

Everything She Touches, Changes Remix

Feminist New Materialism and Contemporary Magical Futurist Art

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This article explores a group of contemporary magical artists who are inspired by feminist new materialist thought. In the work of these contemporary artists, magic is defined less by the transmission of traditions and initiatory wisdom or revelations about truth, and more by the ways in which artists can initiate change by shifting perspectives and orientations through creating inspiring, affective, embodied experiences. I argue that the philosophical shifts that are emerging from feminist philosophies and feminist fiction are also helping to create a cultural space for wider discussions of magic, particularly among artists, who are reconfiguring ideas about nature and being, erasing the distinctions between the human and non-human worlds, highlighting the deep connections between the material and immaterial.

Introduction

The title of this article is taken from a well-known chant within the neo-pagan community. It is very simple: "She changes everything She touches and everything She touches Changes". It refers to the continuing impact of the Goddess in one's life, also suggesting that change is constant and that it emerges from a divine source. The lyrics are often attributed to Starhawk, who founded the Reclaiming community in northern California in the late 1970s. It bears a remarkable resemblance to a

phrase found in Octavia Butler's visionary work of speculative fiction, *Parable of the Sower*, from 1993: "All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change, Changes you" (Butler 1993, 13). If the latter was indeed inspired by the former, the subtle shift reflects Butler's ideas about the imminence of divinity present in the self, and the understanding that all things are both constantly in process and interdependent.

Feminism, feminist theory, speculative fiction and magical subcultures have enjoyed an entanglement of influences for the last half century, with ebbs and flows of cultural resonance and visibility. Over the past several years a distinctive cultural shift has shaped how artists, particularly queer, women and gender non-conforming artists have started artistically expressing their relationship to magic, radically refining ideas of practice and magical engagement. Unlike earlier esoteric or occult artists such as Ithell Colquhoun or Austin Osman Spare, or even hermetically aligned contemporary magical and occult artists practising today, a group of artists has emerged who are much less inclined to embed or encode magical or occult iconography in their work, referring obliquely to

the initiated secrets of magic. Instead, for these artists magical practice and artistic practice is one and the same, reflecting a magical worldview that diverges from traditional modernist occultism. In the work of these contemporary artists, magic is defined less by the transmission of traditions and initiatory wisdom or revelations about truth, and more by the ways in which we can initiate change by shifting perspectives and orientations through creating inspiring, affective, embodied experiences. For this group of magical and occult artists, art itself is a magical spell designed with the intention of producing empathy and novel ways of approaching our collective and entangled futures.

Although it might be premature to refer to these artists as comprising a school or movement, the frameworks through which they view both art and magic are remarkably coherent and are deeply indebted to a linked group of philosophical movements that have impacted twenty-first century humanistic thought, reshaping understandings of reality, and exploring ontologies that inspire ethics of care and responsibility. Feminist new materialism, agential realism, post-humanism and speculative realism are just some of the linked areas of thought which are reconfiguring ideas about nature and being, erasing the distinctions between the human and non-human worlds, highlighting the deep connections between the material and immaterial.

Here, I argue that the ontological paradigms emerging from feminist philosophies and feminist fiction are also helping to create a conceptual space for wider discussions of magic, particularly among artists. I explore some of the foundational feminist thinkers and writers that have

been the most influential in inspiring a new crop of contemporary magical artists, and demonstrate the ways in which these artists are building on these theories in their linked artistic and magical practice.

Emergent frameworks for the practice of magic

Although this article focuses on contemporary art, it is also concerned with the cultural and academic discourses around magic, and for this discussion I favour it over terms such as occultism, mysticism or esoterism. While there are certainly some esoteric dimensions to the work of some of these artists, there is no overriding concern with secrecy, initiatory experience or transcendence. This is a divergence in the scholarship of esoterism, which tends to focus on historical or discourse led approaches to alternative intellectual or spiritual currents (see von Stuckrad 2008, 228–32; Hanegraaff 2012, 6–7). While Kokkinen (2021) aptly articulated the relationship between esoteric art and spiritual seeking, the artists featured here are a rather uncomfortable fit for that category as they tend to not be concerned with individual revelation of ultimate truths. A focus on magic, especially magical practice, shifts the conversation towards experiential dimensions that are more relevant to the artists under consideration.

Of course, magic as an umbrella term used to refer to a set of para-religious or cultural practices related to agency comes with a lot of baggage. Historically it has been deployed as a term of cultural denigration, categorising activities that are marginal, unsanctioned and deviant with respect to religion (Greenwood 2009, 1–18). Within an academic framework,

magic has most foundationally been explored within anthropology and folkloristics, but also laterally within fields such as religious studies. As a topic within anthropology, it has a long history and has frequently been used as a term of othering, denoting cultural practices typically set against normative definitions of religion, especially Protestant Christianity (for an excellent brief historical overview see Tambiah 1990, 1–8). Susan Greenwood's framing of magic has been the most helpful and interesting for this project in exploring the rocky terrains of contemporary magical practice as a pan-cultural and universal human phenomenon. The Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective research project at the University of Erlangen similarly adopts a global perspective, acknowledging in their mission statement the universality of what they define as "practices aimed at predicting, controlling, managing, and manipulating contingent life events" (CAS-E 2025). However, while this framework acknowledges the universality and often socially marginalised position of such practices, the presumption of marginality of these practices and worldviews still inherently suggests a normative position with respect to both empiricism and religion. Given their ubiquity, I do not believe these practices or worldviews are inherently marginal.

I use the term magic here for two reasons: first, most of the artists with whom I am working explicitly use magic to characterise their own approach. Second, however one defines magic, it is not only about metaphysical belief, but is tactical and generally concerned with enacting change, either in oneself or in the material world. As a result, magic becomes a useful framework for

understanding the motivating principles of many of these artists who are less concerned with symbolism or mysticism and instead are inherently concerned with art as an agent of transformation.

What gets categorised as magical practice is informed by a complex of cultural relations mostly regarding institutions of religion, localised justice, societal norms and importantly, healthcare. For many people art occupies a different category from magic, as magic is often conventionally understood as a para-religious activity while art is frequently in the modern world connected with secular discourses. However, the theoretical relationship between magic and art is long-standing, certainly with respect to altered states of consciousness, and also imaginative world-building (Sutcliffe 2021, 12–20). As Sutcliffe has noted, magic is "inherently artful" (2021, 15), but to what degree is an artist considered a magical practitioner simply by virtue of being an artist? Of course, not all artists claim to be practising magic; most do not, but not all magically informed artists are easy to immediately identify as magical practitioners, as their models of magic are not easily recognisable.

For many practitioners involved in magical or occult subcultures such as Wicca, contemporary Paganism or magical orders such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, magic is affectively and aesthetically entwined with notions of tradition, transmission and a connection with pre-modern practice, stressing initiation and ritual, magical curricula and training, and completing grade work. In fact, the academic definition of esotericism proposed by Antoine Faivre reflects some of these features, as demonstrated by his emphasis on tradition and

transmission as key features of Western esotericism (Faivre 1994, 10–15). However, these features are certainly not always present in magical practice. For example, most folk magic and spell work is completed in a very informal way, not necessarily incorporating complex ritual or spiritual gnosis. In the case of artists like Ithell Colquhoun, Hilma Af Klint or Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, or even contemporary magical artists such as Jesse Bransford, who works with goetic imagery, we can identify specific esoteric and occult ideas which are reflected in their paintings and drawings, and perhaps, therefore, we might draw some conclusions about the nature of their practice. However, some contemporary occult and esoteric art, such as that of Tai Shani or Alice Bucknell, does not explicitly visually reference esoteric symbolism or teachings which makes the magical paradigms of the artist harder to identify.

However, magical practice inherently suggests a model of how the universe functions, whether or not the practitioner is immediately conscious of this process. Through the magician's understanding of how magic operates, they are articulating agency within their own comprehension of an ecology. Ecologies are defined by the study of the relationships between entities and their environment, so for the magician, theorising those relationships with other-than-human entities and building an ethical system around those interactions is essential, for example considering how one might bargain with (or threaten) entities summoned through Solomonic grimoire magic, or pouring out milk to gain the favour of local land spirits. As Greenwood notes, magic foundationally relies on an engagement with a cosmos where the

complexities of other-than-human worlds are acknowledged (Greenwood 2009, 8). As such, current post-continental and post-human philosophical trends which focus on the decentring of the human experience and which also expand conceptions of who has agency, which some have called “the non-human turn” (Grusin 2015), potentially articulate a curious intersection with the realities of the magician, who operates in complex spaces with a variety of beings, both material and immaterial.

Although Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, often cited as the dominant models in what is referred to as a Western esoteric tradition (von Stuckrad 2008, 223–26; Hanegraaff 2012, 12), may have a lot to teach us about conceptions of an inspirited universe, these are not the only models, and it is evident that the models for understanding magic are changing and expanding. While post-human and feminist new materialist philosophies are not explicitly magical, certainly not esoteric, they do create an interpretative space that fairly easily slides into metaphors and practices of magic. Here I propose several ways in which feminist new materialist philosophies provide a sympathetic structure for magical interpretations. First, these philosophical positions acknowledge immaterial states and a general theoretical slipperiness of space-time and material reality which are congruent with a cultivated liminality that is a consistent feature of magical frameworks (Greenwood 2009, 5–8). Additionally, a significant shift in contemporary magical worldviews even outside the artistic field marks an increased tendency to embrace horizontal models of relationality rather than hierarchical ones, and to reject platonically derived essentialisms (see

MacCormack 2020, 109–10, 113–15). This is supported by new materialist theories, which break down the boundaries of the human, the non-human and the environment (technological or otherwise) entirely, rejecting the notions of discrete individual bodies, and engaging porous and sometimes shape-shifting realities (Barad 2003).

Feminist new materialisms also explicitly address the agency of matter (Barad 2007), which for some maps onto cultural expressions of animism (Durrant and Dickinson 2021, 4). Although animism itself is a problematic term, originally derived from anthropological descriptions of cultures in a way that promoted ideas of the irrational and primitive, magical practitioners often embrace varying degrees of universalised sentience, and pantheism (for an example see Wachter 2018). Cultural practices in this paradigm have centred around ideas of relationality, hospitality and exchange based on the idea that the material and immaterial worlds are not distinct (Harvey 2013, 5). As we shall see, contemporary magical artists are building connections between feminist materialisms and other cultural frameworks for wider understandings of sentience and agency, often adopting discourses of indigenous knowledge-making, attempting to counter Eurocentric scientific rationality. Although it should be noted that these tendencies themselves run the risk of reproducing othering categories with respect to indigenous knowledge, and in the most naïve circumstances, replicating “noble savage” discourses.

Significantly, because these feminist philosophies emerge from activist positions, they are explicitly transformative in orientation, calling for radical and

widespread shifts in cultural and social perspective with the desired effect of impacting material circumstances. The role of imagination, story-telling, world-building and affect in initiating and supporting this process has generated a web of influences of speculative responses in science, philosophy and literature, and also art. Åsberg and Braidotti refer to feminist new materialist philosophies as cultivating a “radically immanent [...] and politically generative [...] force of the imagination”, supporting the notion that acts of creatively motivated and imaginative magic result in real change (Åsberg and Braidotti 2024, 332).

Feminist theoretical underpinnings

While today’s contemporary feminist materialist philosophers are providing unique opportunities for reshaping magical thought, since its beginnings in the 1970s, eco-feminism has intersected with a variety of magical and esoteric subcultures, particularly Wicca and other paganism, which became more visible as a result of the increased popular awareness of environmental and feminist movements (Crowley 2022, 174). Prior to the current iteration of eco-feminist-driven philosophies, eco-feminism in the 1970s and 1980s provided inspiration for magically inclined women artists who were integrating metaphors of the divine feminine with concerns about the environment and social-justice activism. Earlier feminist artist activists such as Mary Beth Edelson, Ana Mendieta and Monica Sjöö created art within a framework of Goddess religion, contemporary Paganism and Wicca, featuring images of the divine feminine and explicitly critiquing structures of patriarchal oppression, although their work frequently relied

on essentialist metaphors based on gender binaries (Klein 2009, 575–602; Hale 2022b, 81–90). Despite an actual historical diversity in eco-feminist thought with respect to essentialism, a reliance on gender essentialism has been a persistent critique of eco-feminism and second-wave feminism in general (Rountree 1999, 138; Gaard 2011). The dominance of post-modern and post-structuralist theory caused the movement to fall out of favour from the 1990s through the early years of the twenty-first century.

Yet the multiple upheavals of the Anthropocene, climate change, income inequality, persistent racial injustice, new understandings of gender, and the general instability associated with late capitalism have caused a reconsideration and reconfiguration of eco-feminist principles, in addition to providing a matter-centred critique of constructivism and post-structuralism (Barad 2003, 802; Gaard 2011, 26–53). Of central importance today are the ways in which a series of feminist philosophies, influenced partially by quantum physics, eco-feminism and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, offer novel ontological possibilities regarding our relationships with the other-than-human, and even disrupting conceptions of humanity itself, advancing creative theories of the trans-human and post-human. These related, complex and diverse movements explicitly articulate values of justice, care and relationality within a theorised highly fluid and hybridised universe defined by quantum entanglement. Feminist new materialist theorists such as Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad and speculative fiction writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler, re-emerge as the central influences for contemporary magical artists

working in this milieu. Although many of these thinkers were active even before the term "new materialism" was coined in the 1990s, apparently independently by Rosi Bradotti and Manuel DeLanda (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), their work has found new relevance in an increasingly complex world, through advancing ontologies that challenge essentialism and reject binaries, instead focusing on processes, dynamism and relationships. These philosophies are inherently politically committed and concerned with breaking down oppressive power structures, working to shift the experience of humans from the centre of the narrative, emphasising the necessity for ethical relating with other-than-humans and the immaterial world.

Donna Haraway is a central figure within feminist new materialism. Her writings are popular, inspiring and accessible which has resulted in her work becoming one of the key routes through which feminist new materialism has spread outside academic settings, including providing a significant influence on contemporary art in general. Her most cited works are *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and the ground-breaking and highly quotable *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), in which Haraway poetically emphasises the importance of inter-species collaboration for planetary survival. Haraway considers the nature of human existence in terms of various "enmeshments", not just between humans and other-than-humans, but also with technology, which inspired the ever-provocative phrase "I'd rather be a cyborg than a Goddess" (Haraway 1985, 108). Haraway challenges essentialisms as deeply reductive, favouring porous realities and hybridities, centring the inter-species

cultivation of ethical relationships of affinity, the kinfolk we choose. Fundamental for the artists under consideration here, Haraway also argues for “feminist speculative fabulation” (Haraway 2016, 12), emphasising the importance of the creative imagination, exemplified in her often repeated phrase “it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway 2016, 12).

The physicist Karen Barad, who is one of Haraway’s colleagues at the University of California, Santa Cruz, coined the term *agential realism* to express the moral concerns underpinning the foundational quantum connectedness also found in Haraway’s writings (Barad 2007). Barad maintains that there is no action that does not alter the system, including acts of observation and the creation of knowledge. They argue that the illusion that we are all separate and distinct beings is a function of observation, enacted so that we may learn about each other and ourselves, producing a relational ontology (Barad 2007, 137–41). Thus, Barad characterises agency as an ethical precept that defines relational dynamics; describing something as “other” creates a moral responsibility that emerges as a result of defining a relationship between ourselves and something else. In many ways Barad’s work theoretically supports the ways in which many of these artists articulate their magical frameworks within their practices, particularly with respect to conceptions of agency extended to that which is normally defined as immaterial or non-animal. It is likely the impact of Barad’s work has also helped foster a consistency of themes regarding empathy and hybridity within the work of many of these magical artists today.

The writings of Octavia Butler and Ursula Le Guin

Haraway argues that speculative feminisms (also known as feminist science fiction) are vital in helping to call attention to systems of power and authority (Haraway 2016, 31, 39–41). As such, women writers of speculative fiction have emerged as significant influences for contemporary artists seeking models that elaborate on these themes of connectedness, hybridity, trans- and post-human realities and our deep connection with the immaterial world. Octavia Butler and Ursula Le Guin have been particularly influential. In *Staying with the Trouble* Haraway specifically cites Butler and Le Guin as visionary writers whose works are encoded with the potential to change deep cultural narratives (Haraway 2016, 40, 118–22).

Octavia Butler is frequently named by contemporary artists as a visionary pioneer of Afrofuturism, whose decolonialist fiction presaged our contemporary polycrisis, exploring responses to climate change and deep social inequities. *Parable of the Sower* has turned out to be particularly prescient, featuring the story of the empathic protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina. Olamina, struggling in a time of environmental and social collapse, finds a new religion, Earthseed, which teaches that the nature of God is change, reflecting theories that we are always in a dynamic state, and that humans can shape the nature of God. An additional theme of *Parable of the Sower* is that it is the destiny of life-forms on earth to colonise other planets when earth is no longer habitable. Butler’s work addresses critiques of hierarchy and racism, through stories of hybridity and strangeness, questioning what it means to be human. Butler’s

influence is also reflected in the growing interest in Afrofuturism, African Futurism and Indigenous Futurism as presenting paradigms for reconsidering magic in a speculative framework.

Ursula Le Guin has also experienced a recent increase in influence with contemporary feminist thinkers and artists, again possibly because of the citation by Haraway. She is known for revolutionary tales of resistance to patriarchy, pushing boundaries in the representation of women and gender fluidity and exploring novel social responses to crisis. However, it is her critical essay “The Carrier Bag of Fiction”, written in 1986, which is now resonating with new audiences. This essay proposes a structural shift in how narratives are designed and stories are told, a concept which has influenced emerging magical artistic practice. “The Carrier Bag of Fiction”, which Le Guin adapted from the carrier bag of evolutionary theory developed in the 1970s by the feminist anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, suggests that the original tool was not a sharp stick used to poke, but a sack or container in which humans would gather and hold food, useful items and children. Le Guin proposes that the stories of the hero with the pointy stick, what she calls “The Killer Story”, are perceived as more compelling and eventful than the stories of the container, but Le Guin argues that containers hold people and the stuff of life’s meaning:

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily a cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant

side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one. (Le Guin 1988, 13)

Le Guin’s essay stresses the importance of finding comfort with an ongoing narrative rather than one with a tidy conclusion, focusing instead on stories that incorporate cycles, change and progression. Thus, for world-building artists who employ narrative and story-telling as a way of communicating magical principles, the idea that stories should focus on people—both human and other-than-human—rather than plot points is important, creating relatable narrative models that encourage empathy and understanding. As Haraway (2016, 118–19) notes, stories themselves encode cultural structures, so the way in which stories are told is important. Changing the story can alter cultural coding, creating new imaginal spaces for possibility and the conditions for new material realities.

Contemporary magical artists and the impact of New Materialism

For at least the past fifteen years, there has been an increase of interest in and acceptance of themes of magic, witchcraft and esotericism in contemporary art, representing a variety of artistic expressions of what might be considered magical practice, many being quite far removed from the paradigm suggested here (Hale 2022a). Perhaps the most legitimising event of the past two decades was the International Exhibition of the 2022 Venice Biennale, curated by Cecelia Alemani, entitled Milk of Dreams, inspired by the book by Leonora

Carrington, which showcased a range of historically significant and contemporary artists curated around themes of the otherworldly, the imaginative and the liminal, with a focus on transformation and hybridities. One of the central questions of this exhibition concerned the very definition of humanity and the potential of cultivating relationships to technology and also other-than-human life-forms while envisioning the end of the Anthropocene (Alemani 2022). Alemani's curatorial vision simultaneously shaped and was shaped by emergent conceptions of magical art, drawing on some of the central concerns of new materialist thought.

Three years earlier, in 2019, Alice Bucknell had identified a novel magical shift among a group of contemporary multi-media artists they labelled the New Mystics, outlining an emerging tendency to combine immersivity and digital media with mythological tropes in order to inspire differently imagined futures (Bucknell [2019] 2021, 148–53). From 2021 to 2024 Bucknell expanded the concept with the development of a digital platform project called New Mystics, which was in fact less focused on mysticism and was more explicitly oriented toward these developing expressions of magic. Bucknell's intent for the project was to highlight artists who identified with themes of magic and transformation in their art, often focusing on digital art and immersion: "The New Mystics project felt like an important way to bring together some of the key artists working and thinking through these complexities and speculations, artists whose work involves the critical and urgent practice of imagining these alternative futures" (Bucknell 2022c).

Bucknell has featured a variety of artists and collectives, including Rebecca Allen, Zach Blas, Ian Cheng, Patricia Domínguez, Joey Holder, Lawrence Lek, Haroon Mirza, Tabita Rezaire, Tai Shani, Jenna Sutela, Saya Woolfalk, Zadie Xa, Bones Tan Jones, Evan Ifekoya, Himali Singh Soin and the collective Omsk Social Club. Bucknell also specifically wanted to create a space for artists who are interested in working with artificial intelligence in a collaborative context. They added an artificial intelligence, GPT-3, into the descriptive writing on the digital platform. Bucknell's intent was to introduce another interpretative presence to the project, but it has actually had the effect of articulating many of the philosophical features that tie these artists together, possibly because of the texts that GPT-3 was trained on, which ends up reinforcing the central themes linking these artists. The New Mystics project was explicitly inspired by the work of Haraway, and has included artists who combine futuristic and speculative visual idioms, along with psychedelic, indigenous, folk and magical motifs, sliding shaman-like between the futuristic and the pre-modern.

Most of the New Mystics are multi-media artists working with installation employing methods of story-telling over long arcs, and are focused on cultivating experiences of empathy, suggesting the influence from Haraway's and Barad's conceptions of entanglement and also relational ethics. Quite simply, if we can experience the world through the eyes and even bodies of another being, it might prompt action. Bucknell's own practice engages with the ghost in the machine through speculative world-building, employing game engines and artificial intelligence as



Figure 1. Alice Bucknell, *Still from The Martian Word for World is Mother*, 2022. Three-channel 4k video. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

forms of magical practice. Their work is focused on environmental issues, decentring the human while focusing on models of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. Bucknell employs various AI programs in the world-building process, training and feeding an AI instance as a spectral collaborator helping to guide the direction of the narrative. Bucknell theorises magic as shaping an imaginal space of unconsidered potential. This requires breaking out of the cognitive structures created by the confines of language and importantly decentring the human experience.

The Martian Word for World is Mother, a title inspired by Ursula le Guin's 1972 novel *The Word for World is Forest*, is a three-channel video display presenting three different narratives of the race to settle Mars. In the first, Mars is settled by a billionaire entrepreneur as a last-ditch effort to save the human race. In the second scenario, a

terraformed Mars becomes an inter-planetary resource market, shipping water back to a dry Earth. The third scenario proposes a truly alien habitation, once again unlocking modes of thought and creativity that are not based around the human experience. The project was co-written with Chat GPT, providing for the viewer the prospect of an experience of alien language existing outside human language systems (Bucknell 2022b).

The Alluvials is a speculative fictive story of drought and environmental change set in Los Angeles, partially experienced by the ghost of the mountain lion P 22 and a 400-year-old tree called El Aliso, once known as the Mother Tree of Los Angeles, among other interesting entities. Bucknell describes *The Alluvials* as "a four-level video game that onboards queer and ecological game mechanics to explore the affective and embodied dimensions of the



Figure 2. Still from Alice Bucknell, *The Alluvials*, 2024. Four-level video game. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

climate crisis" (Bucknell 2024). It is interactive and playable as a game and was created by combining hacked game engines such as Grand Theft Auto, Stable Diffusion AI, drone imagery and other data sets. *The Alluvials* is designed to give the player a strange experience, where human agency is taken away, with a goal of inspiring a deeper understanding of different and non-human ways of being in the world.

Bucknell's desire is to use the idioms of magic to explicitly challenge structural injustices, and the interactive and immersive nature of their work produces an embodied experience of empathy. They refer to the embrace of magic by contemporary artists as an "intersectional social process" (Bucknell [2019] 2021, 150): "I think in the simplest of terms, my interest in magic as a kind of technology stems from its ability to break apart, or break down, certain systems of thinking that have led us into [this] multi-pronged crisis [...]; it also

proposes a speculative and open-ended way out of the mess of the present towards multiple possible futures." (Bucknell 2022c).

The Korean Canadian Zadie Xa is a multi-media artist who tells immersive tales inspired by her diasporic heritage. Xa has always had an interest in the supernatural, the shape-shifter and the liminal, and her work often centres around matrilineal and transgressive figures, such as grandmothers and shamans, who in Korea are almost exclusively women. Her work is also designed to produce an affective response, and she uses painting, film, performance, ritual and textile, often inspired by traditional Korean craft, to engage the senses. Like many contemporary artists, Xa addresses climate change and incorporates hybridities, ancestral and non-human wisdoms. *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* is an immersive narrative inspired by the Korean folktale of Princess Bari, who journeys to



Figure 3. Zadie Xa and Benito Mayor Vallejo, *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers*, 2020. Digital collage. Image source: www.zadixa.com, all rights reserved.

the underworld to help save her parents. The visitor, who takes on the role of the shamanic Bari, is guided through the journey in a multi-perspectival way by five interlocutors: a conch, a fox, a cabbage, a seagull and an orca whale, each having its own costume and symbolic station. The overriding theme, possibly inspired by Haraway, is the urgent need for inter-species communication and perspective.

For Xa, speculative storytelling opens up imaginal spaces that have the potential for real-world, concrete change, and her profile on the New Mystics website articulates her understanding of story-telling as an act of magic embedded within her artistic practice:

Influenced by science and speculative fiction writers from Octavia Butler to Audre Lorde, Xa thinks of storytelling as a project of critical distance; stories can be a means of addressing, expressing, or thinking through broader social, cultural, or environmental challenges too difficult to examine head-on. But that distance can also be a kind of magic: a space of potential that recognises our interconnected position of precarity and incites a call to action. By weaving together real and imagined worlds, can storytelling become a shared vessel for structural change? (Bucknell et al. 2021)

The British artist Tai Shani is similarly concerned with cultivating the potential of



Figure 4. Tai Shani, *NHA 11* from the series *The Neon Hieroglyph*, 2022. 3D printed head cast in Jesmonite, wig, LED lights, hands cast in Jesmonite and ladybirds, 45 x 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

visionary spaces. Shani works in various genres including installation, film and feminist speculative histories. Much of Shani's work features elements of shape-shifting and time glitches, where pasts and futures converge, critiquing the linear narrative of progress. Employing Haraway's maxim about what stories make worlds, Shani produces conceptual spaces for new cultural

and political realities through feminist inflected retellings of myth and legend.

The Neon Hieroglyph (Shani 2023) is a multi-genred work exploring a mythic feminist history of hallucinogenic ergot, the base natural compound of LSD often found on rye bread. Shani reconfigures a number of legendary tales through history to create a feminist psychedelic experience, moving from the visions of priestesses in the Eleusinian mysteries to an ergot outbreak in a village in mid-century France to a hallucinatory scene from early in the pandemic of 2020. Witches appear as liberatory and communist figures, redistributing wealth and food to needy communities. Ghosts are omnipresent. The result mirrors a psychedelic experience where many things happen at once and causality is uncertain. As in Bucknell's and Xa's work, Shani is interested in generating spaces for imagining new futures unfettered by existing systems of oppression, and for her altered states of consciousness and psychedelics assist in this. Shani's 2025 London installation *The Spell or the Dream* features a sleeping blue giant dreaming simultaneously of catastrophe and renewal. Shani explicitly prompts the audience to "collectively dream of new horizons" (Somerset House 2025).

Through long-term immersive storytelling ranging over two decades, the Japanese American Saya Woolfalk has created a wildly colourful alternative, utopian world inhabited by an imagined people called the Empathics. In the backstory to this world, humans encounter a utopian future race called No Placeans, plant-hybrid beings who can shift their colour and their gender. The Empathics are humans who encounter the spores on the



Figure 5. Saya Woolfalk, video still from *Utopia Conjuring Therapy*, 2012.

Image source: www.sayawoolfalk.com, all rights reserved.

bones of the No Placeans and ingest them almost as a psychedelic process. This gives them access to empathic perception with other beings, inspires them toward creating a Utopia (which actually means “no place”). Woolfalk is explicitly inspired by both Haraway and Butler and her boldly coloured plant-human hybrid beings, who gain empathy through ritual and also through experiencing varying realities through their changing bodies. Woolfalk has created a world that references multiple cultures at once, drawing on a variety of African, Asian and indigenous American visual influences in sculptural elements, textiles, film and performance. Despite the cultural diversity suggested in her work, Woolfalk intends to create an idealised vision of a world that is “post-race, post-gender [and] post-human”, providing explicit models for alternative ways of relating and other possible futures (Picard 2016).

Many of these themes of relational ethics, hybridity and empathy are also apparent in the work of the British artist Bones Tan Jones, who uses sculptural, performance and somatic modalities as well as divination and witchcraft to explore speculative narratives around nature, history and ancestors, exploring themes that entwine notions of diaspora with indigeneity, both Asian and Celtic. Their work frequently features apocalyptic themes, which they characterise as “optimistically dystopian” in their envisioning of queer alternative futures (Something Curated 2022). Much of their work features an ethical response to environmental precarity and the deepening impact of the climate crisis, with a focus on sustainability. Tan Jones’ sculptures are generated from recycled and biodegradable works and they also incorporate living features such as moss and fungi. They frequently encode their works with certain



Figure 6. Bones Tan Jones, *Parasites of Pangu*, 2019. Performers: Bones Tan Jones, Monique Etienne, Chantel Foo, Chiyo Gomes and Yodea Williams. Commissioned by Serpentine Galleries, 2019. Image: Talie Rose Eigeland, all rights reserved.

magical principles, using specific herbs to inspire love or sound frequencies known to resonate with certain emotional properties.

Themes of queer utopias as a paradigm of survival, care and responsibility drive Tan Jones's work, providing visions of communal existence that move past the Anthropocene into a new, uncertain future. Inspired by Octavia Butler's notion of "Earthseed", Tan Jones has created a series of works based around a retelling of a Chinese origin tale, the Myth of Pan Gu, reimagined in sculpture, performance and installation as the Parasites of Pangu. In Tan Jones's version, the non-gendered Pangu is the being out of which the earth, sun and moon were formed, and the parasites are five beings who have survived a climate apocalypse after being put into hypersleep and who have found themselves revived and becoming the caretakers of the planet.

Despite the apocalyptic themes that emerge in Tan Jones's work, magic becomes a metaphor and also a tactic of hope and agency supporting a futuristic orientation.

Futurism involves seeing the present as fragmented and fractured, but it's also understanding that in this place of disruption, there's the opportunity to build something else. I don't care if the future looks like total annihilation. It can be a utopia if it means that our communities are living in solidarity above us. (Bucknell et al. 2022a)

Edgar Fabián Frías, who is not part of the New Mystics network, is a queer Los Angeles-based artist who identifies as a *brujx*, or one who practises a traditional Latinx form of witchcraft, in this case specifically referring to indigenous Mexican Wixárika tradition. They work in a variety

of media, including ritual, video performance and installation, and are particularly interested in healing as an outcome of their magical and artistic practices. As with the other artists covered here, they consider the process and existence of their art itself as a spell. In fact, Frías hosts a YouTube series called “Your Art is A Spell”, emphasising the potential for creative practice to generate change. Their work intersects thematically with several of the artists covered here, indicating a coherence of influences and directions. For example, Frías’s magical practice is interlaced with indigenous futurisms and queer utopias, which are also resonant themes in the work of Bones Tan Jones. Frías designs immersive environments intended to create portals to other imaginative realities which is also a critical feature of the work of Tai Shani and Alice Bucknell.

Indigenous futurism, in this case drawn from Mexican indigenous cultures, provides a central framework of meaning for

Frías. Communication with magical ancestors, divination and the traversing of time and space dimensions are key features. The notion of cosmogonic map-making is a recurring theme, providing spiritual guidance and navigation tools that merge the external and the internal journey for both artist and viewer. Although their art incorporates indigenous cosmologies and refers to concepts such as tradition and lineage, the form of Frías’s art is bold, often



Figure 7. Edgar Fabián Frías, *Vessel*, 2023. Aluminum base, wooden structure with printed neoprene covering, multi-coloured metallic streamers, acrylic dome, quartz and selenite crystal, solar-powered internal light system, screws, nails and adhesive. Image: Isabel Avila, all rights reserved.

abstracted and psychedelic, with a futuristic sensibility, incorporating self-referentiality and humour. *Vessel* (2024) is both a serious and whimsical exploration of the ways in which people travel, and how vessels symbolise resilience and movement. Frías suggests that the instinct for survival which underpins space travel is also an indigenous value. The work is based on the Wixárika origin story, but has additional resonances with Butler’s *Earthseed*.

Hechizo Tuutú (Flower Spell 2023) was a nine-minute digital spell created in collaboration with the witch Gaby Herstik, projected on the Salesforce tower of San Francisco during Pride Week, combining indigenous imagery, AI and queer flags to project a message of power and resilience in an atmosphere that has become increasingly oppressive.

Encouraging embodied magics

Despite the diversity of their work, these artists clearly share a coherent set of theoretical influences in addition to thematic concerns and a similar reframing of magical practice. A major feature of these projects is the overturning of Platonic essentialisms. The idea that everything, from humans, to metals, to plants, to stones, has a unique defining energetic signature, a common feature of traditional hermetically inspired magical practice, is replaced with a model of a sympathetic network of effectively undifferentiated beings who experience otherness, primarily to be able to learn more about the world. Bodies and forms are expressed and conceived of as mutable. Thus, post-human and trans-human futures suggest our ability to be more than, and hopefully better than, human, primarily allowing us to more fully experience intimate relationships with other beings who are recognised as possessing their own agency.

Additionally, the media in which these artists work also suggest a model for cultivating the embodied dimension of magic. The focus on world-building, interactivity and immersion produces an affective and sensory response which engages the faculties in a similar manner to ritual and performance, both of which are also

employed by a number of these artists. This approach certainly is congruent with centuries of magical and ritual spectacle and in many ways does not signal anything new. In terms of modern artistic and magical discourses, immersion was employed in the spectacle-driven occult theatre of the nineteenth century Parisian occult salons created by Josephin Péladan, which were highly theatrical and thick with allegory (Deak 1993, 127). Immersion was also used by occult ritualists such as Aleister Crowley, W. B. Yeats and the Golden Dawn member and actor Florence Farr, each of whom was involved in performing multi-sensory, public, avant-garde theatrical experiences based on mythology and occult principles. These were designed not only to produce an altered state of consciousness in the audience, but also to promote personal and social transformation (Lingan 2014, 101–30).

These artist-practitioners were actively blurring the boundaries between occult subcultures and artistic discourses and intended to introduce “initiatory” occult material to a wider audience for the purposes of elevating the overall condition of a spiritually degraded society (Lingan 2014). A salient distinction, however, is that these contemporary magically motivated artists are for the most part not drawing on occult symbolism or even situating occult or esoteric knowledge as the locus for providing a magical experience or initiating change. They are not focused on the transmission of initiated wisdom as Crowley and Farr were in their mythologically rich performances; they are creating novel images and experiences, even when they incorporate traditional material, as Xa, Tan Jones and Frías do. Bucknell is explicit about this tactic in

their own work, stating that their approach to magic in art moves “beyond the artistic fetishisation of symbols and cultural appropriation” into imagining new and better worlds (Bucknell [2019] 2021, 150). While sensory immersion drives the nature of the embodied experience, it is predominantly the experience of empathy, not exposure to occult symbolism or allegory, which is the engine of material change. Furthermore, while it is clear that imagination and inspiration are critical to inspiring change, they are not sufficient. Feeling and experience provide the most potent channel for motivating transformation. Liminality, wonder, fear and awe become ways of magical knowing that have the power to inspire new realities.

While I have been characterising this movement as a departure from previous occult movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is one significant similarity that informs this iteration of public magical art: the inherent desire for a general spiritual uplifting and a commitment to repair and betterment. While these contemporary artists are in no way advocating a single eternally universal truth waiting to be revealed to initiates, there does seem to be a suggestion that these magically immersive experiences may have the ability to inspire some sort of wider cultural awakening. Just as avant-garde occult performers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were attempting to uplift humanity through occulted encounters and public engagement, there is no doubt that these artists are deeply responsive to rapidly deteriorating planetary conditions and are promoting and desiring a general change in consciousness. While the poly-crises of today are very different from

those of the late nineteenth century, there is still an overwhelming proposition that the root of our current quagmire is, indeed, spiritual and moral, and that changing our spiritual condition may potentially produce revitalisation and perhaps redemption. These artists present a variety of visionary possibilities ranging from colourful, joy-filled utopias, to a range of unsettling potential future states. It is through understanding our planetary fortunes as deeply contingent upon recognising our fundamental unity, that we can perhaps turn this ship around. ■

Amy Hale is an Atlanta-based writer and critic and an Honorary Research Fellow with Falmouth University in Cornwall, UK. She has written widely on Ithell Colquhoun and served as academic advisor to the 2025 Colquhoun retrospective at Tate St Ives and Tate Britain. She wrote the first scholarly biography of Colquhoun, *Ithell Colquhoun: Genius of the Fern Loved Gully* (Strange Attractor, 2020), followed by *Sex Magic: Diagrams of Love* (Tate Publishing, 2024) and *A Walking Flame: Selected Magical Essays of Ithell Colquhoun* (Strange Attractor, 2025). She edited *Essays on Women in Western Esoterism: Beyond Seeresses and Sea Priestesses* (Palgrave, 2022). She has written scholarly and critical essays for Tate, Burlington Contemporary, Art UK, The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Correspondences Journal and others. *Beyond the Supernatural: Magic in Contemporary Art* is due to be published by Tate Publishing in 2026.



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