



## FEATURE

**Friday the 13th: Art and the Occult**

11 Apr 2018  
by Sandy Di Yu

**In celebration of Friday the 13th, a day shrouded in myth and superstition, we've listed our favourite art containing occultism for you so that yours will be a day full of magick.**

Even though it was contingently Christian in its beginnings, like several transgressive symbols throughout Western history, Friday the 13th has been appropriated and even celebrated as a gateway to alternative modes of thinking against existing power structures.

One might initially think of the popular film franchise in relation to the date (my favourite of which is Jason X, where the archetypal story with a gang of teenagers and a rampant killer is set on deck a Star Trek like space shuttle). But past the slasher movie cliches and through the mist of unfounded superstitions, we find a treasure trove of symbolism and inspiration derived from the occult.

The occult is warned against, and this makes it all the more attractive. It creates cracks in the concrete wall built up by the Enlightenment and leaks in serenely disruptive discourse. The history of the occult runs parallel to women being depicted as witches to women embracing their magic and witchery as a symbol of power and agency, for individuals to rise against the hegemonic powers of patriarchy and the narrow scope of scientific positivism, from subjugation to subversion.

While art isn't always about transgression, we can't help but be enamoured with artists that dwell in the subversive. So, in celebration of this day shrouded in myth and superstition, we've listed our favourite art containing occultism for you so that you'll have a Friday the 13th full of magick.

**William Blake: The Night of Enitharmon's Joy/The Triple Hecate**



William Blake: *Hecate, or The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*. The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. ISBN 3936122202. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH.

It seems fitting to start a list on the occult with a painting depicting Hecate, ancient Greek Goddess of magic and witchcraft. Here she is with two figures slightly hidden behind her, or possibly as herself in three forms, parallel to the moon phases of full, half, and new moon. The scene is sometimes described as "nightmarish" with its dark hues and eerie creatures, but we can interpret it in another way altogether: as the depiction of fear of the woman's will over patriarchal religion.

(Reference: Damon, S. Foster. A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake. Thames and Hudson, 1979.)

#### Francisco Goya: Witches' Sabbath (The Great He-Goat)

Francisco Goya: *El aquelarre/Witch's Sabbath* (Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid, 1797-98)

First acquired by Duchess of Osuna (who had a liking for paintings about witchcraft), shown here are witches surrounding the devil embodied as a giant goat, bathing in moonlight. There is a clear allusion to infanticide, which has historically been associated with witchcraft in folklore. Consequently, this resulted in events such as the witch trials throughout Medieval Europe. Curious about this witchy history and the full-blown devastation of the aftermath? Check out Silvia Federici's phenomenal book *Caliban and the Witch* to get an insight on that era in history. (And as a side note, in Spain, Goya's home country, it's actually Tuesday the 13th and not Friday the 13th that's bad luck.)

**Evelyn de Morgan: Cassandra**

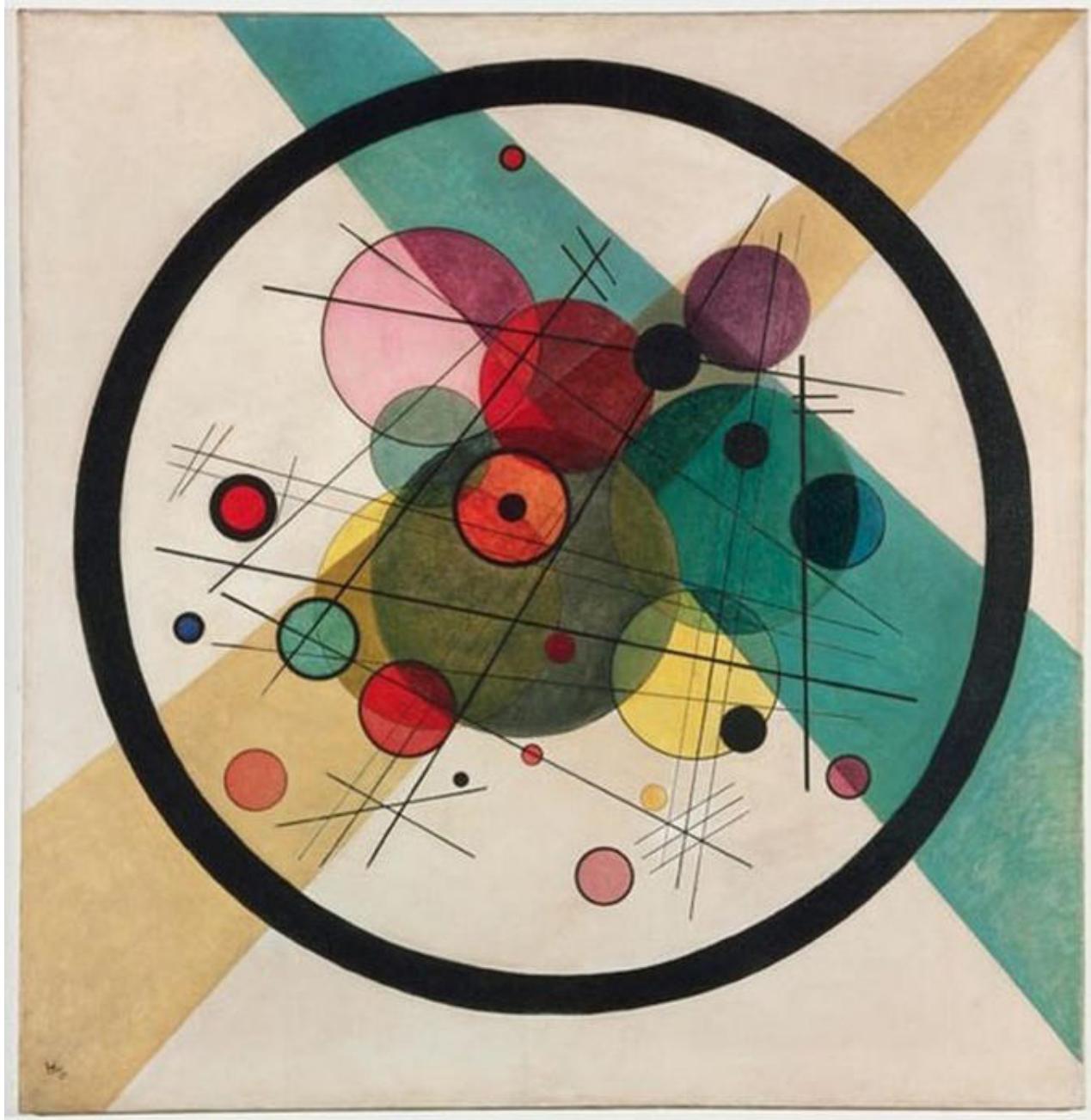




Evelyn De Morgan: *Cassandra*, 1898.

Another figure from Greek mythology, Cassandra (by English painter Evelyn De Morgan) was the beautiful princess of Troy who was cursed by Apollo for rejecting him. The story goes that he gifted her with the power of prophecy, but upon rejection, he spat in her mouth which laid a curse on her so that no one would ever believe her prophecies. She was regarded as insane by her loved ones, but when she taught her twin brother Helenus the ability of prophecy, his words were always believed. This could very well be the perfect allegory of male entitlement and disregard of women's voices. Is Cassandra pulling her hair due to the frustration that she's been condemned to this life, or because she knows that these frustrations are to be shared with women countless centuries thereafter?

### Wassily Kandinsky



Russian painter Kandinsky was a student and a huge advocate of the Theosophical Society, having written about it in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art". The Theosophical Society was founded by occultist and philosopher Helena Blavatsky to advance Theosophy, a branch of esoterism that derives from the idea of Eastern Collectivism and recalling powers and wisdom of ancient religions. Kandinsky's playful works speak of form and composition filtered through a deep understanding of the occult, and the results are enigmatic.

**Kara Walker**



Kara Walker: *Go To Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First* (exhibition), Victoria Miro, London. 2015.

While her works aren't largely about witchcraft or the occult, Kara Walker's starkly impactful silhouettes and other works take on a fairytale-like aura. Her tales speak of the harsh history that black women have faced while addressing the racial problematics that exist in present day. Striking yet often uncomfortable (to the point where some have asked if her work goes too far), Walker's artworks resonate deeply with the tradition of subversion and story-telling along occult lines. As a bonus, here's her in *Vogue* depicted as Glenda the Good Witch, donned in couture and photographed by Annie Leibovitz.



Artist Kara Walker as Glinda the Good Witch in *Vogue* magazine, December 2005.

**Genesis Breyer P-Orridge: Blood Bunny**



Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Blood Bunny" (1997–2007), softwood bunny, blood & ponytail of Lady Jaye, blood of Genesis, glass jar, 13 x 6.5 x 6.5 in.

We love our bunnies and we love artists who pour their blood, sweat and tears into their work. But what of the artist who literally covers a wooden bunny in their own blood? Blood Bunny was made over the course of a decade, with the blood of Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and his/her late wife, one of several of their works that have pushed the boundaries of contemporary art. S/he is a forerunner in the bid to break down gender binaries, is the founder of occult artist collectives, has been labelled a satanist, and has exhibited wildly popular shows throughout the world. Artists like her/him may find friction and controversy with the masses, but his/her witchy contributions to contemporary art are alright in our books.

## Occult and Technology

While the occult can be the perfect remedy to the dogma of scientism, we're convinced that the two aren't necessarily at odds. Here are some artists that we think take on a witchy quality, or at least dabble in the surreal with their exploration of tech.

### Cecile B Evans



#### EXHIBITION

#### **Cécile B. Evans. AMOS' WORLD: Episode One**

23 Mar 2018 – 01 Jul 2018

mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien  
Vienna, Austria

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### Sondra Perry



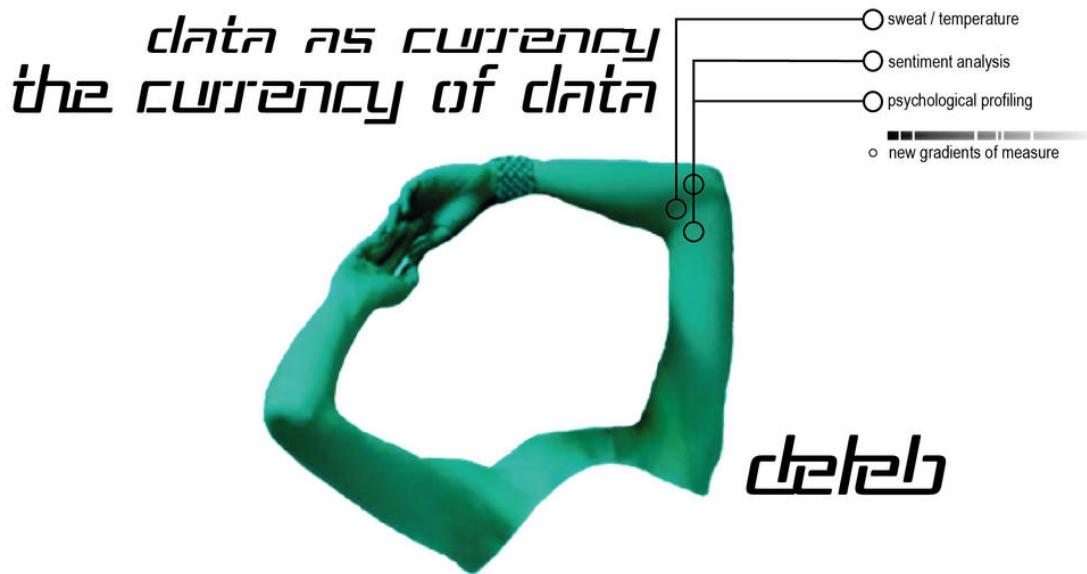
## EXHIBITION

**Sondra Perry: Typhoon coming on**

06 Mar 2018 – 20 May 2018

Serpentine Galleries

London, United Kingdom

**Marija Bozinovska Jones**EXHIBITION  
**De-leb**

11 Mar 2018 – 20 May 2018

Banner Repeater  
London, United Kingdom

### And there's more...

If you're interested in the occult and want to delve into some more things to read and watch, check out these links:

[PERFORMING THE OCCULT: Magick, Rituals and the Monstrous in Live Art with Cuntemporary](#)

[Thirteen Propositions for Theory in the Anthropocene, Collaborative Work by Bogna M Konior and Steph Owers](#)

[Interfaces Monthly 022018: Technology and the Occult](#)

[Surface over depth: pagan inter-species art](#)

[The Occult Humanities Conference](#)

And finally, if you're in London in the coming weeks, Empty Your Lungs As Much As Possible and Repeat the Exercise looks at overlaps between Modernism and the Occult and questions the role of mysticism today.



**EXHIBITION**  
**Empty your Lungs as much as Possible and Repeat the Exercise**  
26 Jun 2018 – 28 Jul 2018  
Arcade  
London, United Kingdom

Sandy Di Yu is a London based writer, art theorist and artist. Follow her on [Instagram](#) or visit her [website](#).

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