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The author analyses the resurgence of magic and spirituality in contemporary art, with particular focus on the figure of the witch. She concentrates on artistic practices which investigate alternative and marginalized knowledges through this figure, often interpreted as a healer, a midwife, and someone who is in a close relationship with nature, based on exhibitions she has co-curated. She introduces the "return" of the witch in contemporary art and how this is connected to the increased interest in alternative medicine and herbalism. Subsequently, she turns to four contemporary artists (or duos) from Central-Eastern Europe who are interested in the healing and potentially dangerous power of plants, the medical aspects of nature, and the often overlooked knowledge associated with them. Artists such as Ana Likar, Jana Zatvarnická, Karina Mendreczky & Katalin Kortmann-Járay, and Lőrinc Borsos incorporate the stories and motifs of specific plants – for example, St. John's wort or deadly nightshade – into their work, referencing both the historical narratives of witch hunts as well as the potential healing / destroying power of those plants, used by women in village communities. Through an analysis of their paintings, installations, and videos, the author explores how their artistic practices reactivate plant-based healing knowledge and reimagine its relevance in contemporary society.

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Lost in the Magical Garden

> Wise women, apothecaries, witches, herbalists: whatever you call them, those who cultivate plants for their fabled mystical and healing properties have existed for thousands of years.[1]

The return of the witch

The return of the figure of the witch is a very visible phenomenon these days. From pop culture to contemporary art, one might have the feeling that witches are everywhere. Yet, luckily, the connotations are very different now than before, as the witch itself is slowly turning into a feminist icon. Also, several exhibitions[2] discuss the notion of magic and spirituality in our world as a response to the ecological, political, and societal crises and the disillusionment that surround us. These projects often place the witch in the center – not as a caricature or a figure from fairy tales, but focusing on the historical background of witch trials, and try to understand the activities of women who were accused of witchcraft during the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Amid the chaotic situations of the twenty-first century, the return to magic / magical thinking, spirituality, and transcendence functions both as an escapist mode and as a resilient strategy. There is a need to believe in something, find hope in the future, and realize how distanced we are from our bodies, nature, and people / communities in general. On the one hand, the interest in magical thinking emphasizes these reconnections with ourselves and our surroundings, but it also provides ways to unlearn certain patterns and look to the past for inspiration. Examining how occult and esoteric thinking appeared during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in response to the changes of the modern world, and how those developments co-existed, a parallel can be drawn to what we

see in the 2020s. In our hyper-surveilled and monitored algorithmic society, there is a need for the irrational, the unexplainable, and the mystical. Relatedly, there is also a need to understand how the systemic repression of women started in the Middle Ages and escalated in the witch trials across Europe and the USA.[3]

Thus, the witch is one of the most prominent figures within this revival of interest in magic and spirituality. Silvia Federici, in her seminal book *Caliban and the Witch*,[4] was one of the first theorists to understand the witch trials of the Middle Ages as a form of systematic oppression toward women, and how the roles "witches" took on in feudal societies were in opposition to the medicalized modern concept of Western medicine, which gained importance after the Enlightenment era. As archivist Victoria Jenkins summarizes:

> Historically, witch hunts had been an example of the danger of mass hysteria: baseless accusations, fueled by naive superstitions and a fickle public court, of witches being to blame for milk spoiling, crops failing, livestock sickening and children dying. But these witch hunts were also codified in law. Scholars such as Silvia Federici have argued that these were efforts to restrain female power to best suit the needs of early capitalism: women who had previously held high societal status working as herbalists, healers and soothsayers were made scapegoats, while unmarried and childless women were not to be trusted. The aim was to position women in domestic roles and to have them perform the unpaid work of childrearing, providing the next generation of workers.[5]

In the Hungarian context, being a witch was rarely a form of self-identification, as argued by ethnographer and researcher Éva Pócs, who dedicated her life to studying European witch trials and the figure of the witch. Rather, it was something other people (the village community, etc.) said about those women – as a form of "othering" – making them scapegoats for various

unresolved conflicts within the community, troubled situations, and sometimes even crimes.[6] All in all, any kind of community norm-breaking could be followed by the accusation of being a witch. Women who seemed different, came from elsewhere, had a deviant lifestyle, or possessed distinguishable knowledge in certain areas (e.g., in healing) were also labeled as witches. In her essay, alongside the witch as scapegoat, Pócs also differentiates a second type (witchcraft as a form of religious justice) and a third type (the possessed witch).[7]

Also likely due to Federici's book – which has been widely quoted, especially in the artistic field – a new kind of interest emerged. Moving away from the representation of the "old hag" in popular culture, whether in Disney movies or folk stories, artists and thinkers began to understand the history of witchcraft and witch trials from a feminist point of view, and in doing so, learned about women whose knowledge had been suppressed and marginalized throughout the centuries.

That is why it is important, first of all, to focus on those artistic practices and positions that are genuinely interested in and address the history of witchcraft and the figure of the witch – for, as the figure became a buzzword, many artists followed the trend but only engaged with it on an aesthetic level.[8] Some of those artists self-identify as witches,[9] which is not inherently problematic – it refers more to a resilient position, an anti-patriarchal standpoint, as well as an openness to the irrational, otherworldly, and metaphysical aspects of life. Being a witch is also considered a rather eclectic belief system and, for many women, an important community, a sisterhood. More concerning are those artistic practices where the figure of the witch is sexualized, shown as an attractive woman (as opposed to an old hag), and where the artists fail to reflect on the historical background and local relevance of issues they raise. Such works often experiment with creating rituals (also online), yet the energy to retain space for the audience – and not fall

into the trap of narcissistic self-display – often fails. Fortunately, I believe those tendencies that look at the figure of the witch as a symbol for feminist resistance are, luckily, more widely present. In the end, the heterogeneity of the artworks related to these questions is not a problem but rather a symptom: many practitioners want to engage with the stories around witchcraft, just from different perspectives.

And why is it that many artists in Central-Eastern Europe are dealing with these questions? The witch trials here were significant between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: Central and Eastern Europe accounted for a substantial portion of all European trials, with an estimated 7,000 trials and 2,000 executions in regions like Poland–Lithuania, Hungary, and Russia.[10]

One reason could be the desire to finally engage with this overlooked and tabooed side of history. The figure of the witch is also highly present in various folk tales and local legends; one of the most famous of them being Baba Yaga, who, on the one hand, is dangerous due to her cannibalistic traits, but, on the other, can also be depicted as a wise woman who helps those in need. And even though Hungary is not part of the Slavic folkloristic tradition, and the myths related to witches are slightly different, it can be argued that in the Central-Eastern European region, the figure of the witch is strongly present in the collective imagination. Thus, several artists who are interested in researching pagan / pre-Christian traditions, ancestral heritage, folklore, and mythology often encounter this figure or that of the wise woman.

In this essay, I will present artistic practices that seek to discover forgotten *herstories* and repressed knowledge, aiming to bring them to a contemporary platform. I will survey artistic practices that investigate alternative and marginalized knowledges through the figure of the witch, often understood as a healer, a midwife, and someone who is in a close relationship with nature. I aim to analyze how contemporary artists engage

with the healing and potentially dangerous power of plants, the medical aspects of nature, and the often overlooked knowledge associated with them. I will present four case studies, and through analyzing them, aim to point out three distinctive artistic strategies used to delve deeper into questions around traditional healing routines. I argue that all three types of works (research-based or investigative; poetic / associative; conceptual attitude) share an ecofeminist standpoint: stating that the oppression of women and the exploitation of our planet's natural resources are inextricably linked.[11] Thus, these works propose a more horizontal and equal approach toward nature and our surroundings. Following the thoughts of Donna Harraway,[12] the artists are interested in notions of kinship and companionship instead of extraction and domination.

This reflection builds on the exhibition *Maleficae – From Bonfires to Online Witchcraft*, which mapped artistic practices engaging with pre-Christian traditions, rituals, and legends – and the figure of the witch – which I co-curated with Dalma Eszter Kollár and Júlia Hermann at Budapest History Museum – Budapest Gallery, Budapest, in the summer of 2024.[13] The project served as an important platform for showcasing artists both from the Central-Eastern European region and internationally, and for finding common threads connecting various practices around witchcraft and magic. The exhibition was divided into two parts: the first looked more closely at artworks interested in historical references, the witch trials, and various roles the women accused of being witches performed. The second emphasized the contemporary interpretation of the figure of the witch, digitality and spiritualism, and forming new communities. Within the framework of the first part, the curatorial team researched several works where the artist examined the roles of midwifery, traditional medicine, and herbalistic knowledge about healing plants. All four case studies

discussed here were featured in the exhibition.

The green witch

Besides the increased interest in magic and spirituality in general, both in the public discourse and the Western artworld, there is also heightened curiosity toward herbalism, traditional medicines, and understanding plants. In her book *Witch's Garden: Plants in Folklore, Magic and Traditional Medicine*, Sandra Lawrence summarizes – among other aspects – the short history of plants that were considered to be a cure for the body. Comparing the literature by "the great fathers of medicine" from Ancient Greece, such as Hippocrates or Dioscorides, she also introduces developments in folk medicine, and how the "trial and error of our ancestors was handed down by word of mouth, then codified by the writers of herbals, such as John Gerard or Nicholas Culpeper."[14] Her book gives a great overview of the history of various plants and herbs, and some of the oldest remedies we know. She lists the plants and accompanies them with archival drawings and herbarium extracts. Such an example for curing the body is feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), which was used for everything from menstrual pain and fevers to melancholy, due to the fact that it grew easily and its application was simple. Originating from the Benedictine monasteries of the tenth century, it later spread to medieval cottage gardens.[15]

The combination of the interest in witchcraft and herbalism has resulted in something several authors refer to as *green witchery*.[16]

This specific literature varies from books on methods of identifying and foraging for healing herbs[17] to those about creating and maintaining a magical witch garden. They also explore the cyclicity of the seasons and give advice on which period is best for growing certain plants. Such books are often connected to Wicca – the modern witchcraft movement coined by Gerald Gardner in his influential book *Witchcraft Today*.[18] The Wiccan belief system includes the practice of witchcraft, the

veneration of nature, and the ritual honoring (alone and in community) of the lunar Triple Goddess and her male counterpart the Horned God; "Much like 'Mother Nature,' the mother of the Triple Goddess is a bringer of life; she is nurturing, yet also a powerful force who commands respect."[19] What is common to these books is that the author often identifies as a witch and shares personal yet practical ideas about how to connect to nature and make use of plants (to treat both mental and physical pain).

For several of these authors, another important reference is Scott Cunningham's *Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs*,[20] an enormous collection of the various qualities of plants. Cunningham was a key figure for modern neo-Pagan and New Age movements, and viewed traditional herbalism as a deeply spiritual practice. He was interested in the energy of plants, and focused not only on Europe, but brought together examples of more than 400 plants from around the world. Balanced between practical advice and the openness to magical use, his book became inspirational to the followers of *green witchery*, as all agreed that foraging, collecting, and using plants and herbs as traditional medicine was one of the most ancient practices of wise women. Authors frequently criticize today's pharmaceutical industry (often referred to as Big Pharma),[21] and discuss how we forget that several natural ingredients which are now synthetized were first extracted from plants. The wish to reconnect with the land, our environment, and nature in general (healthy eating, sustainable living, etc.) often leads to the use of traditional herbal medicine. This might also be the reason why, apart from looking at the history of witchcraft and the figure of the witch, many artists address this specific connection with plants and herbs.

It is also worth mentioning an aspect that journalist Alice Vincent describes in her book *Why Women Grow*, in which she shares stories about women and their gardens: why they garden,

what the garden means to them, how it is related to womanhood, and what their relationship with the Earth and the soil is. In its introduction, she emphasizes how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of her friends and acquaintances turned to gardening as a way to get outside and stay busy. As she writes about the gardening survey she posted online: "These women gardened to carve space out of the situations their lives had placed them in. I saw patterns emerge: lockdown was a persistent motivator; moving to a home with a garden, perhaps unsurprisingly, was another."[22] In Vincent's case, lockdown and isolation also led her to begin her research and interview series, which unfold in her book and tell stories not only about gardening habits but also about women's relationships to land, their homes, and what belonging means, as well as the different stages of womanhood – from giving birth (motherhood), through taking care of one's family, to grief: "Soon, my search for garden stories has become a crash course in womanhood. Through listening to these stories, I learn about how womanhood became and how it could be."[23] Tending to a garden provided a metaphor for the various life stages of a woman, as well as for the cyclicity of life itself – something that resonates on many levels with how the first midwives and healers worked and supported their communities. It is why, in the title of this essay, I refer to a "magical garden": I imagine this place as communal land where one can find cures and remedies for various illnesses, and can also get lost in and wander so as to know oneself better.

Somewhat surprisingly, a non-academic but literary[24] source became quite important during my research: some of the most detailed descriptions about the usage of plants can be found in Polish author Agnieszka Szpila's 2021 novel *Heksy*,[25] which nonetheless relies on historical facts and takes inspiration from seventeenth-century Silesian witch trials. What is striking about the book is how it takes the reader back in time to the period of the sixteenth–eighteenth century, to the Duchy of

Neisse (in Polish, *Nysa*), Upper Silesia (today in Poland). Its second part, written in a different, more archaic language style, introduces three generations of women of the Spalt family: Helene, Ursula, and Mathilde. We get to know a community of women, "a special kind of beguine who have renounced the patriarchal and religious order and live in the forest, where they worship the Old Maid and make love to Mother Earth."[26]

While it spends a lot of time describing rituals related to Mother Earth (resembling current Wiccan movements), this ecofeminist novel also mentions other communal activities, and how the roles of medicine woman, healer, and midwife taken by the Spalts helped many other women in the duchy. Besides practicing midwifery and soothing the pains of childbirth, the Spalts also cooked potions and medicines to "get rid of" unwanted babies or diminish men's libido so they wouldn't want sex as often. These recipes were passed down through generations, considered as secrets, and helped ease the lives of village women; they also formed a strong bond and community between women, which later led to the formation of the Mother Earth cult. In a striking way, Szpila shows how "logical" it was to accuse these women of being witches, when their knowledge made women suffer less and men unable to act on their oppressive and non-consensual instincts.

Szpila also introduces to the reader those plants that, in high doses, could result in hallucinations and other psychedelic experiences. The berries of the deadly nightshade[27] were used by the women of the Mother Earth community to escape reality, experience otherworldly sensations (such as flying, which explains the broomstick trope), and engage in sexual activity with plants, roots, sticks, and the forest / earth in general. This duality within certain plants (being both a medicine and having destructive qualities) is something also of interest to contemporary artists, and will be discussed in the

following sections.

Traditional medicine and herbalism in contemporary art

Before analyzing the works, it is worth again turning to Victoria Jenkins, who summarizes the figure of the witch this way:

> [T]he contrasting representations of the witch as either crone or seductress in fact share much in common. Both figures live on the margins of society, either by choice or as pariahs despised by others. They are unmarried and childless; they may be sexually promiscuous, with no interest in procreation – or they may actively despise children, maiming, killing and even cannibalising them. Above all, both representations depict independent women who possess powerful knowledge inaccessible to most others, especially men. The witch represented a perversion of the traditional submissive, meek, uneducated and nurturing qualities expected of women – a perversion seen as such a threat to patriarchal ideals of womanhood that it has provoked violent attempts to stamp the witch out.[28]

These contrasting representations are foregrounded in the piece I mention below.

The witch's garden (Katalin Kortmann-Járay & Karina Mendreczky: *Gazing at the Stars and the Moon* , 2024)

Katalin Kortmann-Járay and Karina Mendreczky, *Staring at the Star and the Moon*, 2024, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

Katalin Kortmann-Járay & Karina Mendreczky are a Hungarian artist duo who have long explored narratives of forgotten women and marginalized female positions. Their installation, exhibited at *Maleficae* in 2024, originated in *Rianás* (this could be translated as "shatter"), an outdoor exhibition project[29] which also examined notions of witchcraft and magic from the perspective of contemporary Hungarian artists, with a strong emphasis on site specificity.

For the Budapest Gallery exhibition, the duo further developed their piece *Gazing at the Stars and the Moon*, focused on the history of Hungarian witch trials. Their starting point was the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the infamous misogynist volume published in the fifteenth century by inquisitors. One part of their installation, a banner-like textile piece, features an archival image of a naked woman with her face obscured – highlighting how the male gaze sexualized and objectified women. It is also a reference to the *Maleficarum,* where it was described in detail how women took part in orgies with the Devil and performed various unacceptable activities. These false accusations also appear, on parchment-like objects, in the exhibition space. However, they are not general accusations, but are connected to a specific woman who lived in Hungary and was accused of being a witch. The artists researched the seventeenth-century Hungarian witch trials, using the indictment of a certain Mrs. Gergely Szabó, charged in 1681 in Debrecen and later killed in

a brutal way. She was accused of "gazing at the stars and the moon" and "befriending the Devil." The former connects not only to ideas of weather prediction and transformation, but also to healing practices rooted in seasonal changes and to learning about women's natural cycles and rhythms. Thus, the installation can be seen in a way as a memorial to Mrs. Szabó while shedding light on her true activities. The other textile, presenting a series of hands, can be associated with help / aid / support, while the usage of hemp is connected to folklore and artisanal techniques. Furthermore, the installation appears as a garden, where flower- and plant-shaped objects spread out from the wall and emerge from the soil-covered gallery floor, as if growing there.

These objects blend fictional and real plants traditionally used by wise women, midwives, and healers in villages and towns throughout Europe. As Sandra Lawrence summarizes, many of the same plants could be used for healing – or, in higher doses, could become deadly poisons:

> The line between science and magic has always been thin; add religion into the mix and opinions – and emotions – begin to heat up. Plants became battlegrounds: as cultures waxed and waned, a herb 'belonging' to a goddess might be reassigned to a saint – or to the devil. Boundaries became blurred. Astrology, for example, remained a serious point of consideration in medicine well into the Christian period. As the wealth of folklore grew, so too did the romance around it. We are not immune from that glamour today. Folklore and superstition, both local and general, do not die easily, but they do change. Sometimes, properties of a plant can take on two diametrically opposed qualities according to region, culture and even individuals.[30]

Katalin Kortmann-Járay and Karina Mendreczky, *Staring at the Star and the Moon*, 2024, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

In their installation, Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky present plants used by midwives to assist pregnancy, and those employed in the concealed, tabooed practice of abortion. According to Lawrence, the sap of the herb silphium (now extinct) induced menstruation (thus effectively helping the abortion) and became an important contraceptive during Roman times.[31]

As an alternative, people often used pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), which, because of its high toxicity, frequently killed the mother along with the fetus. The image of a fetus and archival photographs of women reinforce these themes. At this point, it is also worth mentioning an earlier work by Dominika Trapp & Sarolta Kremmer, an artist-&-doula collaboration, titled *Bábaíre* (2020–2021). Created as part of the *Waiting Room* project which I co-curated with Edina Nagy, Eszer Lázár, and Eszter Őze,[32] the piece subtly intervened in the Semmelweis Museum of the History of Medicine's collection. With a thin thread made of mohair and silk, the artists "enmeshed" vitrines and objects associated with gynecology and traditional midwifery. From these threads, they knitted and crocheted forms resembling plants historically used by Hungarian village midwives (e.g., *bábakalács* [carline thistle], and *bábaguzsaly* aka *zsurló* [horsetails], the names of which both contain the Hungarian word for midwife, *bába*). I see *Bábaíre* as an inspiration for Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky, although their installation is more monumental and overwhelming. The same motifs which appeared in the Trapp–Kremmer work – the carline thistle or horsetails (*Equisetum arvense*, which, because it is high in silicium, helped with kidney and urinary tract problems, hemostasis, and to keep bones, hair, and nails healthy) – are

present in this magical garden too. After someone gave birth, the Greeks used mugwort, myrrh, and chaste tree berry, all of which aided recovery, and are also referenced by the artists.[33]

Another plant highly visible in their installation is deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), which contains the powerful sedative atropine. In large doses, atropine causes heavy sweating, vomiting, respiratory difficulty, hallucinations, coma, and death. It is widely believed to be one of the key ingredients in witches' flying ointment, as described both by Szpila in her novel and by Lawrence.[34] The artists "chain" a belladonna-shaped object to the wall, highlighting its dangerous aspects. The piece is also positioned close to the first textile work with naked women, once again connecting the meaning of the name belladonna to the sexualization of women.

The two faces of St. John's wort (Ana Likar: *She Made Storms* series)

Ana Likar, *She Made Storm,* 2022 and *She Made Storm - Marina Češarek Gallery*, 2024, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

In the installations *She Made Storms* (2022) and *She Made Storms – Marina Češarek Gallery* (2024),[35] Slovenian artist Ana Likar focuses on a single plant: St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*). As Sandra Lawrence explains, this herb has long been considered both a painkiller and a ward against evil spirits.[36] It was used to calm the mentally ill and has nerve-soothing effects. When placed under one's pillow, it also aided sleep. Known too as the "fairy herb," it was best gathered on June 23rd – St. John's Eve – when its magical properties were believed to help women find husbands, conceive, or boost their fertility.[37] The plant had many uses, from treating wounds to soothing coughs, but is best known today for its

antidepressant properties.

Likar's installation has various components. One resembles an ancient herbarium; on closer inspection, it contains detailed botanical drawings of St. John's wort in different forms. Petals and plant remnants are embedded in the paper, and a special tincture made from the herb accompanies the drawings in small bottles. The drawings appear first as an innocent collection, as the viewer does not yet connect them to the history of witch trials and to what an overdose can cause. This creates a striking tension within the installation: the drawings of the beautiful yellow flower are more traditional, while a film, the second component – both in its narration and editing – presents a darker (and visually experimental) side to the same story. In the video piece, the artist revisits the 1701 Ribnica witch trials – considered among the bloodiest in Slovenian and Central-Eastern European history, and focuses on the story of a single person, Marina Češarek. Likar was also drawn to St. John's wort's contrasting application: how it was used by both healers and later by prosecutors. Although its healing power was well known, its hallucinogenic properties – in high doses – were exploited by prosecutors to coerce confessions from the accused women, or "take" them to a mental state where they were easily manipulated.[38]

The installation's title, *She Made Storms*, comes from the transcript of Marina Češarek's interrogation. Brought to trial in 1701, she was then a forty-year-old woman, the wife of a shoemaker and a mother of six. When asked if she practiced magic, she replied, "I made storms," which can be understood both literally, in the sense of engaging – as in the case of Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky – with the cyclicity of nature, and also metaphorically, related to healing and easing pain. I consider the storm not as a negative event but a catalyst for change. While introducing the historical background of the witch trials, the film takes viewers to sites connected to Češarek's story,

including her assumed birthplace at the Mikl House, which was briefly renamed after her in 1987 as the Marina Češarek Gallery.[39]

In 2023, the house was permanently flooded, becoming a haunting metaphor for historical erasure. The video combines both eerie black-and-white and color footage of these fragmented sites – starting from a cave in Klek, Croatia, where witches were said to gather in the eighteenth century, through the gallery space in the Mikl House, now inaccessible, but where St. John's wort petals fly around like dust, to Ribnica Castle, where the trials took place. There is also an exhibition at the castle, where the artist learns about the abovementioned usage of St. John's wort. The video itself is narrated by the artist's mother in Ribnica dialect – often repeating a sentence or a word, stuttering, sounding insecure. It evokes the sense of a coerced confession, as if the daughter (Likar) was questioning her mother in a twisted way. But mainly, through the video's narration, Likar presents her research about the trial, the misuse of St. John's wort, and the forced confessions and torture that women like Češarek suffered. Besides juxtaposing the two main locations in the video, the artist also shows the land around Ribnica Castle and the St. John's wort plant in close-up, along with some atmospheric shots.

By focusing on this overlooked event in Slovenian history, Likar reveals how women's own knowledge was used against them. The practice of manipulating victims into confessing – via torture or psychoactive substances – did not end with the Middle Ages; it just changed form. Likar's installation sheds light on the darker aspects of nature, using certain stylistic elements of the horror film genre as a starting point. It also emphasizes locality: of the home, the region, and the country. It talks about the importance of certain sites, and how a specific place carries memories of the past – often uncanny, tabooed, marginalized memories. The artist traces back these events, "unearths" the fragments, and, just like in the video, when the empty space is shown with the

flowing flowers, brings the ghost back from the past.

In a way, Likar creates a silent memorial for the Slovenian witch trials, which might bring to mind the *Steilneset Memorial*[40] in the town of Vardø, Finnmark county, Norway. Designed by architect Peter Zumthor and artist Louise Bourgeois (and considered to be her last work), the memorial opened in 2011 and commemorates the ninety-one people who were accused of witchcraft and executed there in 1621. Vardø ranks first among Norwegian towns where witch trials took place and where most of the accused were burned. The minimalist site consists of two buildings, and while Zumthor's is a 120-meter-long wooden structure containing his installation, Bourgeois's is even more striking. Her installation (*The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved*) is set within a smoked-glass cubed room: on a metal chair, an eternal flame burns and is reflected in seven huge, oval mirrors. It echoes the trials, the methods of execution, and the anonymity or invisibility of the victims. We still don't know their names but the flame recalls their stories.

Becoming plant (Jana Zatvarnická: *Imagining a Herbarium*, 2023–)

While Likar's work, as we saw, was research-based and used historical facts to present false accusations made during the witch trials – as well as St. John's wort's dual aspect (both a medicine and a poison) – Slovakian artist Jana Zatvarnická looks at these questions on a more abstract and associative level. Just like Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky, she does not focus on a single plant, but presents

Jana Zatvarnická, *Imagining a Herbarium*, 2023, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

her collection through watercolors and paintings. The series is titled *Imagining a Herbarium*, and is an ongoing project in which the artist revisits emblematic plants, herbs, and flowers.

The artist uses her own, self-made antique paper, as well as specific pigments derived from plants, mixed into her tempera paint. She worked on the series during a residency in Budapest (organized by Budapest Gallery), and spending time in the region (the artist lives in Germany) allowed her to explore various plants and herbs used by women both centuries ago and in the present. Here, she revisits those plants, but instead of precise depictions as in Likar's work, she often paints them in an anthropomorphic way. Thus, it is not immediately clear whether we are looking at delicate drawings of plants or feminine / androgyn figures from another realm.

The artist emphasized this ambiguity as she is interested in the process of becoming, of hybridization, and imagines scenarios in which, through the knowledge and work women perform with plants, they slowly *become* them. This combination of abstraction and figuration is a strong characteristic of Zatvarnická's series, and renders the works somewhat out of time, as they reference both early twentieth-century symbolism as well as contemporary figurative trends. Using natural pigments and handmade paper, the artist is also self-reflexive about the materiality of making art, and she chooses to work in a sustainable way.

In her series, she evokes the beautiful but deadly belladonna mentioned earlier, as well as valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*, also known as garden heliotrope), which is used for treating insomnia and sleep disorders. Willow (*Salix*) also appears – a plant with a rich history connected not only to healing but also to grief and death. In Ireland, it was said that willow trees would uproot themselves and follow lonely travelers at night, and that the lovesick also visited willows to unburden themselves. In Ancient Greece, it was already known that it could help women in labor,

and Native Americans used it to treat skin irritation.[41] But, perhaps most importantly, in the nineteenth century, salicin was isolated from both willow bark and meadowsweet. When this was converted into salicylic acid, it became the inspiration for a drug that relieves pain and thins the blood – what we now know as aspirin.[42]

Other works in the series – like *Bloody Root*, *Plant Being*, or *Breasts* – are even less concrete, not only in their representation but also their titles. They do not reference a specific plant, but rather the interconnectedness with nature and the constant cyclicity of foraging and learning from the weeds around us. Zatvarnická's series is an ongoing project, as she learns, unlearns, and discovers forgotten or sidelined ancestral knowledge. Her herbarium does not aim to be a scientific, objective compilation, but rather a personal, subjective collection of traces, associations, and memories – the slow process of becoming plant. This is both the strength and the weakness of the project: the intimate motivation and the abstract, associative depictions, even though aesthetically pleasing, can verge on becoming decorative, and the viewer, if not prepared with knowledge about certain plants and their history, could be left somewhat disoriented. It is worth briefly mentioning another example which also reflects on ancestral / indigenous knowledge systems and the healing capacity of plants: the installation by Patricia Dominquez titled *Vegetal Matrix*, shown at Wellcome Collection's exhibition *Rooted Beings* in 2022.[43] The piece is well researched, and both conceptually and aesthetically exciting, presenting the

Jana Zatvarnická, *Imagining a Herbarium*, 2023 (right) and Ana Likar, *She Made Storm*, 2022, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

history of various indigenous Latin American plants – *Brugmansia* , *Banisteriopsis caapi* (used for the visionary yagé or ayahuasca), cinchona, and mandrake – their colonial history, and their past and present usages.

The eternal plant (Lőrinc Borsos: *Snakeface*, 2020)

In the exhibition at Budapest Gallery, even though it was clear that several works addressed the figure of the witch through herbalism, there was a notable tension between more associative, poetic, abstract practices (Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky, Zatvarnická) and the research-based projects highlighting a specific plant, such as St. John's wort in Ana Likar's case. On the one hand, the more poetic works may seem vague or scientifically unspecific – perhaps even mixing up plants and their histories, or focusing more on tendencies than individual plant histories. On the other hand, I consider the artistic interpretation of the theme an important part as well, giving a broader perspective and even making the viewer feel a little "lost in the witch's garden."

Lőrinc Borsos (front) (back: Shani Leseman), *Snakeface* (*The Wizard, The Witch / NailArt 02*), 2020, group exhibition "Maleficae - from Bonfires to Digital Witchcraft", Budapest Gallery, 21 June – 8 September 2024, curated by Flóra Gadó, Júlia Hermann and Dalma Eszter Kollár, installation view. Photo: Tamás G. Juhász

I would also like to draw attention to a third category of work: the artist duo Lőrinc Borsos's (Lilla Lőrinc & János Borsos) installation *Snakeface (The Wizard, The Witch / NailArt 02)* (2020), which features a real plant – not merely as a reference, but as an *objet trouvé*, placed at the heart of the work. Two rods – *The Wizard* and *The Witch*, one wooden and phallic, the other shiny black latex – form a "magic triangle," and in the center, in

a plexiglass box, lies a real *Datura stramonium* (commonly known as thornapple, jimsonweed, or devil's trumpet), a poisonous flowering plant originally from Central America. In a way, Borsos Lőrinc also makes a geographical connection in this work: connecting the seemingly distant lands of Eastern Europe and Central America, and highlighting the shared interest in certain plants and natural resources.

Though *Datura stramonium* (like all *Datura* species) can be toxic in high doses, it has long been considered an important plant. In traditional medicine, for example, it was used to treat asthma (by smoking the leaves). But it is better known for its hallucinogenic properties, which is why shamans in South America, as well as *táltos* in Central Europe, used it in ceremonial practices. As described at length in Carlos Castaneda's books – though he gives the example of peyote rather than *Datura stramonium* – the planting, cultivation, and consumption of such plants was a ritual, and the resulting psychoactive experience seen as a sacred transformation.[44] Alongside belladonna, *Datura stramonium* was likely another ingredient of witches' so-called flying ointment, used by women for hallucinogenic purposes. During the witch trials, the presence of *Datura stramonium* in a woman's garden was a very bad sign – it could lead to immediate accusation and was believed to bring bad luck.

By placing this plant almost as a sacred object in the center of their installation, the artists highlight once again the dual nature of such plants and the thin line between healing and harming. They also draw attention to the often overlooked potential of psychedelics in treating depression and anxiety – an idea that is now being slowly scientifically confirmed.[45] Lőrinc Borsos frequently incorporate personal stories and themes into their work, including religion and mental health. They do not shy away from discussing their own experiences with psychedelics and their interest in the effects of psilocybin, for instance. When brought together, the installation's two rods, symbolizing the duo

as two distinct entities, merge the male and female, the spiritual and the scientific, creating a space where anything becomes possible.

This also connects with the original idea behind the duo's practice: for many years they experimented with creating an alter ego, a joint persona with the name of Lőrinc Borsos. It became a third and separate entity, originating from them but also moving beyond them. In a way, *Snakeface* could be seen as a metaphor for this hybridity and fluidity: the merging of the different sides, like the process of the alchemical marriage, creates something whole – a unity which encompasses the aspects of the male and female while also prefiguring something unknown. Through this alchemical process and unification, the *Datura stramonium* becomes eternal – it is resurrected, and serves to emphasize all the knowledge which we can still learn from the plants around us. Today, the duo is separated, and they now experiment with retaining the artistic project while removing it from their private lives. What the interconnectedness of art and life adds to a work, and how changes in an artist's life may affect an audiences' perception remain interesting questions.

Conclusion

My aim in this essay was to map out a certain trajectory within contemporary art – namely, how artists who are interested in magic and the figure of the witch have turned toward questions around traditional medicines, herbalism, and healing plants. These tendencies are just some among many, and it is important to mention others, such as: documentary photography (works by Virginia Lupu or Lucia Sekerková); conceptual photography (Noémi Szécsi, Kasha Potrohosh); a performative approach related to rethinking pagan rituals and community (Alicja Wysocka) and queering the figure of the witch (Vala T. Foltyn); and contemporary storytelling through graphic arts (Dorottya Poór, Marie Lukacová). My specific interest here

has been to understand how motivating factors such as herbalism became relevant in today's society, and how several authors and artists connect the figure of the healer, the midwife (aka the witch) of the Middle Ages, with a contemporary ecofeminist position.

While analyzing the artworks, three categories emerged: First, a research-based / investigative practice focusing on untold local narratives (Likar). Second, a sometimes more figurative (Kortmann-Járay & Mendreczky), sometimes more abstract (Zatvarnická) set of works, where what is common is an associative, poetic language which focuses less on concrete facts but rather the overall atmosphere of a given context. And, third, a conceptual practice, with a nod to neo-avant-garde tendencies, where notions such as the readymade or *object trouvé* are enriched with new meanings.

What connects these works, besides their abovementioned thematic interest, is an ecofeminist standpoint or starting point – also highly present in Agnieszka Szpila's novel – asserting that the exploitation of women and nature stems from the same ground. As Dr. Tasneem Anjum summarizes, "ecofeminism fuses ecology and feminism into one and seeks to draw parallels between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women."[46] The witch trials and accusations demonstrate in a striking way how these two forms of oppression were systematically connected, and how the knowledge women gained from nature, the soil, and the Earth (and about their own specific locality) was used against them, leading to their degradation and banishment. These artists chose the perspective of ecofeminism precisely because the histories of witchcraft and contemporary ecological thinking are intertwined, and to emphasize that, in the current climate crisis, it is crucial to relearn these forgotten practices so as to envision a more sustainable future.

Healing with plant-based medicines and midwifery might be the most relatable roles performed by women accused of being

witches in early modern society. Is it possible that, in today's accelerated, late-capitalist society, many artists are turning toward these topics because they are trying to understand what it means to be healthy and to heal in the present? Furthermore, can looking back at the history of witchcraft also help us understand how the process of healing functions within a community? A good example for this might be the sisterhood of witches, which functioned as a support structure for a given community (a village, a group of women, etc.). Thus, artists, curators, researchers, and many others who are willing to, can learn from these wise women about how to form a community, what plants are teaching us, and how to look at nature in a more horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-exploitative way. And through that, perhaps our understanding about healing could also alter. As Alice Vincent argues, a possible reconnection with the Earth, soil, and nature (in her case through gardening) can serve as a practical way of engaging in this learning.[47] *Why Women Grow* can also be connected to previously mentioned *green witchery*, though more as a way to link the figure of the witch with the cyclicity of womanhood, and with understanding the tending of soil and the Earth as a feminist gesture.

I would like to close by referencing another thinker, Robin Wall Kimmerer, who, even though living and working in a different geopolitical context, teaches us in a striking way how to learn from plants and the nature around us. Her pioneering book *Braiding Sweetgrass* can be read partly as an autobiographical work, reconnecting with and understanding her Native American roots / ancestry, but also as a kind of encyclopedia of botany, natural history, and mythological worldbuilding. She introduces this way of thinking with the myth of Sky Woman – a Native American creation story – and compares it with the biblical story

of Adam and Eve. As she writes:

> Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.[48]

I believe that it is important to listen to Wall Kimmerer's words – not only to better understand the European cosmologies in which artists and curators from Central-Eastern Europe are embedded, but also to open ourselves up to different understandings of the world. As she introduces the cultural, natural, geopolitical, and historical stories of several plants, such as the pecan, a more respectful approach unfolds – one that the abovementioned artists also follow in their works. As she summarizes:

> In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top – the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation – and the plants at the bottom. But in the Native way of knowing, human people are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of Creation.' We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn – we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They've been on the earth far longer than we have and have had time to figure things out.[49]

Wall Kimmerer does an admirable job in activating these knowledges and looking at them through the perspective of the present; in a way, the artists whose works I analyze do the same:

they look at the land, the soil, and the plants as something to constantly learn from.

1 Sandra Lawrence, *Witch's Garden: Plants in Folklore, Magic and Traditional Medicine* (Welbeck Publishing, 2020), 6.

2 *Waking the Witch*, various venues in the UK, 2018–2019, https://www.wakingthewitch.uk/; *Witch Hunt*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, 2020–2021, https://kunsthalcharlottenborg.dk/en/exhibitions/witchhunt/, etc.

3 See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004).

4 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

5 Victoria Jenkins, *Visions of the Occult: An Untold Story of Art & Magic* (Tate, 2023), 35.

6 Éva Pócs, "Boszorkányság és boszorkányok Közép-Kelet-Európában," *Korunk*, 2005.

7 Pócs, "Boszorkányság és boszorkányok."

8 I couldn't go in detail with these examples, but, for example, the flowery self-portraits of Ukrainian artist Kasha Potrohosh often fall into this realm.

9 See, for example, Vala T. Foltyn, within our exhibition.

10 More information about early modern witch hunts.

11 Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

12 Donna Harraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

13 *Maleficae*, Budapest Gallery, 2024.

14 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden*, 98.

15 Lawrence, 100.

16 Ellen Dugan, *Garden Witchery: Magick from the Ground Up* (Llewellyn Publications, 2005); Gerina Dunwich, *The Wicca Garden: A Modern Witch's Book on Magickal and Enchanted Herbs and Plants* (Citadel Press, 2000).

17 Tina Sams, *Healing Herbs: A Beginner's Guide to Identifying, Foraging, and Using Medicinal Plants* (Fair Winds Press, 2015).

18 Gerald Garner, *Witchcraft Today* (Citadel Trade [1954], 2004).

19 Jenkins, *Visions of the Occult*, 38.

20 Scott Cunningham, *Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* (Llewellyn Publications, 1985).

21 Daniel Finn, "Big Pharma Is a Big Menace to Global Health: Interview with Nick Dearden ," *Jacobin*, May 9, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/09/big-pharma-global-health-patents.

22 Alice Vincent, *Why Women Grow* (Canongate, 2023), xv.

23 Vincent, *Why Women Grow*, 32.

24 Other literary examples include Madeline Miller, *Circé* (Pocket, 2019); Irene Solá, *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* (Graywolf Press, 2022); Paul Murray, *The Bee Sting* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

25 Agnieszka Szpila, *Heksy* [*Hexes*] (Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2021), translated into Hungarian by Vera Wolosz in 2024, and published by Jelenkor.

26 "Meet the Author: Agnieszka Szpila," *Passa Porta Festival*, https://www.passaporta.be/en/calendar/meet-the-author-agnieszka-szpila.

27 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden*, 186.

28 Jenkins, *Visions of the Occult*, 31.

29 The installation was a part of the exhibition *Rianás* by the artist group Project833. *Rianás* was a one-night, outdoor group exhibition in Szeged, Hungary, that could be visited during a tour. March 20, 2024, Szeged, Witch Island. Organizers: Zsuzsanna Sztanó, Ádám Jeneses, and Gyula A. Kovács. Curator: Tímea Fülöp.

30 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden*, 6.

31 Lawrence, 78.

32 *Waiting Room - Women Healers and Patients on the Periphery of Medicine*, was a contemporary art intervention at the Semmelweis Medical History Museum, Budapest, 2020–2021. Curated by: Flóra Gadó, Edina Nagy, Eszter Lázár, and Eszter Őze, https://www.isbnbooks.hu/books/varoszoba-noi-gyogyitok-es-paciensek-az-orvoslas-periferiajan-waiting-room-women-healers-and-patients-at-the-periphery-of-medicine/

, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/18846.pdf.

33 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden*, 80.

34 Lawrence, 186.

35 The work was commissioned by the UGM Maribor Art Gallery for the Triennial of Art and Environment EKO 9.

36 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden*, 122.

37 Lawrence, 122.

38 Although, technically, St. John's wort is a herbal supplement, not a hallucinogen. While it can have some psychoactive effects, it doesn't typically cause hallucinations in the way that psychedelic substances do.

39 This was within the framework of the exhibition by Jošt Rotar.

40 More information about the *Steilneset Memorial* can be found here: https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/stories/explore-the-collection/the-damned-the-possessed-and-the-beloved-about-art-architecture-and-witchcraft/.

41 Lawrence, *Witch's Garden,* 112.

42 Lawrence, 112.

43 More information about *the Rooted Beings* exhibition: https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/rooted-beings.

44 Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Washington Square Press, 1985).

45 Andy Extance, "Can psychedelics treat depression? Maybe, and you might not even have to take a trip," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/01/psychedelics-hallucinogens-depression-robitussin-auvelity-nrx.

46 Dr. Tasneem Anjum, "Ecofeminism: Exploitation of Women and Nature," *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, July–August 2020, https://ijels.com/upload_document/issue_files/2IJELS-10720206-Ecofeminism.pdf.

47 Alice Vincent, *Why Women Grow* (Canongate, 2023).

48 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Penguin Books, 2020), 7.

49 Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 9.

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