

Modern Witchcraft and Identifying With the Dead

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Abstract

The modern witchcraft movement is a spiritual activism that began in the UK in the 1950s and spread to the U. S. in the 1970s. According to Starhawk, who is an American leading feminist witch, compared to other spiritual practices, one of the unique traits of this movement in the U. S. is that modern witches are trying to identify with the victims in witch hunts and to “take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims.” But how is it possible to identify with the dead who lived in another time and region? This paper shows how contemporary witches, in their practice, identify with the victims in the historical event. In order to reveal this, this paper analyzes artworks by Yumeno Goto, who is known as a modern witch in Japan and does oil painting as an act of modern witchcraft and examine the ways in which Goto fills the gap between depicting the past and saving the today’s people as an artist witch.

Keywords: Modern Witchcraft, Neo-Paganism, Feminist Spirituality, Starhawk, Yumeno Goto

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Introduction

This paper begins with a discussion of the definition of a witch in *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk, a best seller book about modern witchcraft. Starhawk writes, “To be a Witch is to identify with nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims.” As Starhawk defines it, modern witches are those who identify with the dead who lived in other times and regions. This essay discusses how this definition of modern witches influences and informs artworks by Yumeno Goto, who is known as a modern witch in Japan and does oil painting as an act of modern witchcraft. Specifically, this paper analyzes the *Thorn Maria* series to examine the ways in which Goto fills the gap between depicting the past and saving the today’s people as an artist witch. Through an analysis of the *Thorn Maria* series, I seek to understand how modern witches identify with the victims of history.

On Modern Witchcraft and the Goddess

The modern witchcraft or neo-pagan witchcraft movement is a spiritual movement that began in the UK in the 1950s, when the law against witchcraft, the Witchcraft Act 1735, was repealed (Du Chene 171). The abolition of the law led to some people claiming that they had been practicing modern witchcraft in secret. Modern witchcraft reconstructed a pre-Christian, pagan religion that is believed to have been hidden from society because of witch hunts. This pre-Christian, pagan religion worshipped Goddess as well as God, unlike other major religions that are often male-centered. Because of the unique gender relationship in its ritual, the modern witchcraft movement spread to the U. S. in the 1960s and 1970s, adopted by feminists. Feminists did not simply embrace the movement but also developed new aspects under the second-wave feminism (Salomonsen 6).

One of the leading books that have contributed to this feminist shift in modern witchcraft movement is the aforementioned *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* by Starhawk, released in 1979. This book is well known for its influence on Dana Haraway’s *a Cyborg Manifesto*. In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk defines a witch as a person who identifies with the victims of witch hunts and resists the prejudice all over the world. But the question that arises from this definition is, how is it possible to identify with the dead who lived in different times and different regions? I suggest that the key to the answer lies in her concept of the Goddess. Starhawk formed a coven, called Reclaiming, in San Francisco in 1979 where people worshipped the Goddess. *Reclaiming Newsletter*01, published in 1980, opens with the declaration that “We reclaim the Goddess: the immanent life force, the connecting pattern of all being” (*Reclaiming* 1). The Goddess here is not a transcendent deity, but a presence immanent in the world, including ourselves. According to Starhawk, the goddess is the eternally moving energy and sacredness underlying all we can touch, and thus all beings are connected and linked to it (Starhawk 164). The Goddess cannot be fully accessed by the ordinary consciousness. Therefore, witches would need to go into a state of trance by doing rituals and to access the Goddess who exists beyond the cultural limitations of their awareness, thereby gaining a different perspective on the world (Starhawk 42,167). By accessing the Goddess through rituals, the ordinal boundary in space and time can be overcome.

On Yumeno Goto's Artwork

The works of Yumeno Goto are good examples of modern witchcraft. Goto is an oil painter and a modern witch in Japan. She creates the arts of oil painting as witchcraft art works. She said, “I consider everything in terms of the Goddess,” in an interview published in 2022.¹ She creates paintings with “myths, folklore, magic, the Virgin Mary and the Goddess, and quotations from the history of art” as motifs. She stated that “through her senses and hands, she mourns, scoops up, and reweaves the sorrows of the oppressed and hunted in the past and stretches a hand to the future generations.”² In a Japanese TV show on April 26, 2022, she announced, “I want to shed light on the people who were oppressed in the past, so I would be happy if I can bring magic or salvation to people who feel that they don't fit in this world.”³ The *Thorn Maria* series by Goto are oil paintings on wooden panel supports. The five works from the series, *Thorn Maria XVIII* to *Thorn Maria XXII*, were exhibited at her solo exhibition *Recreate the Hidden Goddess* held at Ginza Tsutaya from September 9 to September 20, 2023. At the center of the paintings are the Virgin Mary with her skin exposed. There are several nails/thorns driven into the paintings. Some of the nails/thorns have their tips pointing toward the inside of the paintings, while others pointing toward the outside. Despite the nails/thorns, *Thorn Maria* has a peaceful look on her face. The surfaces of the paintings are rough like a rock surface.



Figure 1: Thorn Maria XVIII

¹ 『後藤夢乃インタビュー<後編>魔女として絵を錬成し、人々を救済する』 [Interview with Yumeno Goto <Part 2> Alchemizing pictures as a witch and saving people] by Tagboat: https://tagboat.tokyo/artistinterview/yumeno_goto2.

² Goto, Y (2023). Artist statement on *Recreate the hidden goddess*

³ Iura, T. (Executive Producers). (April 2, 2022). 『ブレイク前夜 ～次世代の芸術家たち～：画家 後藤夢乃』 [The Night Before the Break: Artists of the Next Generation: Painter Yumeno Goto]. BS Fuji.



Figure 2: Thorn Maria XIX



Figure 3: Thorn Maria XX



Figure 4: Thorn Maria XXI



Figure 5: Thorn Maria XXII

The *Thorn Maria* Series and “Carnal Contingence”

Although the *Thorn Maria* series depicts the Virgin Mary, there are several representations that remind us of the image of the historical witches fraught with prejudice against women. The nails/thorns hammered throughout the paintings are reminiscent of the needle test during witch hunts. The needle test involved pricking the accused person with a needle or pins to find a “witch’s mark” or insensitive spot on the body. It was believed that witches, due to their alleged pact with the devil, had areas on their bodies that were numb to pain. The logic behind this test was that if a person did not react to the pain of being pricked, it was seen as

evidence of their involvement in witchcraft. Despite being pricked with needles/thorns, Thorn Maria has a calm expression on her face and the corners of her mouth are slightly upturned. *Thorn Maria XVIII* and *Thorn Maria XXII* are painted entirely in blue, and *Thorn Maria XIX*, *Thorn Maria XX*, and *Thorn Maria XXI* are painted entirely in red, giving the impression that Thorn Maria is being thrown into a stream of water or into a blazing fire. It seems as if Thorn Maria is undergoing the swimming test and is burned at the stake in a witch hunt. Differently from many other Marian arts in which she wears blue or white clothes, Thorn Maria is naked. Many witches in western art history are also often nude.⁴

The *Thorn Maria* series, though being basically portrayals of Mary, has some features that recall the historical witches as victims of patriarchy. The image of the witch created by the delusion of a patriarchal society as a woman who has “insatiable sexual appetite” and engages in orgies with the devil in the night world, is the opposite of the Virgin Mary, who is known for her immaculate conception of Jesus (Naito 156). The cult of Mary is criticized by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* as a “supreme masculine victory” (Beauvoir 225). This is because Christianity, abhorring and fearing the flesh and animality in women, venerates the Virgin Mary as “the image of the most perfected woman, propitious to men,” who is far from real women (Beauvoir 224–225). The cult of the Virgin Mary, who is a transcendent being created in the fantasies of Christian patriarchal society, functioned as an exclusion of women in society. It is estimated that women constituted 85 percent of those executed during witch hunts (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 105). Jung also points out the connection between the collective worship of the Virgin Mary and the devaluation of real women, and argues that witch hunts occurred as a result of the rising Mariolatry in medieval society (Jung 236). The cult of the Virgin Mary and witch hunts are linked together in that they both stem from a fear of the real female body. According to Beauvoir, the fear of the female body comes from men projecting “the horror of his own carnal contingency” onto women (Beauvoir 201). In other words, men find their fear of all the characteristics of the body that cannot be controlled by reason (e.g., aging, sexual desire, etc.) in the female body. The exposed skin of Thorn Maria can be seen as an emphasis on the presence of the body. By drawing *Thorn Maria* series, Goto attempts to unite the sacredness and the animalistic nature of women, which have been divided in society, and to reclaim the animalistic nature of the body as sacred. In *Witches*, Erica Jong observes, “The Virgin Mary is a sanitized version of the Mother Goddess—sanitized and fragmented,” since her real body is eliminated and only “motherhood” remains (Jong 30). Thorn Maria may be seen as a figure of the Virgin Mary freed from sanitization. “Carnal contingency” also includes pain, which we can’t control. The nails/thorns in Thorn Maria, who has a peaceful expression on her face, teach the viewers about the existence of pain she has in her daily life.

Witchcraft of Paintings Beyond Time and Space Through Sharing Pain

The pain of Thorn Maria is not confined to the picture but it reaches beyond the surface of the painting. In an interview published before “MEET YOUR ART FESTIVAL 2023,” an event for up-and-coming contemporary artists in Japan, Goto said that she makes her paintings transcend the boundaries of the surface by creating a rock-like surface with multiple layers of pigments. The nails/thorns in Thorn Maria play a similar role. Nails are used to join pieces of

⁴ Alprecht Dürer, *The Witch* (1501); Hans Baldunggreen, *The Witches* (1508–10); Francisco de Goya, *Witches’ Flight* (1798); Antoine Wiertz, *Young Sorceress* (1857); Albert Joseph Penot, *Witch On Broom Departure For The Sabbath* (1910), etc.

wood together.⁵ The nails/thorns connect the real world where we live and the world inside the picture. Many of Goto's works are not varnished on the surface. One of the reasons Goto does not varnish the surface of her works is, according to her interview on July 10, 2022, that, "varnish coatings add a single film over the surface of the painting," and "the painting would not be able to transcend the boundaries." Goto adds that this art style was established recently and she used to varnish her paintings to "make them shiny," but she had found that the people in her paintings "became people from the past" because of the coating.⁶ Goto paints about historical or mythological subjects, but she does not shut them up inside the "past." The pain of Thorn Maria goes beyond the surface of the painting and seeps out into the real world in which we are.

The nails/thorns express the pain of Thorn Maria, which is due to the hatred directed toward her body. The presence of the thorns/nails hammered into her emphasizes the "Carnal contingency" that all of us have, and yet is abhorred in civilized society. Some of the nails/thorns in *Thorn Maria* series have their tips pointing toward the outside of the painting. Thus, they represent the pain that viewers have as well. When I asked Goto about the *Thorn Maria* series, she said, "*Thorn Maria* series represents the crossing of the painting's boundaries and acceptance of pain by driving nails/thorns into the painting from both the inside and the outside." Through the pain of the Thorn Maria, the viewers recognize their pain whose presence has been ignored and suppressed. The thorns/nails that penetrate both the paintings and the viewers dissolve the boundary between the pain of Thorn Maria and the pain of the viewers. Sharing their pain, the viewers, including Goto herself, identify with the victims of witch hunts.



Figure 6: Thorns/Nails

Conclusion

The modern witchcraft movement emerged as a revival of pre-Christian, pagan traditions with a unique emphasis on the worship of the Goddess in the UK in the 1950s and spread to

⁵ MEET YOUR ART. (August 25, 2023). 『【アトリエ訪問 with 片寄涼太】キリスト教以前の欧州の土着の宗教観をテーマに制作する・後藤夢乃の森のアトリエ【THE BASE】』[*Atelier Visit with Ryota Katayose*] *The Forest Atelier of Yumeno Goto, who creates works on the theme of indigenous religious views in pre-Christian Europe* [THE BASE][Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kqjV45eqSE>

⁶ biscuit gallery. (July 20, 2022). 『後藤夢乃×円香 魔女対談@ 2022年7月10日』 [*Yumeno Goto & Madoka Witches' Dialogue on July 10, 2022*] [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLCem1BwNV8>

the U. S. in the 1970s. According to Starhawk, this spiritual movement influenced by feminist perspectives in the 1970s United States, regards a modern witch as one who identifies with historical victims of persecution and resists prevailing prejudices. The key to this identification lies in the concept of the Goddess, an immanent life force connecting all beings, transcending ordinary consciousness through ritualistic practices. Yumeno Goto's artwork, particularly the *Thorn Maria* Series, is a good example of modern witchcraft. The *Thorn Maria* Series explores the intersection between the Virgin Mary's portrayal and historical prejudices against women during witch hunts, challenging societal constructs around female bodies. Goto's artwork transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, rejecting the confinement of historical or mythological subjects to the past. The nails and thorns, penetrating both paintings and observers, dissolve boundaries between the viewers living in the real world and the figure of Thorn Maria depicted in the paintings. The *Thorn Maria* series serves as powerful modern, enabling viewers to acknowledge and accept suppressed pain. In this way, Goto ultimately bridges the gap depicting the past and saving the today's people.

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