

“WITCHES” at September Gallery in Hudson, New York

BY NOAH DILLON, MODERN PAINTERS | MAY 01, 2017



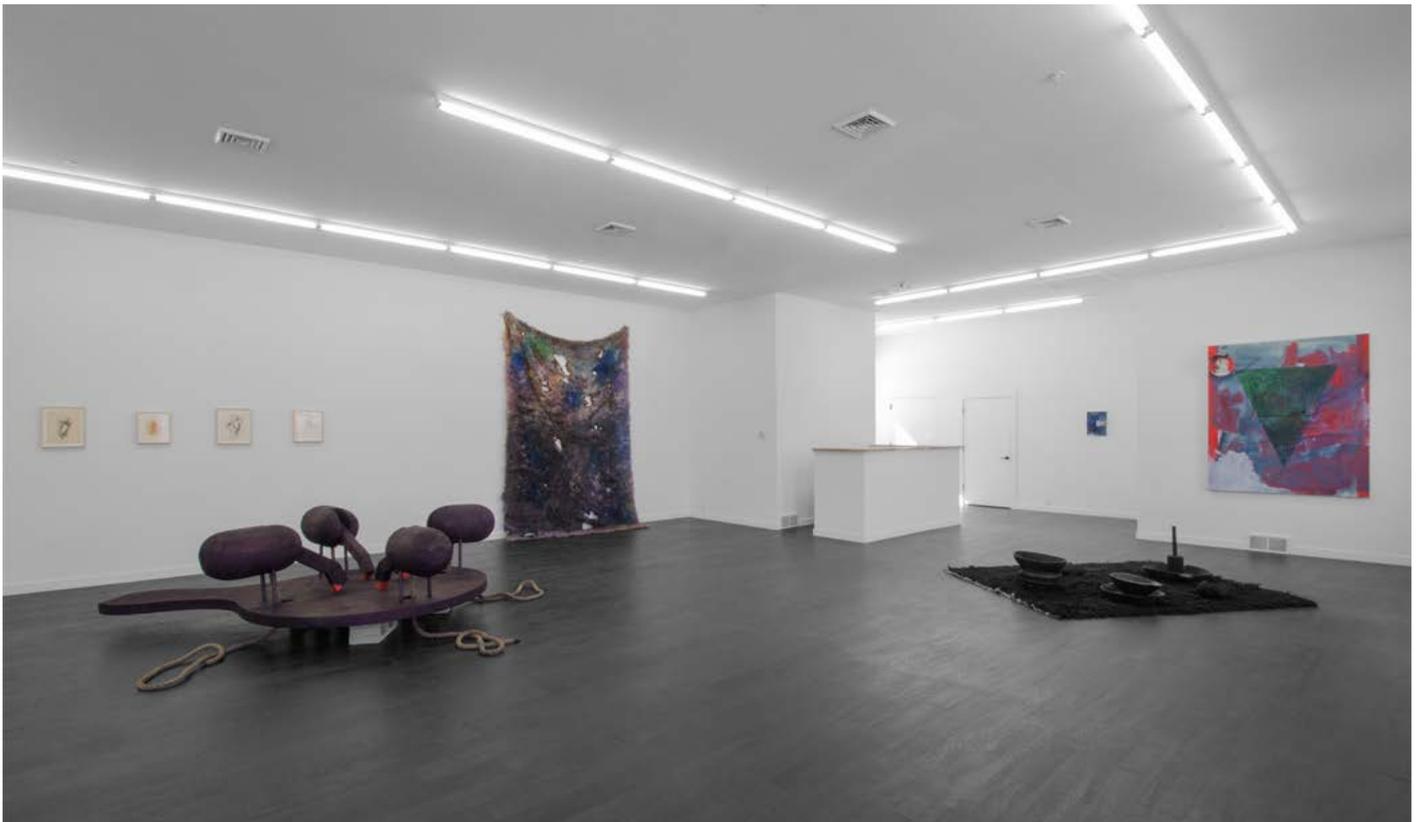
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Installation view of “WITCHES,” at September Gallery.
(Installation view of “WITCHES,” at September Gallery.)

Printed usage of the word “witch” has, according to data from Google, grown over the past century. It offers a lot to work with: threat and terror to patriarchy, feminist power, a connection to ecology and ritual and naturalism, superstitious and alchemical metaphors, plus sex, rebellion, altered consciousness, and blasphemy. At Hudson New York’s September Gallery, “WITCHES,” curated by Kristen Dodge, takes up these themes, with works by Anna Betbeze, (Marjorie) Cameron, Rosy Keyser, Laurel Sparks, and Marianne Vitale adopting the visuals or peering into “craft” of an occult nature. In the dripping, blustery, gray early spring of upstate New York, the show was incensed with *witchiness* before even entering the front door. Purple flags with a white center hung outside businesses up and down the main drag, a sort of visual mantra announcing each owner’s intention to resist illiberal policies by the Trump administration. (A local symbol, the Keep Hope Alive Flag is part of a year-long installation in the city.)

Many of the artworks are indebted to the idea of artists as magicians of the studio. A piece by Keyser, by the entrance, called “Turkey Cock,” 2017, is made with oil and the talismanic inclusion of horse hair. Like several of the works by Keyser, it is invested in the ritualistic practice of painting.

Keyser’s avian title echoes a sculpture by Vitale, “Very Fine Gander,” 2017, near the middle of the room. That piece is made of wood, stained dark brown—a large paddle with four big birds standing on its rim. An enlarged replica of a kind of Eastern European children’s toy that has been made for at least the past 100 years, the birds’ necks pivot up and down, and large ropes connected to them suggest that they can be yanked and made to peck. Vitale has previously made altar-like sculptures and trussed wooden bridges, charred black. Her work is usually druidically archaic, but not so here. Instead, it’s cryptically childish, and like an incantatory pun, crudely uses ropes to command the phallic birds’ heads to bob rhythmically.

Betbeze’s work is familiar and plies well against Vitale, both artists using burning and destruction as methods. A stacked assemblage of blackened, burned bowls and bric-a-brac on a black rug by Betbeze, “Untitled (Collection),” 2017, look like implements in the aftermath of a sacrifice. Another scarified rug by Betbeze is hangs on the wall.

A painting by Keyser from 2015, “Terrestrial Mime,” is more deconstructed than destroyed, with a pristine wooden stretcher slathered with dripping, provisional swaths of canvas, string, bamboo, cord, enamel, etc. It resembles, as many of these artworks do with their emphasis on process, a ceremony’s aftermath.

Sparks, who had previously made iconic images with a lot of symmetry and allusions to naturalism, here has five smallish paintings with a similarly vivid palette of bright pink, baby blue, and yellow acrylic; marker, spray paint, along with crusty gray papier-mâché, embedded with buttons, googly eyes, and shells. These little totemic pieces, with repeating patterns of like sigils of stripes and rectangles and triangles, esoteric-looking networks, reveal new connotations with this curatorial placement, such as pentacles or grimoires filled with magical signs, more than painterly formalist imagery. They look like designs made to empower or enchant. “As Above, So Below,” 2012, directly refers to Hermeticism, the esoteric Renaissance muddle of philosophy, theology, art, and science, which tried to develop alchemy but ended up inventing science and reinforcing Christianity.

Cameron’s drawings are tumescent. In two, both called “Pluto Transiting the Twelfth House,” 1978–86, scratching marks describe billowing, bulbous, spectral forms. In another untitled and undated piece, a similar abstract shape inhabits a woman’s lower body, a disfigured growth forming in the space that her reproductive organs should be found. Two of the best horror movies of the past decade, “The VVitch,” 2015, and “Antichrist,” 2009, featured witches with metaphorical emanations like this: a pussy that grabs back.

Last year, about half the voting public apparently fell under the warlock spell of Donald Trump, and some of his supporters have even posited that idiotically esoteric “meme magic” helped will him into office. (Even more insane, some on that fringe allege that Hillary Clinton is literally a satanic witch.) On the other side, members of the opposition have suggested that Ivanka Trump can sway her father into humane policies, and many continue to litigate the primary campaign, as if to break a spell and set the world right again. A confessed sexual assault perpetrator is president, and although I’m skeptical of magic and art’s efficacy in combating this state of affairs, all means of active resistance are essential right now.

“WITCHES” is on view at September Gallery from March 18–May 7.



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