

An Artist's Perspective

Judith Hoch

I am an artist and anthropologist. Many of my ideas were born during anthropological research and teaching when I gained an appreciation for ancient symbols and traditions which defined humanity for 99.9% of our time on the planet. During this immense span of human history, we were mainly gatherers and hunters, enjoying relative gender equality,



freedom from warfare, and close proximity to the spirits of nature. I believe that the development of institutional religions in tandem with population growth, territoriality, and consumerism have combined to warp human life. My art practice returns to our source through an appreciation for the nature and our mysterious cosmos.

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Accursed Charms



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My paintings in the series, *Accursed Charms*, refer to the longest holocaust in history: the witch trials and executions which took place between 1450 and 1750 in the British Isles, Scandinavia, Russia, and Europe. These violent centuries of European history destroyed the pagan past and defamed woman's character with many repercussions still felt in our contemporary world.

Many people in the West feel that Christian religions are due unquestioned respect as an intrinsic right (and tax exempt status!), and that Christianity in general is somehow “better” than non-Western fundamentalist sects in which women are inferior to men. This is despite the fact that the Christian religion is responsible for many past and present human rights violations against women such as the torturing and execution of thousands of innocent women during the witch inquisitions in early modern Europe, the refusal to sanction women’s own control over their bodies, and the creation of secondary status for women in theology and practice (not to mention the continuing missionary overthrow of indigenous traditions of gender equality throughout the world).



The paintings and essays which are part of my *Accursed Charms* series refer specifically to the curse laid on women through a campaign of legalized terror, initiated and supported by both the Catholic and Protestant Churches. My paintings include images of clergy and the secular men who worked for them, torturing women and executing them by burning and hanging.



The paintings in *Accursed Charms* also show women declaring an end to terror and oppression, crying out that it is time for a united Earth community to outlaw any religion, which does not observe a bill of rights for all genders and peoples.

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With my paintings in *Accursed Charms*, I made large what I first found as small and hidden from her/history: the tiny black and white woodcut illustrations made by artists attending witch executions. In order to record the events of the day, artists sat in reserved front row seats capturing the barbaric actions of the executioners and the final, chilling moments of the victims. These artists’ black and white works became illustrations in chapbooks sold as popular mementos. Chapbooks were important to rural people as entertainments, full of tantalizing misinformation about the heinous crimes of the witch in service to the devil. Chapbooks were mostly small paper-covered booklets, usually printed on a single sheet folded into books of 8, 12, 16 and 24 pages. I studied and copied illustrations from Chapbooks in the rare book room at Cornell University. To my mind and eye they were like children’s books, yet they conveyed a powerfully evil message about women and showed women dying painfully in public for a totally imaginary crime: witchcraft disguised in the language of “heresy.”



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Scholars now agree that the crime of witchcraft was essentially a *woman's crime*, so that in reality, courts executed women for the crime of *being women*. There was no proof of witchcraft which could serve as evidence in a modern court of law. According to witch manuals, all women were capable of being witches and probably were. Cleric authors articulated this definition of a witch as definitively female. It was just a step away to use their arguments to convict a woman of being a witch in court, and that is exactly what happened before the courts changed their rules. Innocent women, accused of being witches, *ipso facto*, were witches, because *all* women were evil witches.

The largest number of executions took place in Germany and Scotland the homeland of many of my ancestors. Scholars' estimates of the number of women killed range from the tens to the hundreds of thousands. In many villages, people were encouraged to accuse women they knew of witchcraft, by placing an anonymous note, naming an unsuspecting victim, in a box in the center of the village. A victim's property could be confiscated upon conviction, and her relatives had to pay for everything including her torture and the wood to burn her. What an amazing racket this organized witch hunting proved to be when it reached into every poor woman's pocket to line the purses of the men at the top of the food chain!



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The First God



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What was the folk religion of Europe for many centuries prior to the witch trials? My series of works, *The First God*, employs symbols from early European art to depict a spiritual alternative to Christianity, one which, unlike Christianity, is actually found in the ancestry of every person because it is so much older. I think my *The First God* series of works is a new iconography for a spirituality based in nature, the true creator, sustainer and destroyer of our existence. Christian

clerics try to usurp these natural powers in favor of an invisible “god” with which only they can communicate. In truth, nature is our first religion and always responsive to us if we know how to approach it with gratitude and love.

Witch trials and killings took place during the time when Europe was unifying into national and state identities. At that time, religion was of two varieties: that of the country and of the city. City folk were mainly Christian and country folk were a little Christian and a lot pagan. Country people believed that nature was sacred and that magic rites and ceremonies could bind together the spirits of nature with those of people and their communities. Women’s status in the country was equal to that of men; rural women worked side by side with men in roles of importance, as they do in many subsistence economies. The religion of nature recognized a local feminine deity as well as a great feminine god in many parts of Europe.



Ceremonies and rituals marked agricultural and life cycles, established spirit protection over farmland, or sent gratitude to nature spirits for sustaining life. Local people used herbs to heal themselves and respected the energy of Earth, water, and sky upon which their livelihoods depended. They also honored their ancestors and the ceremonial sites that they’d inherited, especially the megalithic stone structures found in many places in Europe and the

British Isles. Sacred groves of ancient trees were often meeting places for ritual and celebration, groves that the ancestors planted and protected to preserve water supplies, wood reserves and other ecological benefits. Urban Christian clerics envied the sacred power of these sites. The centuries of the Christian witch terror made it plain that there would be no more singing, dancing, herbal healing or night time meetings at the old standing stones or in the sacred groves of the forest, and accordingly, many of these sites were destroyed or commandeered for Christian use. (11)

Ancient European art is filled with images of nature, the closest thing to the divine on Earth. In my large work, *Return to the Source*, birds fly upward and outward into the unknown, carrying souls from earth, blending features with humans, and laying magical eggs. The anthropologist Marija Gimbutas documented the bird, as well as many other Neolithic symbols, in her encyclopedic works, *The Language of the Goddess*, *The Civilization of the Goddess* and others. Forces of light, bringers of death, and messengers, birds are powerful spirit entities. The magical qualities of eggs and flight set birds apart from people and provide powerful symbols of regeneration, birth, and spiritual evolution.



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Marija Gimbutas, late anthropologist of old Europe, found the Neolithic artist used a frog’s bent, hind legs to symbolize a birthing woman and the frog’s tail to express spiraling womb-energy. The symbols on the body of my *Frog Goddess* figure are part of this Neolithic

artistic vocabulary. Neolithic artists used animals to represent qualities admired by humans. The frog transforms itself from egg to tadpole to swimming amphibian at the right time and without undue



stress. Can we *Homo sapiens* do the same? Can we transform ourselves from juveniles into adults capable of living on Earth in a sustainable and peaceful way? The answer to that is just around the corner. Some say it will come with the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, others with the end of petroleum. (13)

I was lucky to live in Britain before Stonehenge with entrance tunnels highway. There's something about the come away changed, but you probably while. They exert attracting energy, so soul longs to return. It was the stones to solstices and equinoxes. Until the idea what those terms really meant.



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Stonehenge, and the hundreds of other stone circles, lines, and menhirs in the British Isles, had alignments with many significant lunar and solar events. Many of the stone circles and lines were calendars of great precision, which marked the solar and lunar expansions and contractions across the natural year. Megalithic/Neolithic cultures studied the skies with such concentration that they could predict the eighteen-year wobble in the cycle of the moon with their stone observatories. The solstices were the corner points of the year (still are!) marking concordance between Earth

and Heaven.

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Artemis is an ancient Goddess worshipped at Ephesus under the Latin name of Diana. Her temple was in its glory around 550 BC and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The legend of the day was that Amazons built Artemis' first temple. Over the course of the fourth century, Ephesians converted to Christianity. Because of the hatred of the new Christians, Theodosius declared Artemis temple closed in 391 AD. In 401, a mob led by St. John Chrysostom finally destroyed this great architectural wonder, and the stones were used in construction of other buildings. Some of the columns in Hagias Sophia originally belonged to the Artemis' temple. This was a common way of completely erasing pagan religion from the map: destroy a sacred site and reuse the building materials. (16)



In my *Artemis and the Snake God*, pictured above, Artemis contains her regenerative fish (later taken by Christianity as its symbol), water symbols, and death-dogs. From her hand, she throws a thunder bolt. An enthroned Snake God sits across from Artemis. This giant God is inspired by a powerful Neolithic icon from Thessaly, possible an early version of Artemis. The Snake God's long neck, surmounted by her bird-head, is very phallus-like, holding the power of male and female in protective unity.

MAMI WATA: PROPHECY



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Mami Wata is a plural noun that connotes the myriad, ancient water deities of Africa, whose priesthoods are matriarchal. Mami Wata once inspired not only African cultures but also the ancient Anatolian, Middle Eastern, Greek, and Roman traditions. Mami Wata deities are often half mermaid, half reptile or fish, primordial deities of great power.

In contemporary art, especially in Haiti, Mami Wata deities are represented as human women, their hair parted in the middle, their skin white or golden, and a snake surmounts them. The snake represents what the ancient Yoruba culture calls, "Ashe," the vital force responsible for all manifested forms. The snake also shows that Mami Wata is a sibyl, a diviner of ancient truth, a guide and a prophet. While some believe that the name is simple English "pidgin," designating the "mother of water," Mamissii Vivian Hindrew has found evidence that the name is derived from Coptic, Demotic, Egyptian and Galla languages, meaning variously, as with the oldest forms of Isis, "she who creates herself," "the one who reigned alone in the beginning," "she who is mate-less," and "the one who brings forth the gods." ¹

¹Mamaissii Vivian Hindrew, *Mami Wata, Africa's Ancient God/dess Unveiled*, Lulu Publishing Co, 2007.

My *Mami Wata Prophecy* painting pictured above came forth spontaneously in my work, although her tradition is familiar to me because of my work and life in Nigeria, Miami and the Caribbean. She says, "I hold the mysteries of your life. All will be well."



This painting and the others in my Mami Wata series were inspired by an artists' residency on Farewell Spit, a world heritage area near my home in New Zealand. This residency was supported by the Department of Conservation and resulted in an exhibition in 2010, six months after completion of my time on Farewell Spit. There I acted in my roles as



artist and diviner to speak directly with the spirits of nature using yarrow stick divination. The messages that I received from the spirits of nature were part of my exhibition.

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My divinatory message was a warning to my county of Golden Bay about environmental decline; but it recommended a positive solution. Return to the worship of nature, let the land live, let the sea live, and praise and thank the birds, seals and fish because we are all descendents of the Sea, the origin of all. The Sea loves us and responds with love to our respect and gratitude for her gifts.

The Nature Religion of Santeria/Lukumí Tree Planting in New Zealand

For over thirty years, I've been involved with the study and practice of the nature rituals of Santeria (proper Cuban name, Lukumí). My interest in this Yoruba derived religion began when I lived in Ibadan, Nigeria studying and acting with contemporary Yoruba folk theater and its audiences as the basis for my Ph.D. thesis in anthropology at McGill University in Montreal. Later, I wrote about the stereotypical portrait of Yoruba women in this male dominated theater in my book (with Anita Spring), *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*.

During my years in Nigeria, I was introduced to the passionate and fascinating Yoruba divinities of sea, mountain, river and forest. Lukumí developed in Cuba when the religion of Yoruba slaves spread throughout the island especially in the latter part of the 19th century. Like traditional Yoruba faith, Lukumí is based on nature worship, belief in the sacredness of the planetary creation, free will and fate, universal laws and the recognition of binary principles of constructive and destructive forces. The center of this religion is shell divination with the Dilogún, related to the UNESCO listed Ifá, a "treasure of humanity." Sacred iconography, beautiful altars and artistically designed ritual objects are integral to Lukumí, as is Lukumí's world famous music whose drum rhythms are the basis of salsa, meringue, rumba and other popular Latino dances.

Before I became a full time artist, I taught at Florida International University in Miami, where, on the second week of my arrival, I met Ernesto Pichardo who is a Changó priest, scholar, teacher and community activist whose outstanding contributions to African and African Diaspora Studies in South Florida have been recognized for three decades. Through my meeting with Ernesto in the 1970s, I began practicing simple nature rituals and offerings which have brought me closer to the nature spirits of my land in New Zealand, especially the spirits of trees.

The reason that I used divination as the basis for my artwork for the Department of Conservation residency on Farewell Spit was because, as I say in my articles on the sacred forest, “. . . the destruction of the planet, especially the forests has occurred since mainstream religions dislodged the ancient oracular systems based in nature revelation, like Ifá and the merindilogún, the I Ching, the Druid tree alphabet, Norse runic divination and others, which guided human behavior. Have we insured the death of the planet because we’ve lost part of the natural information that guides our soul to awareness of our stewardship responsibilities on Earth?”

I am often asked by the spirits to make a journey to a forest for a particular reason and a sacred artwork may result. My *Seven Sticks for Ogún* is such a ritual object. This piece was at home on my altar for over a year before I returned my sticks to the forest. At that time, I wrote, “Somehow, in all the centuries that followed the Buddha’s awakening, the importance of the Bodhi tree’s teaching took second place to Buddha himself as a teacher. We forget that the Bodhi tree, not the Buddha, was the great teacher who granted enlightenment, and that the tree is oblivious to who sits underneath it. Anyone of us, not only Sidhartha, can find the same truths through time spent in contact with an ancient tree, whether it is a Bodhi, an Iroko, or any other ancient tree. . .”



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Over thirty years ago, my husband and I were fortunate to inexpensively buy forty acres of land on the South Island, surrounded by national park, bounded by a river, over looking the sea. Since that time, we have been reforesting this land with native trees to provide habitat for the endangered birds. Our land is listed with the Queen Elizabeth II trust and is now a protected bird sanctuary. One of my greatest pleasures is contemplating our forest and its birds.



I consider our growing forest the greatest art work to which I have contributed, in cooperation with the greatest artist of all, Nature.

A Final Word

It was my conclusion at the beginning of my career that the restoration of our planet's environment and the empowerment of women go hand in hand, but not without the abandonment of mainstream religious beliefs that make woman and nature secondary citizens. My ideas after thirty years have not changed. I dedicate my work to educating people about what happened in her/history and to creating new/old icons and symbols of nature. Spirit is a force that unites us one to another. Organized religions are political institutions that divide us. Art at its best is beyond religion, money and power. That's why Vladimir Putin and other dictators imprison artists. Art is another "Fifth Estate", a voice independent of boundaries and affiliations which speaks straight from the heart.

Judith Hoch Artwork ©

Image References

- (1) Judith's Studio in Golden Bay. Not open to the public.
- (2) Megalithic stones on Taputapuatea on the sacred island of Raiatea in French Polynesia.
- (3) *Enemies of the State*, 2006, oil on canvas, text from the Malleus Malleficarum (Hammer of Witches),
- (4) *Patriarchal Confessions*, 1991, oil on canvas, 45" x 60".

- (5) *Stop the Executions!* 1990, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60".
- (6) *Burning Crone*, 1996, acrylic and oil on canvas, 70" x 82".
- (7) An example of an unknown artist's drawing from the 17th century depicting the execution by fire of two witches in Germany.
- (8) *Grieving for Joan Prentice, a Witch Hung in England for the Crime of being an Old Woman*, 1990, acrylic on paper, 18" x 22".
- (9) *Hanging for Profit*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 70" x 82".
- (10) *Trickster's Laughter*, 1986, enamel on carved wood, 96" x 96".
- (11) *Sunset Maltese Sanctuary*, 1998, acrylic on paper, 22.5" x 18".
- (12) *Return to the Source*, 1990, Oil enamel and oil paint on wood, 87" x 90".
- (13) *Frog Goddess*, 1989, Oil enamel on wood, 72" x 96".
- (14) *Dance of the Winter Solstice*, 1990, oil enamel on wood, 96" x 120".
- (15) *Turned to Stone in Cornwall*, 1980, acrylic on board, 20" x 36".
- (16) *Snake Goddess*, 1991, oil enamel on wood, 70" x 96".
- (17) *Mami Wata: Prophecy*, 2010, oil on canvas, 1045mm x 95mm.
- (18) Judith Hoch divining with yarrow sticks on Farewell Spit, 2010.
- (19) Farewell Spit with the mountains of Golden Bay in the background.
- (20) *Seven Sticks for Ogun*, 2009, mixed materials and found wood, altarpiece, approx. 18" x 9".