

BRIGITTE MULHOLLAND

Brigitte Mulholland is thrilled to present Ryan Wilde's solo exhibition *De Lamiis et Indumentis Diaboli*, a rigorously researched - and also playful - exploration of the history of witch hunts, and the contemporary reclamation by women of witch fashion and imagery as a means to dismantle the patriarchal systems that once used it to control (and even kill) them. The exhibition consists of new sculptures (including small works that are a play on "voodoo dolls"), paintings, and woodblock prints, as well as her own version of a pustaha (a divination book). Witches, a sexy satan, and innocent women tempted by demonic creatures populate the works.

Spanning roughly from the 15th to the 18th century were the notorious European witch hunts, a period of widespread moral panic. The hysteria was fueled in the 1480s by texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *De Lamiis et Pythonicis Mulieribus*, which instructed people on the urgency of identifying and eradicating supposed witches. Purportedly backed by papal authority, they depicted witchcraft as a dire threat and emphasized the critical need to eliminate this previously unrecognized danger. They are comprised of both text and some of the earliest illustrations of witches; as most of the audience for these books were unable to read (especially in latin), the imagery served to assist them in their hunt. Wilde's woodblock works, and her version of a pustaha, are inspired by these images.

Throughout history, clothing has served as a powerful symbol of identity, status, and conformity. In the creation of this exhibition, Wilde, a former milliner who acutely understands the power of what one wears, studied how clothing was weaponized against women during this time. Women who challenged gender roles, wore distinctive clothing, or did not conform to traditional styles, were more likely to be accused of witchcraft; their clothing serving as some of the evidence. The mere act of donning a particular garment could be fraught with peril - and become a matter of life and death.

More recently, the witch, once a symbol of fear and otherness, has been reclaimed by many contemporary women as an emblem of empowerment, individuality, and resistance to patriarchal norms. This transformation is vividly encapsulated in the popularity and prevalence of witch-like clothing. Characterized by elements such as flowing robes, pointed hats, and the use of dark, earthy tones, these kinds of clothes go beyond mere aesthetics, and represent a deliberate and conscious act of defiance against conventional beauty standards and societal expectations of femininity, becoming a vehicle for women to assert their autonomy, embrace their personal power, and reject the constraints historically placed on female identity and expression. These clothes are challenging traditional gender roles, and also paying homage to the resilience and strength of the "witchy" women who were persecuted.

The contemporary fascination with this style of clothing also reflects a broader cultural shift. It symbolizes a longing for connections with nature, the mystical, and the exploration of alternative spiritualities outside of mainstream religious practices. In a world increasingly dominated by technology and capitalism, this style of dress allows women to explore and express a more intuitive, mysterious side of their identities. This phenomenon also underscores the role of fashion as a form of non-verbal communication, a way to create solidarity among those who feel

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marginalized or silenced. By embracing a style associated with a historically persecuted group, women are not only reclaiming a narrative of oppression, but also forging a collective identity that celebrates diversity, strength in the face of adversity, and the right to self-definition.

In the history of witches, there is also a complex interplay between notions of sex, sexuality, and the demonic. These elements, historically used to demonize (and thus control) women, are today being reappropriated as symbols of sexual liberation and autonomy. In historic texts and imagery, the figure of the witch was often depicted in illicit sexual liaisons with the devil or as a seductive succubi – a potent symbol warning of female sexuality as being dangerous, uncontrollable, and malevolent. However, in contemporary fashion and cultural narratives, this association has been flipped. Women are increasingly embracing these once-maligned aspects as expressions of their sexual agency and power. In the exhibition, Wilde likewise flips puritanical notions and fear-mongering of sexuality on its head: here, a devil seduces a witch and a matronly, seemingly pure, bystander. A sexy satanic figure flies through the clouds; a snake coils around and through a green witch's breasts. Mirroring the embrace in contemporary culture, these elements and images traditionally linked to the demonic and sexually deviant are now a statement of unapologetic sexuality and feminine strength, and a tool for exploring and embracing a broader spectrum of female identity, allowing women to explore facets of their personality and sexuality that would have previously have been suppressed or stigmatized.

In the reclamation of the witch, there is a reclamation of women's own narrative. It turns the historical weaponization of non-conforming women, who were told to be both shamed and feared, into women who are embracing their power and independence: symbols of strength in the ongoing struggle against patriarchal dominance and the societal policing of female bodies and sexualities. It is a resistance against historical narratives that sought to control female sexuality; a stand against ongoing societal norms that seek to dictate women's choices; and a celebration of the rich complexity of female identity. This fashion "trend" is not merely a stylistic choice but a powerful statement in the ongoing discourse of gender, power, and liberation.