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### **The Dark Monarch**

Tate St Ives, [St Ives, UK](#)

It gets very dark in Cornwall – a fact not lost on the artists who left London for St Ives during World War II. Away from the city smog, days were brighter but nights were also darker and made darker still by the mandatory blackouts that hid the community from German bombers. If the history of art in St Ives is most often cast in the shadowless light of Utopian Modernism, ‘The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art’ focuses on its alter, nocturnal state.

Curated by Martin Clark – artistic director of Tate St Ives – with writer Michael Bracewell and artist and curator Alun Rowlands, this is an exhibition of states of darkness. It begins with a neolithic dawn of stone circles (Lanyon Quoit, Bryan Wynter’s 1946 painting of the ancient Cornish dolmen) and a clutch of Barbara Hepworths and Henry Moores, and ends with an apocalyptic clash of visions of the afterlife: Cecil Collins’ 1968 painting *Angel of Flowing the Light* and Paul Nash’s *Mansions of the Dead* (1932) are pitched against John Russell’s goliath sunset finale, *Untitled (Abstraction of Labour Time / Eternal Recurrence / Monad)* (2009). Between these two points the exhibition traverses broad territories of the supernatural, the occult and the paranormal, while sampling a range of counter-Enlightenment philosophies as well as symbolic and metaphorical treatments of darkness. It presents an idea of modernity complicated by compelling old-world legends, superstitions and beliefs, or else overcome by a more immediate sense of barbarity and fear.

Titled after a libellous 1962 roman à clef by the sometime St Ives-based artist Sven Berlin, ‘The Dark Monarch’ is established within the Cornish landscape described in the first pages of the novel. Paintings by Wynter, Nash, Graham Sutherland and John Piper – dramatic landscapes in the open-air Romantic tradition – punctuate the exhibition. Magic is figured after Berlin’s description of the ‘Dark Monarch’ as a malevolent force bound up in the natural landscape or in a somewhat feminized account of occult practice. A curved display case contains a library belonging to the British Surrealist painter and writer Ithell Colquhoun with books by Aleister Crowley and journals entitled *Prediction or Tomorrow*. Close by are Hepworth’s crystal-like *Form, Opus 82* (1934–6) and *Group of Three Magic Stones* (1973). Further along, Eva Rothschild’s twin orbs of black and clear glass, *Actualisation* (1998), are placed next to an opened copy of a 17th-century book entitled *Occult Philosophy*. This arc of domestic sorcery ends with photographic collages from Penny Slinger’s 1977 photo romance, *An Exorcism*, which neatly gathers the cabinet’s emblems and entwines them in feminist images of sexual liberation.

Other parts of the exhibition are more loosely choreographed. Cerebral works by John Latham, Jeremy Millar or Cerith Wyn Evans become oddly acquainted with one another through vague suggestions of the paranormal; pressed within a series of works involving ideas of ritual and performance they appear to have strayed from a different tradition. Similarly, Damien Hirst’s gold-plated unicorn in formaldehyde (*The Child’s Dream*, 2008) and Eric Ravilious’ pastoral watercolour, *The Vale of the*

White Horse (c.1939), appear, in their different ways, more connected to myth than magic and out of sync with the predominantly Gothic and grotesque sensibility that underpins the exhibition. Despite being far-reaching and rather pushed for space, 'The Dark Monarch' is, at its best, an exhibition of unlaboured coherence. The penultimate section produces an excellent chronology of inter-war and war years in English landscape painting, moving through twilight images of stasis (Sutherland's Pastoral, 1930, and Entrance to a Lane, 1939) onto Michael Ayrton's horrific Skull Vision (1943) and Wynter's more hopeful Path Through a Wood (1950). Any historical narrative or sense of linear time is rebuffed with the insertion of fantastical 19th-century work such as the Victorian fairy painting by Richard Dadd or the purposefully anachronistic work of Steven Claydon.

Sven Berlin's defamatory account of St Ives sealed his departure from Cornwall. The novel, written shortly after he left (complete with horse-drawn caravan), was pulled months after it was published and has only recently been reprinted, a decade after his death. On Halloween, the artist Linder, dressed in a floor-length silver gown and black-veiled headdress, wove her way through the surfers on the beach accompanied by a blonde girl on a white stallion. She arrived at the gallery with a procession of musicians headed by a snapping horse's skull known in local folkloric tradition as the Penglaz. Linder's performance, Your actions are my dreams, marked Allantide, the eve of winter and the beginning of the Celtic New Year. It ended with the party filing out of daylight and into the museum one after another, with a wispy dancer dressed in black, as night herself might look, moving slowly in their wake.

**Michelle Cotton**