



White Magic

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Episode fifty-eight of the American TV show *The Monkees*, “Mijacogeo” (aka “The Frodis Caper”) tells the story of the Monkees saving the world from Glick, a mad wizard who is using television to exercise mind control over viewers around the world. At one point Micky, Michael and David are captured and tied up in Glick’s warehouse. They escape by using their own mental powers, summoning Peter telepathically with the help of a mystic chant, *nam myōhō renge kyō*. As part of an ongoing satire of hippy fashion and its appropriation of Eastern musical styles and philosophical ideas, the joke gets made several times that Micky didn’t learn it studying meditation with an Indian guru, but from sending away a coupon from a cereal box.

In the same year that the Monkees episode was written and filmed, and in a different but not too distant corner of West Coast American culture, Bruce Nauman made *Window or Wall Sign* (1967), which also locates something profound in an everyday context. The neon sign, such as might advertise a brand of beer, spells out the claim: “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths”. It is this work that provides the title and centerpiece for the exhibition *Mystic Truths*; and the possibility of articulating the mystical in a contemporary context is its guiding question.

In her curatorial essay Natasha Conland contends that the treating of mysticism is like “writing in disappearing ink”.¹ Within the dominant Western culture the word carries connotations of pretension and obfuscation, and so the ‘mystic’ in the proper sense of the ineffable—what can’t be said at all because it can only be known through personal

ritual experience, says (blurring with the private or non-hegemonic) what can’t be said publicly. In this grey zone, between spiritual enlightenment and not wanting to admit to reading horoscopes, the show explored art’s relation to belief and the occult.

The works presented cohered around questions about the nature and limits of the power of image or idea, the visual object as talisman perhaps, and the concept as spell. In fact, it was the other way around in one of Dane Mitchell’s works which presented a spell, creating a portal to the spirit world in the gallery itself, as conceptual art. The piece was marked by a plaque at the entrance to the gallery, acknowledging the assistance of a white witch. Mitchell also installed thermometers throughout the gallery that might test for the presence of spirits, believed to account for inexplicable temperature drops in haunted rooms.



While the status of practices like witchcraft, unlucky numbers and fortune-telling were questioned by works by Mitchell, A.P. Komen and Karen Murphy (investigating stories of a cursed cabin #13 at a resort) and Mikala Dwyer's (who employed a tree reader for free consultation during the exhibition in her installation), other works approached the thematic more obliquely. Perhaps like a spell, the strange power that an agreed meaning for something—a meaning that defines cultural belonging and is passed through time—can have, was brought out by the flower arrangement by Maria Loboda, made according to the gloomiest traditional flower symbolism. Also like a kind of spell casting, about wishes or desires, Jennifer Tee and Liz Maw's works employed a personal, invented, but allusive symbolism. And Thomas Zipp's painting enacted a kind of divination—painting about a place he's never been to.

Just the simple magic of representation was highlighted in the curatorial frame, where a model, a document, a re-enactment or even the possible referents for an image set up a play between perception and reality, most effectively through Barbara Visser's brilliant *Actor and Liar* which doubled the effects of representation by having the same person act the roles of interviewee and interviewer, presented on two back-to-back screens, in an exposition of the true story of a confidence trickster.

Where Nauman's piece contrasted the mystical with technology, Loris Gréaud invoked the history of technology's hauntings, and Laurent Grasso generated digital smoke and mirrors. Mitchell's two other works also staged special effects, miking up and amplifying squeaky floorboards, and having Colin McCahon's auratic status as an ex-employee of the gallery provide a glow from a gallery cupboard, door slightly ajar.

Playing the skeptic, David Hatcher's work joked about our desire for depth, enjoining *Do Not Attempt To Analyse Your Inner Experiences* in his wall painting *Om Message*, which self-diagnosed as an "Oedipal Manoeuvre In The Dark" against father figure theorists. In contrast, the psychoanalytic tone of Annette Messenger's treating the word "secret" as a symbolic object—presenting it in hairy, spidery, nesty writing—insisted on the consideration that the way we regard what is hidden—what is not revealed to sight, what is secret—may be important to the way we treat the feminine in general. Gender politics was also suggested by Olivia Plender's work with the proto-feminist spiritualist movement. The 'irrational' has a long and gendered history of persecution, yet this intensely political dimension to the show was left as a subtext, or secret. Conland leaves it that the phrase "mystic truths" is an "oxymoron" hearing in the English word "truth" the dominant Enlightenment legacy of scientific reason. Of course, it is not just semantics or logic that makes it hard to talk about certain things in certain contexts though, or to get the ink to show up,

but a culturally located politics of belief. Rather than fictional mumbojumbo, Monkee Micky's Japanese chant is an actual mantra 'revealed' by the Buddhist teacher Nichiren in the thirteenth-century. It derives from the Lotus Sutra, the teaching of the first historically recorded Buddha, known as Siddhartha Gautama or Shakyamuni Buddha who lived in India around 500 BC, and its words contains the concept the "mystic truth" (sometimes translated as "sublime law"), which in this teaching is an awareness of the presence of Buddha nature in all beings, their potential for love and compassion, and so the possibility for all to attain Buddhahood.

The Arabic word *Haqiqah* in Sufi tradition also means "mystic truth" without any contradiction in terms. At a time when the homelands of this mysticism are subject to military violence and such films as the 2007 adaptation of *300* continue to insult the legacy of Persia, there is a compelling opportunity to inspect these cultural aspects of the politics of the 'mystic', and its association with what is 'other' to Western values.

More locally too, the politics of belief and ritual practices have a specific history that the show elides. The Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907 for example, made it a crime for New Zealand's indigenous Maori to use their medicines and other spiritual knowledge, and these traditions are in a process of revival and regeneration that is hard to imagine integrating easily into the contemporary art institution, and the consistently European framework (and contributing artists) of *Mystic Truths*.

In her catalogue essay, Ann Demeester links the exhibition to a range of international events dealing with similar concerns, "from the large-scale show *Strange Powers* organised by Creative Time NY (July–September 2006) to the small-scale group show *Future Primitive* in UKS, Oslo (April–May 2007)... and... *New Spiritualism in Art* scheduled to be on view in Centre Pompidou, Paris in Spring 2008".² *Who's Afraid Of The Big, Bad Wolf?* co-curated by Emma Bugden and Pita Turei (Te Tuhi, Auckland, March–April 2007) might join the list.

More generally, in the year that Robert Storr's *Venice Biennale* proposed we approach a selection of some of the most celebrated contemporary art as "Art in the present tense" with the suggestion that we should "Think With The Senses, Feel With The Mind", ideas about thought, belief and knowledge, and the limits of reason in relation to our experience of art seem to be in question regardless of subject matter. This chapter in the epic global wrestle of scientific reason versus contemplation, the massive and ongoing processing of the oppositions set up between Greek rationalism and Abrahamic revelation, is to some extent prefigured by Isabel Carlos' 2004 *Biennale of Sydney, On Reason And Emotion*.

Mystic Truths reframed some familiar truths in this context—that the kinds of significance that art works have is similar to that of personal talismans or ritual objects in that it may not be something easy or even necessary to explain; that art is irreducible to accounts of its thematic concerns or its formal achievements; that an approved role for art can be to elude and thereby challenge preconceived notions, fool the senses, and, in these ways, take us beyond instrumental reason; that representations are always gestures beyond themselves, and so like Sufi poetry can express mystic truths, things that aren't representable. By doing so in relation to a particular sphere or popular belief, however, there is something far more specific in the works that the curator's sensibility and cultural location have drawn together. The show successfully presents strategies for coping with the endlessly skeptical space of contemporary art, aware of the impossibility of simply asserting something within it, the tedium of simple irony, and the fundamental interest of experience.

Mystic Truths

Curator Natasha Conland
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand
www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz/
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Notes

¹ Natasha Conland, 'Mystic Truths—New Sense Rather Than Non Sense', *Mystic Truths* (catalogue), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2007: 13

² Ann Demeester, 'As Certain as Can Be—A Case Study in Pop Sociology', *Mystic Truths* (catalogue): 26