



Noga Shatz

50,000 Witches

June 2023

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Solo Exhibition

One Paved Court Gallery
London

June 2023

Curator and text by:
Lee Weinberg

Noga Shatz is an interdisciplinary artist working in painting, printmaking, installation & music. Obtained my MFA at Slade/UCL with distinction. My practice explores painting and its extensions and feminine & queer identity

Select Exhibitions: RA Summer Exhibition| The Epoch of Space-Changing Perspectives, Haifa Museum of Art| The 6th Drawing Biennale, Jerusalem| WAC, Wells| Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize, London| Foreign Subject, Artworks Project Space-BAGT, London| Tipolet, Binyamin-Gallery, Tel-Aviv| Wobble, solo show, Maya Gallery, Tel-Aviv

Awards: Highly Commended Artist-Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize 2019, Rabinovich Foundation for the Arts Grant 2019, ACE emergency response fund 2020, Foundation for Future London Grant 2021.

Two solo shows she had done in 2019 and in 2021 provided her with a chance to deeply reflect on her practice in retrospect. Engaging with the opening of her Culture Interest Company “The Open Art Club”, Noga started to expand her activity beyond her studio. The program provides employment for LGBTQ+ artists and free access to art education to underrepresented groups.

This work & the pandemic led to new ways of understanding her work as a queer female artist, eventually leading her to critique and re-evaluate her process, painterly gestures and how she shares her practice.



In Loving Memory/ The Devon Witches , gouache and ink on paper, 2023



"Many poor women imprisoned and hanged for witches", pamphlet by Ralph Gardiner, 1655; It is thanks to Gardiner and his book which railed against the Coal monopoly that we have so much information on one of the largest witch trials in England — that of the Newcastle Witches.

The case of the Newcastle Witches lead to one of the biggest witch trials in England, yet the story is not as well-known as the infamous cases at Berwick and Pendle. This is a tale of a ruthless City Corporation, a coal monopoly, a corrupt witch-finder and how a skeptical Lieutenant with an eye for the ladies saved an accused witch from the gallows-tree

"We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. There were laws to ensure our return. To not return was to risk being punished. Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view-a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity."

bell Hooks in: Mehta, Aasha. "Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre: Bell Hooks, Boston: South End Press, 1984." (1987): 45-46.

Introduction

50,000 witches is representing a turning point in the artistic practice of Noga Shatz, a queer, feminist artist, living and working in London. The exhibition is a milestone in a long-term research process Shatz had embarked on following her experience of isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The exhibition explores how different facets of women's representation in the history of art and culture are cemented in our subconscious in the gestures, techniques and modalities of painting as an artistic medium. The name of the exhibition is a gesture towards the 50,000 people that were prosecuted, tortured and executed throughout the history of Western Europe for being witches. Through the re-invention of her painterly language, Shatz is re-visiting and re-imagining the figure of the female body in an attempt to reconstruct our understanding of it.

In contemporary research and interpretation of historical documents from the 16th and 17th centuries, the time most associated with witch hunts around Western Europe and the UK, it has become clear that the definition of a 'witch' had very little to do with actual concerns over the practice of witchcraft. Rather, 'the witch' was a symbol created by the different orders of Christianity to propagate the extinction of women who lived on the margins of the social order: women who chose not to marry, women who might have been queer, or different in their sexual orientation and gender identity; women with various disabilities, or women that did not adhere to Christian religious conduct and rule.



Agnes Sampson - A Rock-Lobster Witch
Acrylic on canvas, 2022

Agnes Sampson (died 28 January 1591) was a Scottish healer and purported witch. Also known as the "Wise Wife of Keith", Sampson was involved in the North Berwick witch trials in the later part of the sixteen century.



A depiction of the devil giving magic puppets to witches, from 1591. (Image credit: Wikimedia Commons)

She was considered to have healing powers and acted as a midwife. The indictment against her indicated that she was a widow, with children. The historian Edward J. Cowan argues that a tale told against her, recorded by James Melville of Halhill, of her receiving a gift of an image of James VI from the Devil on behalf of Francis Stewart, 5th Earl of Bothwell does not fit the chronological evidence.



Venus- Self portrait as a witch, gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper, 2023

Much like any other hate campaign, the figure of the witch was intentionally a grotesque representation, that looked to demonize women and justify violence unleashed against those who resisted the patriarchal order and refused to subordinate themselves to systems of normative power. Such women naturally looked for alternative ways of living, often supporting each other in enclosed communities. Looking at these histories from a contemporary, feminist perspective, we might as well consider these women heroes of their time. However, the voices who tell their stories and the memory of their bodies have been drowned, tortured and distorted.

Through a feminist queer lens, 'witch hunts' are a blatant example of the silencing of 'the other'; a testimony to the grave conditions under which women had to live throughout most of Western history and the little possibilities and freedoms they had in directing their own lives. Their lives, therefore, are only what they internalized them to be. The fascination with this process of demonizing queer and other women through the figure of the witch had sent Shatz on a journey of re-examining and questioning her identity as an artist, her use of symbols, materials and formats to convey her experience as a queer female artist.

NS: "I imagine, if I lived in those times, I would have been hunted, as an artist, as someone who is female, and queer, never exactly conforming social conventions. At the same time, I was hopeful to find models — stories of women who could testify to their experience, and their point of view.... There are a few female artists who do that, like Artemisia, but it is very rare... Its like this perspective is completely gone.... and I wanted to bring these stories to life"



Francisco Goya's 'Witches' Sabbath' from 1798 is one of the paintings that are hanging in Noga's studio.

Goya's painting shows Baphomet, surrounded by a coven of young and aged witches in a moonlit barren landscape.

His paintings have been seen as a protest against those who upheld and enforced the values of the Spanish Inquisition, which had been active in Witch hunting during the seventeenth-century Basque witch trials.

For Noga the creature in the painting, that is supposed to represent the devil, metamorphoses to a portrait of Venus as a witch.

Process and Language

In the process leading to this exhibition, Shatz filled her living space and studio with stories and images of women, which penetrated and flooded her subconscious mind – images of witches, mythological creatures and monsters, depicted as female figures of symbolic importance throughout Western art and cultural history– painted, engraved, sculpted. As the research and the process progressed, also started to appear lists of rules and restrictions that limited the voice, gestures and expression of women.

Shatz immersed herself in this universe, looking for evidence that will prove the existence of subjects, persons, behind the images, the myths, the monsters, the muses and the simulacra. Searching for an affinity with these women who somehow were able to leave a trace in the margins of history, through occupying masterpieces created by men. As she is re-reading those images – in search of signals, gestures, micro-expressions, she subverts the male gaze and exposes the vulnerable subject beneath the representation.

The paintings in this exhibition all emerge from that deep subconscious ocean of imaginaries. In that vast blue-green-purple landscape, the artist is looking for things – undefinable things that were buried, that have drowned and forgotten.



Self-portrait-as a Witch, gouache on paper, 2023



Shiny Buried things, gouache and ink on paper, 2023

from the time she rose in the morning until the time she went to bed at night. One of the only means of freedom of expression was through coded and secret messages. Letters were used in private, but in public, other means of communication evolved. One way of delivering such secret messages in public was 'fan language'. The "language" was a set of signals, postures and gestures that ladies could give with the fans to communicate with their suitors without speaking to them. There is debate around the legibility of this language. While some of the signals were traditionally used in European courts since the 16th century, it is unclear whether those signals, or secret language, was something that was legible during the Victorian era, when the secret language of fans became popularized.

Shatz explains:

"I am imagining these women, who learnt the meticulous details of how to communicate with the fans, touching the right cheek with their fan and leave it there to gesture consent, or Touch the left cheek to say 'no', and it is not entirely clear if the men they were communicating with could even understand what they were signaling. So it almost became like an internal language used by women in their attempt to communicate with men from within the strict set of rules they were asked to follow. Its like, who were they talking to? And who was that language for?"

In this interpretation of the 'secret language of fans, Shatz exposes the blatant contradiction that exists between the woman as an image and the woman as a being from the perspective of the male gaze.

While on this journey, Shatz realised that much of the subversive energy that could help her resurrect the subjectivities of the women behind Botticelli's Venus, Sir Peter Lely's Susanna or Caravaggio's Medusa, women whose faces and bodies we know so well, is not in the image of the body, but in the apparent distortions of the female body in the effort to confine it to the male perspective and the model's gestures that could not be erased. This made her think about her painting process:

NS: *"I suddenly realized that all my art teachers were men, that all I know about painting I know from the point of view of a man, that most of my inspiration comes from male artists and male perspectives. I came to a point where I was not sure any more who I was as a painter. I asked myself, how would I be painting if I had an alternative perspective... I wanted to liberate my painterly language from the restrictions of what looks right and wrong according to those standards... This necessarily meant to confront the limitations on my body and what it is allowed to be... I look at the paintings of men, and I am almost envious of the freedom that they allow themselves. Their gestures are unhinged, open, while I feel that my body is already molded into a limited set of movements"*



Simonetta- After The Birth of Venus, 1480s by Sandro Botticelli, gouache and ink on paper, 40x40 cm, 2023



Anonymous
woodcut
depicting
witchcraft.,
printed **Ulricus
Molitoris: On
vampires and
pythonic
women;**
**Reutlingen, J.
Otmar, um
1489**



Playing with Fire, gouache and ink
on paper., 2023

In this process of objectification, the female body always stands for something else rather than itself, and is distorted and its gestures limited in accordance to that symbolic value imposed. As a body and as a subject, it does not have the right to express itself, but it is there to be in-service of the expression of others.

Shatz think in these terms when she says:

"The familiars in my paintings, the animals and non-human creatures that you see on in all of the painting have a function in the construction of the character's subjectivity. The animal takes part in the internal life of the woman, and functions like a shield. I see it taking part especially in moments of transformation. This is when the animal appears and takes part"



Self-portrait- A Witch and her Familiar, gouache on paper, 2023

always stitched and completed, controlled and restricted. The paintings are intentionally left un-finished, leaving space for the margins to rip, for the skin to peel against the internal desire to fully embody the potential of the fluid sense of a self.

This internal image of the body, lives inside the memory of models, mythological creatures, monsters, witches, animals and other companions that live in the margin of the social realm and offer an alternative to violence.

The exhibition looks to explore the tensions inherent to being woman, the tension between in need to be a sealed body, a body that hides its weaknesses, secretions, desires and pores, always stitched and completed, leaving no room for the margins, for the skin, for the fluid sense of being subject.

The Portrait in Shatz work

Most of the work in this exhibition is comprised of deconstructed portraits of female mythological characters, or female characters that are treated as a symbol or a placeholder for symbolic meaning in works considered Western masterpieces. In the exhibition you will meet the likes of Botticelli's Venus, Caravaggio's Medusa alongside St. Mary, and St. Susanna.

Through the depiction of these women, Shatz is exploring the delicate relationships constructed through painting between life and fiction, life and symbolic.

In our conversations Shatz remarked:

NS: "There is a complex relationship happening here, first, there is the simple, familiar politics of representing a woman's body in painting, which in the history of art, was bluntly directed to please men. Women's bodies are depicted distorted, un-natural. I look at Botticelli's Venus, for example, and her body seems tormented to me... Women in paintings always seem uncomfortable to me. Their body posture always restricted and overly designed, and the gestures, very often do not match the scenario. For example, with Susanna, who had been sexually abused in the religious myth, and hence became a saint. The only depiction I know of Susanna, where she is resisting the abuse, or expressing any form of contempt or disgust is Artemisia's painting of the subject. Most of the paintings focus on her being a saint, rather than the horrifying story that led her to this position"

Lash Keith in the article: "The Otherness of the Familiar: Witchcraft, Land Use Policies, and Husbandry Manuals in Early Modern England", finally reveals that one of the main reasons for the formalization of witch hunts throughout England related to changes in the laws of land use policies and the rise of new husbandry manuals. The execution was to execute power over ownership of house pets and cattle.

In Shatz's work, the familiars appear as companions, guards, and protectors of the women that she brings to life, oftentimes, they become part of the female body, entangled with it and complicated with it. There is an intimacy a real familiarity between the familiars and the characters depicted. Relationships that bring to mind post-humanist visions of relational complication, as suggested, for example by Donna Haraway, most notably in her book "Staying with the Trouble", where she takes time to weave relationship with what she terms: "otherkin". In that she is asking us to reimagine the world through the eyes of the ultimate other in the form of an animal. She is asking for us to consider our affinity to other creatures that make up the human.

Vance, Lash Keith. "The Otherness of the Familiar: Witchcraft, Land Use Policies, and Husbandry Manuals in Early Modern England." *Humanities Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (2022): 142-159.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.



A late-16th-century English illustration of a witch feeding her familiars

Frances Dolan's work provides further insight into the interpretation of such acts, and through her research exposes the relationship between witch hunts, violence and crime within domestic disputes and abuse. In her work she demonstrates how oftentimes allegation of witchcraft were a way of husbands to get away with their wives; excuses for covering up sexual abuse and rape and were staged as a means of maintaining power in the hands of men.

The reference to a distorted parenthood is also meaningful. The notion of a distorted parenthood alludes to the identification of women with reproduction, and the suspicion towards those who choose to engage in other relationships.

Dolan, Frances E. *Dangerous familiars: representations of domestic crime in England, 1550-1700*. Cornell University Press, 1994.

Shatz looks to expose through her portrait works, this complex relationship between the painting, the artist and the model, the real woman, standing in front of the painter and put into the awkward position, that communicates an experience that is very distant from her reality. Noga remarks:

NS: "I often think or try to imagine the experience of being a model, standing in front of the artist, in that frozen awkward posture, and how distant the experience of that woman is from the character that is represented."

This relationship between the artist and the model is often complicated with the relationship between the artist and 'the model as muse'. Hence the female body oscillates between meanings that it amasses from the realms of the imaginary and the symbolic whilst the real is a devastating experience of objectification.

In the text, I am using Jacques Lacan's understanding of the internal orders of the psyche. According to Lacan, there are three orders that compose the human psyche. *The Symbolic* – is everything that is symbolized by language. It is an order that works with familiar signs, that are indirect and abstract representations of real things. *The imaginary* – is an internal order where reality is mediated through internal images, including self-image and image of others. It is the space of dreams, and of visual hybrids as a cognitive function. As such, this order has a lot to do with memory. *The Real* – the preliminary order is defined as everything that doesn't belong to the symbolic nor the imaginary order. These are phenomenon that we find difficult mediating to ourselves. According to Lacan, the internal conflict that exists within us is in part an internal conflict between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic orders. For Lacan, this conflict between the different orders, the gap that exist between our expectations, managed by language, symbols and images, and The Real is the very definition of trauma

Forceville, Charles. "Non-verbal and multimodal metaphor in a cognitivist framework: Agendas for research." *Multimodal metaphor* 2 (2009): 19-35

Evans, Dylan. *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2006.

In this process of objectification, the female body always stands for something else rather than itself, and is distorted and its gestures limited in accordance to that symbolic value imposed. As a body and as a subject, it does not have the right to express itself, but it is there to be in-service of the expression of others.

The Helen Series and the secret language of fans

This multilayered dynamic plays an important role in the series of small paintings called "Helen", presented in the second floor of the gallery. In this series, Noga works to converse with the bodily gesture of the model as a means of communication that at best remains mute, misunderstood, or plainly ignored.

This series started with Shatz's fascination with the shape of fans, reminiscent with the shape of shells, both deeply identified with women's depictions throughout the history of Western art. Shatz, looking into this shape started to excavate its meanings and semantics.

The folding fan originated in Japan and was introduced to Europe in the second half of the 16th century and soon became an essential item in women's' attire, especially for upper class and wealthy women.

Throughout the Victorian era, a society that adhered to a strict sense of behavioral control and etiquette, the life of the average middle or upper-class lady was directed by a set of rules that instructed her what to do every hour of the day -

Familiars were often seen as a proof to the connection a witch had with other, demonic and monstrous worlds, and in many cases, stories about familiars were extracted from witches through torture.

Gibson Marion, in her article "Cunning Folks and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions", looks to trace the meaning and stories of these familiars and describes them as *"the malevolent nurture aspect of witches, as they cared for their familiars as they would pets or children, connecting the tradition with a corrupted form of maternal affection..."*

The familiars hold a very important role in Shatz imagination of the women and objects she is looking to excavate from under the ground in this series.

Shatz notes:

"I imagine these women, who were many times executed, burnt on the stake together with their familiars and then I think about myself, about my dog, Louie, how I care for him and how I feel he is functioning as kin... I imagine those women tortured alongside with their pets... there was even a story in the 16th century of a dog being executed for bearing a relationship with the devil ... and I ask myself, why would you execute a dog?"

Gibson, Marion. "Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3, no. 1 (2008): 115-118.

The gestures of Helen's figure in these paintings, whether the figure's eye and facial expression are clearly depicted, or where Helen's figure, body and gesture flow into the movement of the paint swallowing her, are of a body that does not understand its place, that tries to stretch to bridge the gap, or better to say, the abyss between the experience of a subject, and the experience of being object.

Shiny Buried Things

In this series of works, Shatz dives into a subconscious space where her identity and life stories of witches, models and female artists – mix and marry with her own experience as a queer female artists today. Many of the works in this series focuses on marginal items, symbols and creatures, that are often disregarded in painting, but that could hold the clue for a life of a subject beyond representation. The series is focused on objects, familiars, and the demystification of the figure of the witch. Many of the works in this series portray the artist herself and her companions.

The Familiars

In European folklore of the medieval and early modern periods, familiars were believed to be supernatural entities or spiritual guardians that would protect and/or assist witches and cunning folk in their practice of magic. As it is described in records from the time, these were not imaginary but: *"clearly defined, three-dimensional... forms, vivid with colour and animated with movement and sound"*, as opposed to descriptions of ghosts with their *"smoky, undefined form[s]"*

from the time she rose in the morning until the time she went to bed at night. One of the only means of freedom of expression was through coded and secret messages. Letters were used in private, but in public, other means of communication evolved. One way of delivering such secret messages in public was 'fan language'. The "language" was a set of signals, postures and gestures that ladies could give with the fans to communicate with their suitors without speaking to them. There is debate around the legibility of this language. While some of the signals were traditionally used in European courts since the 16th century, it is unclear whether those signals, or secret language, was something that was legible during the Victorian era, when the secret language of fans became popularized.

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what they were signaling. So it almost became like an internal language used by women in their attempt to communicate with men from within the strict set of rules they were asked to follow. Its like, who were they talking to? And who was that language for?"



The Language of the Fan		
Carrying in the right hand in front of face	Follow me	
Carrying in the left hand in front of face	Desirous of acquaintance	
Placing it on left ear	I wish to get rid of you	
Drawing across forehead	You have changed	
Twirling in the left hand	We are watched	
Carrying in the right hand	You are too willing	
Drawing through the hand	I hate you	
Twirling in the right hand	I love another	
Drawing across the cheek	I love you	
Presented shut	Do you love me?	
Drawing across the eyes	I am sorry	
Touching tip with finger	I wish to speak to you	
Letting it rest on right cheek	Yes	
Letting it rest on left cheek	No	
Open and shut	You are cruel	
Dropping it	We will be friends	
Fanning slowly	I am married	
Fanning quickly	I am engaged	
With handle to lips	Kiss me	
Open wide	Wait for me	
Carrying in left hand, open	Come and talk to me	
Placed behind head	Don't forget me	
With little finger extended	Good-bye	

The Etiquette of Fans and Filtrations, as in Victorian Womens' magazines in the Victoria era. This specific manual is taken from Duvelloy's "The language of the Fan", a marketing pmphlet that had helped populraising the fan through the revival of 'the secret language of fans'. Image credit: Soethby's web article: "The Secret Language of Fans", written by Alexandra Starp, Apr 24 2018



In this interpretation of the 'secret language of fans, Shatz exposes the blatant contradiction that exists between the woman as an image and the woman as a being from the perspective of the male gaze. The little, fragile paper works, depict Helen, a dear friend of the artists, and her model, as she is re-creating the fan gestures described in the 'secret language of fans'- manuals that were published around the Victorian era. The gestures and postures are rendering the body awkward, while the expression exposes the internal turmoil in this effort to communicate, to claim a voice and a position, while being misunderstood or completely ignored. Positioned in relation to the canvas recalling Susanna's posture from

Artemisia's painting "Susanna and the Elders", the paintings converse to ask what is the meaning of saying yes, or no, when the female body is fully subjected to male desire, via the abuse of physical power and violence.



Artemisia Gentileschi, Susanna and the elders, oil on canvas 1610

Susanna - following Susanna and the Elders, 1610, by Artemisia Gentileschi, acrylic on canvas

