

CULTURE

WITH ALL DUE IRREVERENCE

Where's the harm in an occasional dose of subversion, even in the most solemn and sacred of culture and art? There's none at all, says tarot artist Hazel Florez, who has found much to tickle her in the Western canon stretching back hundreds of years. Indeed, a bit of mischief and the inclusion of wry in-jokes can improve a work immeasurably

By Hazel Florez

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Cool Bitch and Hot Dog, Elizabeth Radcliffe, 1978. Featured in Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-90



‘He’s not the Messiah, he’s a very naughty boy’ has to be one of the most unforgettable examples of comedic oratio delivered by a thinly veiled Terry Jones in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* in 1979. A breathy, impatient, Cockney version of the mother of Christ tells an imploring,

beseeking crowd to 'shove off'. From the cosmic to the comic, artists inspired by magical thinking have often had a brush with mirth and mischief, bringing levity to dogmatic and liturgical brevity. 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here', Dante Alighieri's bleak fire-and-brimstone epithet, is met with sardonic jest as two colourfully robed figures hastily veer away from the vortex of despair, symbolised by the hairy, scary upended claws of a devil plunging the bowels of the abyss. As they turn their faces away in presumable disgust, one can imagine the beast's katabatic descent from the surrounding pastoral landscape accompanied by the faint screams of the uncommitted emanating from the pit of doom.

Throughout the history of Western art, the reverent has often been tempered with the irreverent. Michelangelo's Sistine chapel ceiling notoriously shocked officials at the time; its graphic nudity, fleshy buttocks and exposed groins aggrieved the pontiffs. According to the Renaissance author Vasari, Biagio, the pope's master of ceremonies, often complained about the undress of Michelangelo's heroic figures. In the spirit of mischievous revenge, the artist gave Minos, the Judge of the Souls, the facial resemblance of Biagio da Cesena.



Leaving Hell (Inferno XXXIV), detail from Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, Urbino and Ferrara (1477-1478). Collection: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb.lat. 365

The Gothic macabre has always had the capacity to expose human cruelty, folly and vanity. Never more so than in the dystopian hellscapes of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Vincent of Beauvais and Bartolomé Bermejo, those masters of Medieval mockery, display sympathy for the devil in their portrayal of fallen imps who seem endearingly comic alongside the placid sanctimony of their vanquishers.

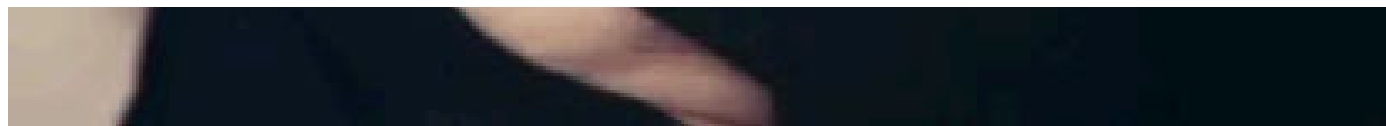


Leonora Carrington, *Annunciation*, exact date unknown

Rather than presenting an angelic Virgin in a state of serene apotheosis, Leonora Carrington's *Annunciation* depicts a *tableau vivant* of flurry and commotion as Mary rushes into the room betwixt two wincing and aghast bystanders. No celestial hosts of patient vigil here. Eerie winged creatures fill the air and snakes on the ground elicit a sense of perturbing disquiet. The moment of immaculate conception, typically represented by classical masters as a moment of graceful feminine surrender, is upended as a moment of turbulence and ennui.

Anna Biller's overlooked indie film *Love Witch* (2017) is a boldly innovative piece of cinema that at first looks like nostalgic kitsch, though on closer inspection it is like nothing you have seen before. Biller invites her audience to witness an angry female gaze that is as playful and seductive as it is deadly serious. As a pastiche of low-budget horror movies from the 1960s and 1970s, the film is a satirical rendering of a dangerous femme fatale seducing and luring men to appalling demises. It deftly plays with social anxiety surrounding the figure of the witch, a glamorous independent woman who is aggressively anti-maternal and a psychopathic killer. The film mocks conservative social expectations of women and gently pokes fun at the hackneyed fairy-tale 'happily ever after' ending of the white wedding.





Simon Costin for Alexander McQueen, crucifix mask, 'Dante' collection, autumn/winter 1996-97

'Any organisation created out of fear must create fear to survive,' the American stand-up comedian Bill Hicks once quipped. In a sartorial subversion of Catholicism, the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen incorporated elements of religious ritual in a series of exquisitely cut theatrical garments in his autumn/winter 1996-97 collection. Simon Costin, director of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall, collaborated with McQueen to make a mask consisting of a white crucifix set against moulded black plastic that was evocative of a transgressive Venetian disguise.



Film still from *The Love Witch*, shot on 35mm film at the historic *Herald Examiner* building by Anna Biller

Penny Slinger's *Elevation-Modesty* is a mischievous and surreal collage depicting two devotional nuns in the foreground in postures of prayer and supplication. Meanwhile, in the background two of their fellow sisters appear to levitate with witch-like numinosity. It is a wickedly witty touch typical of Slinger, who here liberates the divine feminine from the oppression of enforced puritanism. Her latest book, *An Exorcism: A Photo Romance*, will be published by Fulgur Press in June 2024.

'Women in Revolt' is at Tate Britain until 7 April 2024. For more information, visit [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)

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