

UNQUIET
THINGS *for kindred glooms*22
Jan
2021Sensory, Imaginative, and Psychic:
Interview With Artist Gina Litherland

categories: art, interviews, The Art Of The Occult



Next up in this very informal series of interviews with the contemporary artists whose work I was generously allowed to include in *The Art of the Occult* is [Gina Litherland](#).

Active in the visual arts since the mid-1970s, exploring photography, performance, drawing, and painting, Gina Litherland studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and her paintings, drawings, and articles have been published worldwide in journals and periodicals. Her essay on the connections between creative activity and the natural world, "Imagination & Wilderness," appears in [Surrealist Women: An International Anthology](#) (University of Texas Press).

Enthralled with folktales, myths, and literature since childhood, these themes have served as an important source of inspiration in her work. Children's games, old theater forms such as puppetry and opera, traditional British folk ballads, divination, superstitions, the human/animal boundary, and the natural world wherein the mundane commingles with the magical to coalesce into the richly detailed visions, fables, and dreams on her canvas.

I am so pleased to share with you my recent interview with this generous-hearted, delightful artist, wherein we chat about tea and divination, fairytales and curious women, and the endless and fantastical inspiration to be found in nature



Tea Leaf Reading

In “Tea Leaf Reading”, the painting that you kindly allowed inclusion of in *The Art of the Occult*, we are treated to the divinatory dramatics of a session of tasseomancy wherein two figures contemplate the portents in a teacup, while various animals look on in interest, or flit overhead, perhaps in alarm! Can you tell us about your own interest in/history with/or practice of various divinatory techniques and rituals? And while we’re spilling the tea, what’s your favorite brew to have on hand—either while working on your art, or just relaxing with a cuppa?

My interest in divination started when I was in high school and bought my first tarot deck. I went to our local bookstore in Gary, a tiny place called “The Book Nook” and bought the Swiss Tarot, the only one they carried. If you’re familiar

with that deck it's an old design and many of the images have a dark, foreboding quality. I really like it, but the Devil card in that deck is absolutely terrifying. I dabbled with it a bit, got a little spooked by it, and put it aside. I hadn't really studied the Tarot, I was just fooling around with it.

Some years later I picked up my first I Ching, which interested me greatly and I've used that consistently over the years. I also began studying the Tarot more deeply and occasionally did readings for other people. The images intrigued me. I was also very interested in astrology and studied that, and did charts for people. I got a reading around that time from an astrologer who told me that art would be the central focus of my life and that it was imperative that I use my creativity. I already sort of knew this, but at the time it was a great encouragement to me. She also said that my painting would take the place of the tarot for me. That was interesting, because I never fully connected with the imagery of any of the tarot decks that I found. I eventually came to the conclusion that I would have to create my own. I started one about 5 years ago and I'm hoping to finish it in another 5 years or so. I want to do all 78 cards so the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana are illustrated and that's a lot of work! Beyond that I think all sorts of divination methods are interesting, like palmistry, bird augury, tea leaf reading, etc.

My favorite tea? I drink tea all day and I love black tea, green tea, mint tea, and there's also a tangerine/orange tea with rose hips that I drink every day. I have lemon balm growing completely out of control in back of the house, and I can pick it fresh in the summer and blend it with mint. It's wonderful, especially when it's fresh like that. Lemon balm is excellent for lifting the spirits, too, and Nicholas Culpepper wrote that it made the mind "happy and bright!"



A Friendly Game



Little Red Cap



Beautiful Wolf Lady

I've seen mention of a handful of your favorite artists—Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Hilma af Klint, and Vali Myers, to name a few. Can you tell me what it is about these artist's work or vision that speaks to you so profoundly? Is there a common thread that you find particularly compelling?

Leonora Carrington's work has an airy luminosity to it, and references to Celtic mythology and magic which fascinate me. Remedios Varo's work is also magical and hermetic. Both of these artists obviously studied early Renaissance painting, something I'm also inspired by, and used it in a very personal way. Vali's work feels very intimate, like looking in someone's diary. Hilma af Klint's work has an elegant, glowing balance. What they all share is working from their inner vision and being wholly committed to it. That is always the kind of work that interests me.

You speak of how in every myth and folktale, there is a pivotal scene in which an encounter occurs, pushing the hero/heroine into an unknown world in which they have to learn to navigate. What are some of your most beloved fairy tales, mythic stories, poems, or parables, in which such a shift occurs? Can you speak to how you may have interpreted that scene or characters through the strokes of your paintbrush?

One of my favorites is Little Red Riding Hood. It's so basic and perfect and the image of the little girl facing the wolf is an iconographic image that's understood universally. It's also what I call one of the "anti-curiosity stories", the warning being "don't stray from the path". Like Bluebeard's bride being warned not to open that one door, or Pandora being told not to open the box, it's the old warning to women not to be curious. They are all basic rehashings of Eve in the garden speaking to the serpent and eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. I find it all fascinating. The encounter leads to a revelation of some sort, maybe terrible, maybe wonderful. Red Riding Hood and Beauty and the Beast are also two of my favorite fairy tales because they involve a human female encountering an animal.

A recurring theme in my work is penetrating the wall that separates humans from other animals. Part of what the myth of the Garden of Eden is about to me is that our fall occurred when we recognized that we were different from animals, we felt the shame of being naked. That's when we lost paradise and why we have this longing to repair the rift between humanity and nature, but we struggle against it, too. We want to be superior and we're not.

When I depict these scenes I'm showing them through a lens of female experience. A woman or girl is having this moment of discovery that will lead her to some new understanding. This discovery is sensory, imaginative, and psychic. It is not interested in control but in learning from the encounter.



The Unknown Room

...And as we often see ourselves in the stories we are most drawn to, I am curious as to how much of yourself do you see emerging forth on the canvas as you share these stories through your personal lens and the medium of your art?

From the time I started reading these stories when I was little, I related them to my own experience completely. I loved the thought of Little Red Riding Hood bravely straying from that path in the woods, in the way that I loved to explore the wooded areas near the house I grew up in. It felt mysterious and dangerous. And now, when I'm painting these scenes the situations still feel fresh to me, that feeling of awe and discovery that I feel when I'm walking through the woods or when I'm painting.

I did a painting called *The Unknown Room* that shows a woman about to open a door with a key. I had a dream that I was at the door of my old house from my childhood. The door in the dream looked just like the one in the painting, like a weathered, medieval door with a wonderful texture. When I opened it, I entered a beautiful room of glass filled with glittering bottles. That moment at the door, when I was deciding to go in, reminded me of the Bluebeard story. When Bluebeard warns his wife not to open that door, and then she does as soon as he leaves, that moment at the door is the most suspenseful in all of literature! She opens it and

sees all of the murdered wives that came before her, the most ghastly sight. The discovery, as horrid as it was, saved her life. The discovery can be wonderful or horrific. Often these encounter stories have multiple levels of meaning for me, the original meaning layered with my own experience. The fact that they take a long time for me to paint, usually a few months, gives me lots of time to think about the meaning.



Crazy Jane

I see the term “Midwest surrealism” used in many descriptions of your work; though I suppose I could conjure for myself some imagery of what that might mean, I’d love to hear your thoughts on it for folks who may not be familiar.

There was a group of wonderful artists working in Wisconsin and Chicago, starting in the 1940s, who were strongly influenced by the European Surrealists. Some of them were Gertrude Abercrombie, Sylvia Fein, Marshall Glasier, Dudley Huppler, Karl Priebe, Julia Thecla, and John Wilde. If you looked at their work and compared it to the European Surrealists, there’s nothing particularly Midwestern about it. It’s a category created by art historians and critics because they like to label things. If you are an artist and stay in the Midwest, the tag of regionalism always follows you around. I personally love the Midwest and feel fiercely loyal to my Midwestern roots, so it’s fine with me.



early work from the artist

Ok, so I don't want to embarrass you, but on Facebook you shared a drawing you had created when you were four years old and it was so much fun to see that colorful little relic from your formative years! Obviously a great deal has changed and evolved over time since that artistic offering from toddler-you... but maybe not everything...!

To my eye, you seem to work in a very similar color palette today! Those deep, rich, beautifully earthy shades can still be seen to great effect in your current work (I actually see so many of them in *Tea Leaf Reading*!) Can you speak to the use of color in your work?

That's funny, because I recently found that early drawing that I did and one of the reasons I posted it was that I did really think that it was unmistakably my work. I think your observation about the colors is great. What I noticed was that I made sure each hand had five fingers, the clothes were kind of detailed and fancy, and I still love that sort of detail. One of the things I love about drawing and painting is that the personal stamp is so unavoidable. That brain-to-hand communication, the kind of line a person uses, for example, are as unique and personal as a fingerprint or a signature. I love the pure tactility of painting. And yes, I do gravitate toward earth colors and jewel tones. I also like to layer color, which oil paint does so beautifully, and use glazes so one color shows through another.



Life on the Moon

You sometimes use a “decalcomania” technique by stamping various colors onto the panel and letting the textural forms suggest images, through which a narrative forms. You have noted that this can be a very satisfying way to work, and often the most revelatory— with a world emerging out of nowhere. In this time of isolation and COVID, we haven’t been seeing much of the world at all over the course of the past year. I’d love to live vicariously through the worlds you are creating! Can you tell us please about the worlds you’ve been most excited to have seen revealed to you on your canvas of late?

When the pandemic first hit, honestly, I was stunned. I spent a lot of time staring out the window and watching the birds at the feeders. I kept a notebook and mostly drew funny cartoons of myself having no energy and watching the busy, industrious little birds and squirrels outside. Then I started thinking about one of my favorite writers, Shirley Jackson, and her book, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. It’s been one of my favorite books for a long time. One day, my husband, Hal, said to me, “I would have chosen different library books if I knew this was going to happen.” It reminded me of an almost identical line at the beginning of *Castle* that comes from Merricat about their own library books, chosen right before she and her sister, Constance, completely sequester themselves from the world. I

decided this would be a good time to pay tribute to that novel.

So I did my Portrait of Mary Katherine Blackwood, for Shirley Jackson. Merricat stands in the middle of a wooded area with her cat, Jonas, neatly folded into her arms safely tucked into her own feral, magical world. Around this time I also did a cooking painting, with two women making a big harvest stew with a variety of animals assisting them in the kitchen. I've become obsessed with cooking during the pandemic, and enjoy figuring out what to cook next. Now I'm working on a painting of harpies and another one of a woman standing in an incandescent garden at night. These two paintings were just begun very recently and I think they both radiate a kind of eerie light in the darkness. Now that we're coming into 2021, I'm trying to be hopeful in the midst of all of the chaos of the world.



Do you have a particular process you use when entering into your work? What gets you in the mood to create? Any rituals or practices?

I always start my day by feeding the birds and squirrels. After breakfast, I have a cup of coffee or tea, then I light some incense, and put some music on before I begin. I do this without fail every morning. I decided this would be a good time to pay tribute to that novel.



A Most Celebrated Raccoon



In Bloom

You have an essay in the collection *Surrealist Women*, titled “Imagination and Wilderness” stating that “The imagination is a wilderness — liberating, ecstatic, waiting to grow and fly and howl.” I’m still trying to track down a copy of the book because it sounds absolutely marvelous! And my own imagination is set wonderfully alight/aflight by your words in this vein as I consider this impact of the natural world on the human psyche and creativity. Can you tell us a bit more about that statement and perhaps also about the influence of the natural world upon your own work?

One of the ideas that I was trying to get across in that essay is that our psyches need wild spaces and wild life in very deep complex ways. Nature is endlessly creative and fantastic. It’s an imaginative entity in itself, and everybody needs it, not just the animals that live in these spaces. Nothing stimulates the imagination like sitting in nature, looking at the way a bird’s nest is made, or the intricate symmetry of flowers.

I was also thinking about the similarity between taking a walk in the woods, looking at the forest floor, noticing little things like plant debris, lichen, small animals hiding here and there; the similarity between that and painting, dabbing paint on a panel and seeing forms, having textures suggest other forms, the associations that come into the mind if you can be receptive to these suggestions. Nature is constantly creating and extinguishing life forms in the same way that unconscious thoughts rise and vanish in our minds. Being receptive to passing unconscious thoughts are what the surrealists meant by pure psychic automatism.

Civilization has treated nature like a commodity, and by doing this, we’re not only creating a very unhealthy environment, we’re killing off a part of our minds and turning ourselves into automatons. Human beings are much too arrogant and lacking in respect for wilderness. If you turn to wilderness with an attitude of receptivity and respect, it always gives something precious back to you. I love the myth of the Norns, the three women who took care of the tree, Yggdrasil, from the Poetic Edda. Yggdrasil was the tree of the world, the center of the universe, and the Norns were three wise women that nurtured the tree, watered it, and tended it. I find that incredibly beautiful, the idea that just tending to a tree and nurturing it can have an effect on the universe. I think it’s true.

Previously in this series of artist interviews:

[Connections, Connections, Connections: An Interview With Artist Susan Jamison](#)

[The Images Wish To Speak: An Interview With Artist Carrie Ann Baade](#)