & Andréa Picard (tiff 2006)

Leslie Supnet – sun moon stars rain, 3.20mins, 2009

sun moon stars rain is a psychedelic elegy, lamenting the death of mother nature's children.

Blood Clock – FASTWURMS, 11.55mins, 2005

Blood Clock was first exhibited in the FASTWURMS installation of the same name at the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI), 2005.

Blood Clock features original images and sound from FASTWURMS rural home, including the cycle of a full moon with a spring frog chorus and cows playing in a pond as the sun sets in the harvest season.

FASTWURMS original images are mixed with samples from the classic pagan cult film *The Wicker Man* (1973), including *Willows Song* by Paul Giovanni:

Heigh ho! Who is there?
No one but me, my dear.
Please come say, how do?
The things I'll give to you.
A stroke as gentle as a feather
I'll catch a rainbow from the sky
and tie the ends together.
Heigh ho! I am here.
Am I not young and fair?
Please come say, how do?
The things I'll show to you.
Would you have a wond'rous sight?
The midday sun at midnight.
Fair maid, white and red,
Comb you smooth and stroke your head.
How a maid can milk a bull!
And every stroke a bucketful.

They Run! – Laura Conway, 7.27mins, 2015

They Run! is a visual retelling of a retelling. It is a fan fiction-animation, an ode to Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1983 novel *The Mists of Avalon*. It is primarily a defense of the mythical mother of western story - Moraine Le Fay - the lover, half-sister and vilified priestess of Arthurian legend.

Cloven Sunset - Gwen Trutnau, 3.14mins, 2015

Made for the 2015 One Take Super 8 event in Winnipeg, Manitoba