



Art

The occult's return to art: 'Before, you'd have been laughed out of the gallery'

Tantra, spirit mediums, Obeah - why have things become 'a bit witchy' in the art world of late? Our writer takes a trip into deep space to find out

Hettie Judah

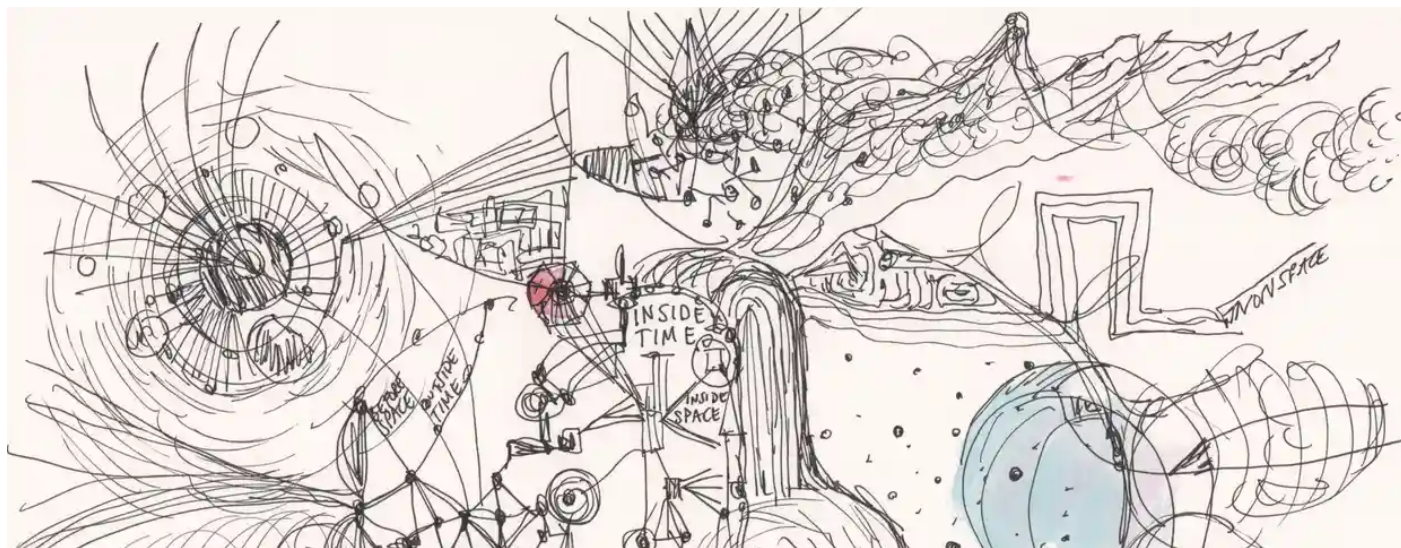
Wed 4 Nov 2020 10.34 EST

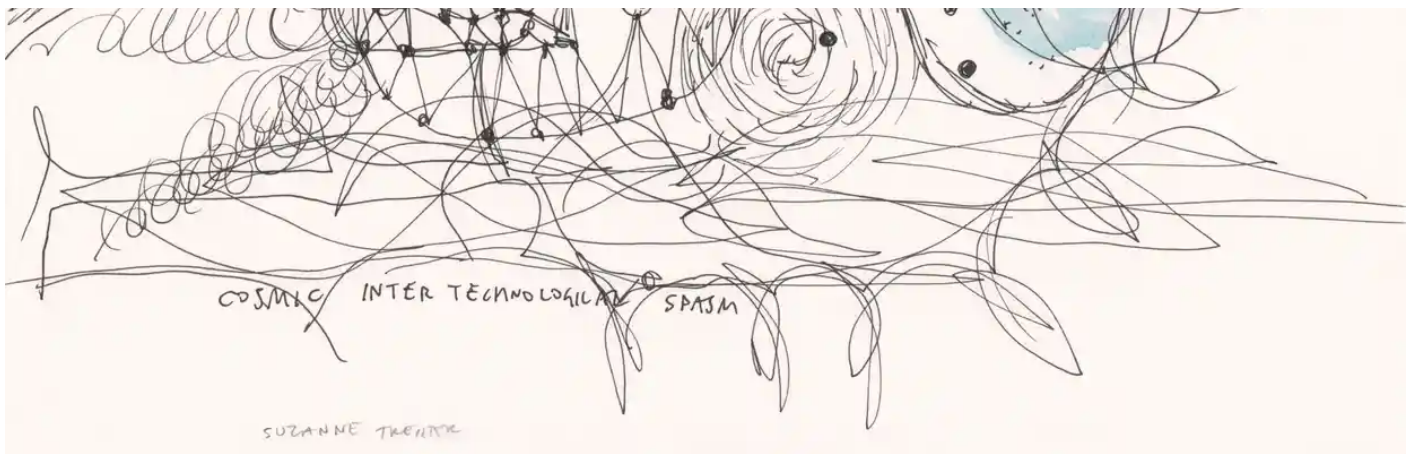
Last night, Suzanne Treister took me on a 400bn light-year journey into space. The purpose was to visit her Museum of Black Hole Spacetime, and so, along with a couple of dozen fellow travellers, we jetted off - via a seance led by Treister. Describing the shared journey as we rose up from our chairs, through space, to reach her fantastical museum, Treister hoped that we would “reach an altered state of consciousness, ready to experience visions” that we might “otherwise be unable to experience in our everyday lives”.

We drew and described whatever we felt we encountered during 20 minutes in the museum (in my case a monster tree and ersatz [Hilma af Klint](#) paintings), before Treister talked us slowly back down to earth.

This was no Halloween parlour game: Treister's seance took place at the heart of the British art world. Hosted by London's Serpentine Gallery, material produced during previous sessions feature in the touring exhibition Not Without My Ghosts, due to open next month at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield.

There is a surge of interest in spirituality and mysticism at the moment, currently manifesting in both art practice and gallery programming, which extends to exhibitions such as Tantra at the British Museum, and The Botanical Mind at Camden Art Centre. In truth, things have been a bit witchy, a bit shamanic, in the art world for a few years. But this wave feels different: heavier, darker, more engaged. Rather than the hipster witchery of a few years ago, this new spirituality is rooted in explorations of feminism, anti-colonialism and alternative power structures.





📷 Artwork made by Suzanne Treister during her Museum of Black Hole Spacetime seance. Photograph: Courtesy the artist, Annely Juda Fine Art London and PPOW New York

It is also, perhaps, a response to the fear and anxiety of the current moment. “I think this surge in esoteric beliefs tends to show up in moments of crisis, when things are feeling uneasy and unsettled on a good day, and bereft of hope on the worst of them,” says S Elizabeth, author of *The Art of the Occult*. Growing up surrounded by richly decorated tarot cards and zodiac posters designed by [Alphonse Mucha](#), Elizabeth sees the occult and art as inseparable.

As well as offering the consolations of ritual, Elizabeth describes the occult as a source of anti-authoritarian power. Much of the art in her book is by women, many - such as the Swedish theosophist Hilma af Klint or the surrealist mystic [Remedios Varo](#) - marginal figures in their time. “Spiritualism was very much intertwined with social justice movements of the day,” says Elizabeth. “Transgressive women resisting patriarchal oppression have always been called witches.”

A number of the female mystics whose work appears in *The Art of the Occult* also feature alongside Treister’s seance pictures in *Not Without My Ghosts*, which explores the idea of the artist as spirit medium. Among them are mystic artists

of the 19th century such as [Georgiana Houghton](#), who produced drawings with the assistance of spirit guides. As spirit mediums, women were afforded leadership they could not have assumed in Victorian society beyond the sphere of the seance. Many were also connected to the struggle for women’s suffrage.

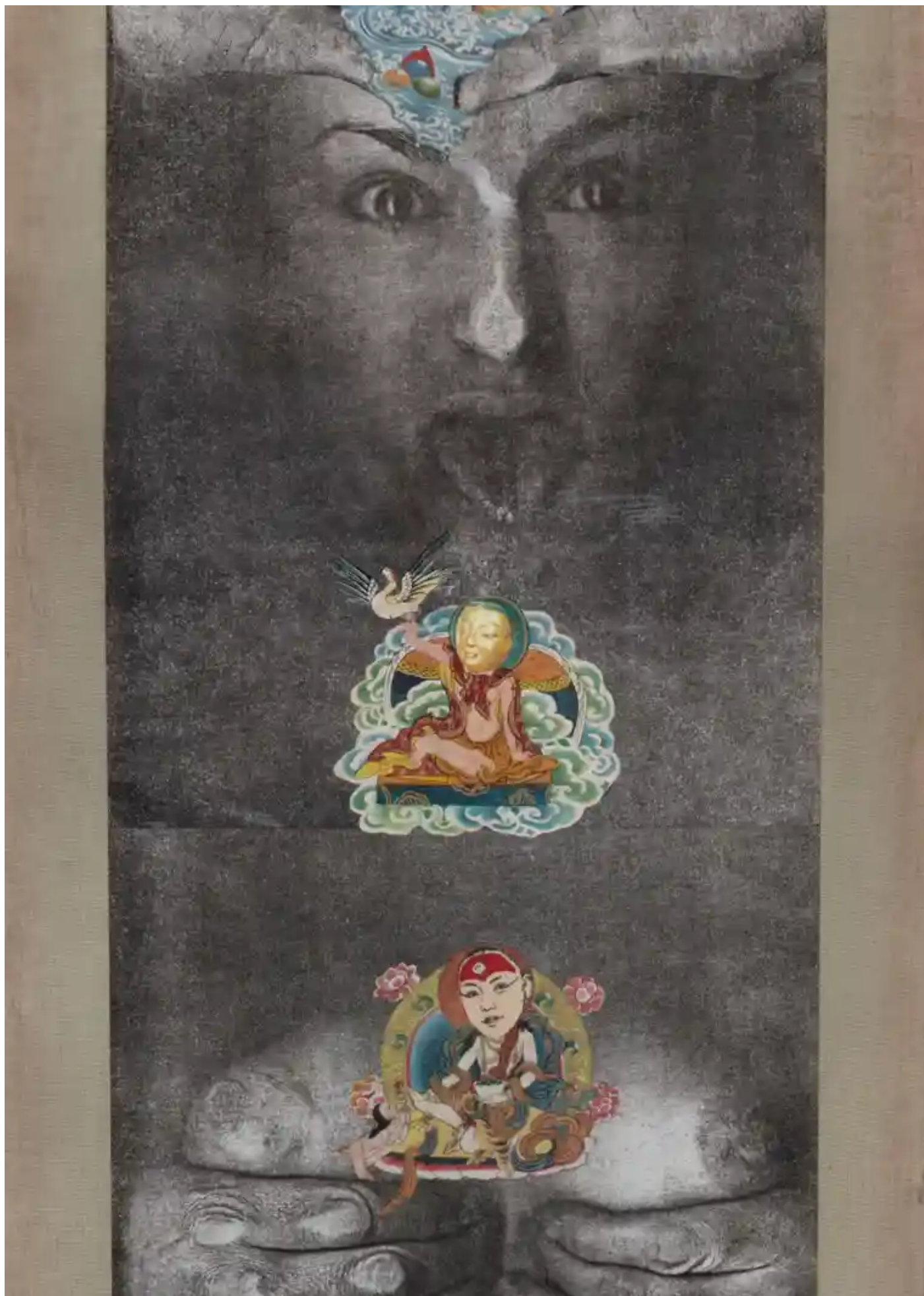
Treister does not see herself within this lineage of spirit mediums, instead describing an interest in “areas of investigation currently unexplained by science, some of which may turn out to be differently accepted in future”.

The Museum of Black Hole Spacetime grew out of a residency at the European Organization for Nuclear Research ([Cern](#)) in Geneva. “One can look at much art practice as emanating from thought processes which access deeper levels of

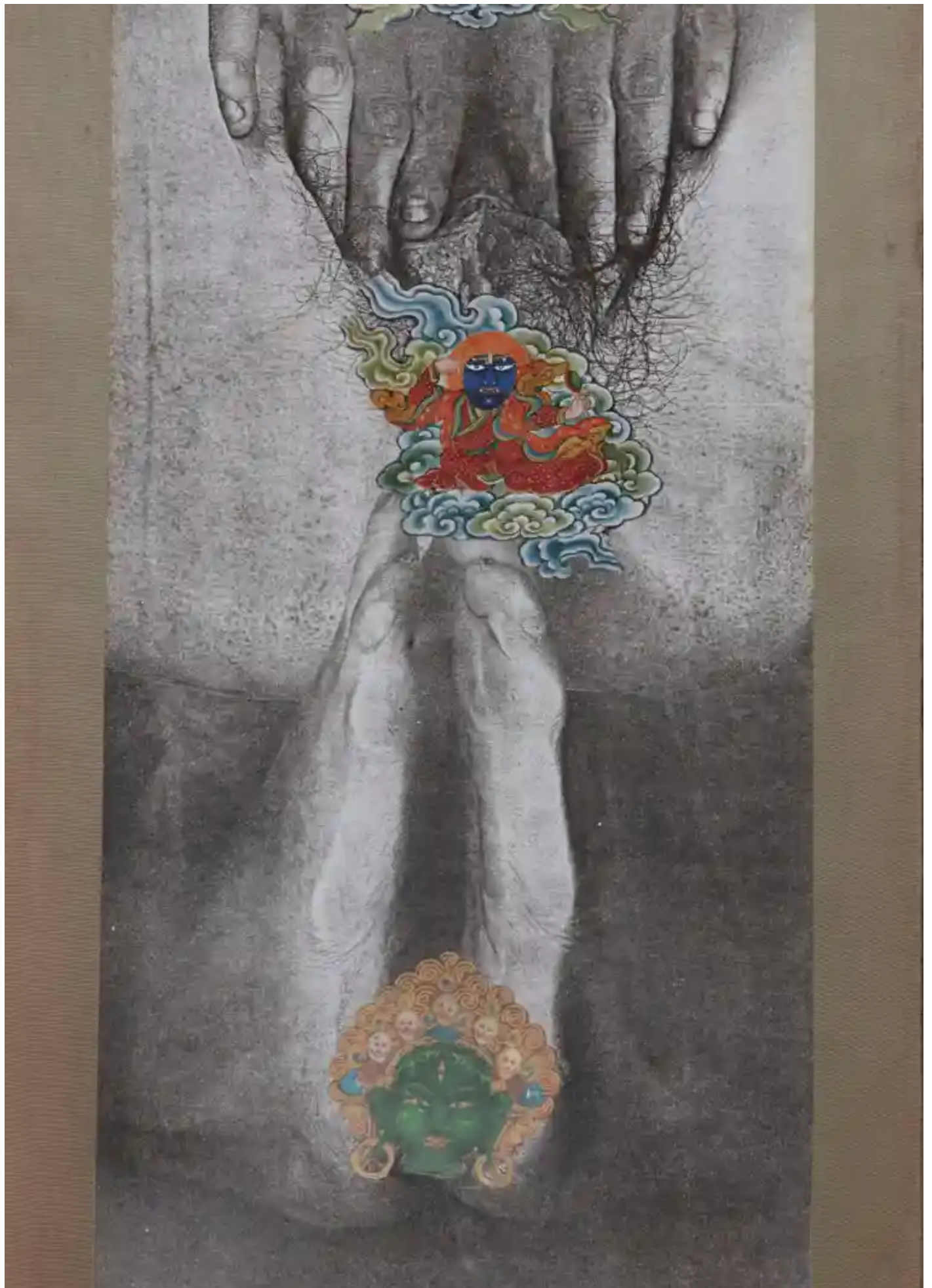
practice as emanating from thought processes which access deeper levels of consciousness and which, as Bruce Nauman suggested, may 'reveal mystic truths'," she says. "Having spent a lot of time at Cern I would say this can apply equally to theoretical particle physicists."













📷 Penny Slinger's *Chakra Woman*, 1976. Photograph: Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London and Blum and Poe, LA. Copyright Penny Slinger.

California-based artist [Penny Slinger](#)'s work has featured in both *The Botanical Mind* and *Tantra* exhibitions. "I always felt the practice of art to be akin to magical practices. In both cases, the intangible is being made manifest," she says. Slinger started exhibiting her feminist surrealist work in London in the late 1960s. While she had always been interested in the mystical (one might describe her collage works of the period as distinctly psychedelic) a visit to the 1971 *Tantra* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery was life-changing.

"When I walked into that amazing exhibit, I felt I had 'come home'," she recalls. "It was a sense of total recognition." The iconography and philosophy of *Tantra* is rooted in the concept of *shakti* - feminine energy. "Unlike much of our western definition of what is feminine, it is an active principle, an energy force underlying and underpinning all creation," explains Slinger. "As such, *shakti* presents a vehicle for the manifestation of the feminine that is unshackled, unrestrained and brimming with potential."

Her work increasingly turned toward *Tantra*. On show at [Camden Art Centre](#), her collages *Solar Flare* and *Eastern Alchemy* (both 1976-77) offer an ecstatic, feminine vision of natural forces. To make the long scrolls *Rose Devi* and *Chakra Woman* - currently at the British Museum - Slinger applied areas of her naked body to a Xerox machine. "This was my way of 'bringing it home' and delivering it in a package that was at once shocking and arresting," she explains. "The series represented my homage to the 'chakra man' of Tantric art, bringing the mystic transmission into a modern, living context. Claiming it."

In 1979 Slinger co-authored the bestselling *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy*, and stepped away from an art world that was uncomfortable with her work. It took a new generation of feminist curators to bring her early art back into view this past decade. Slinger feels that it's about time there was a resurgence of interest in mystic subjects. "For a long time I had been encouraged by the world of fine art to remove references to

the spiritual from my work.”

Harminder Judge, who had an equally revelatory encounter with Tantric art, says that even 15 years ago, galleries would not have taken him seriously for engaging with spiritual subjects. “My interest in Tantra or Manichaeism? That kind of stuff was not cool: you’d get laughed out of the gallery. All of a sudden that’s valid,” he says. Ten years ago, Judge was celebrated for his ambitious performances, but lost faith with his own work and stepped away from the art world. A friend gave him *Tantra Song*, a book of abstract paintings made to assist meditation. It fuelled his desire to work in a new medium: highly polished gorgeously pigmented “paintings” built up in layers of plaster and wax.

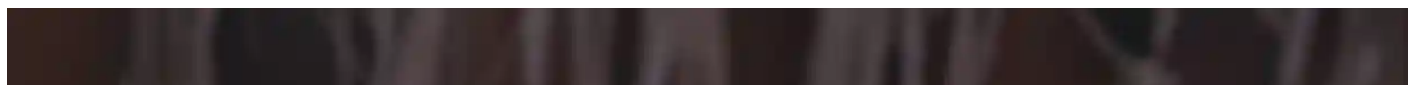
Judge sees the art world’s new openness as a response to larger shifts. “Artists are pretty sensitive, outward-looking. I feel artists are moving toward the spiritual again to comment on the forces connected to the rise of the right in Europe or Trump in the US – these scary political movements.” Tantra, in particular, feels apt: it is “as much a reaction to conservatism as it is an ancient philosophy,” says Judge.

This is, in broad terms, a sentiment echoed by Albert Whittle, recipient of the annual Frieze artist award for her powerful short film *Reset*. “Spiritualist practices always require and demand change of you,” observes Whittle. “White supremacy does not want to change, it is so comfortable in itself.”

Whittle left her home and studio in Glasgow to spend time with her family in Barbados during lockdown. Attending the Black Lives Matter marches, her mind turned to “early forms of protest on plantations” and how the pushback against black protest still “came down to a loss of property”.

Whittle notes that some of the first laws passed by the British in the Caribbean forbade Obeah, the spiritual practice followed by enslaved west Africans. Just as Tantra was seen as a dangerous, unifying, revolutionary force by the British in India, so Obeah was seen as a source of rebellious power in the Caribbean. The 1898 Obeah Act condemned any person who “pretends to use any occult means, pretends to possess any supernatural power or knowledge”.

In *Reset*, dancer Mele Broomes performs controlled ritualistic movements in a netted costume of ropes and shells, her body reflected in a cruciform pond. Whittle wanted her to look like “a goddess or some kind of avatar” as though she might have the power to summon a whirlwind of rebellion.





Avatar ... a still from Reset. Photograph: Alberta Whittle

“There’s a very deep-seated fear of these different practices and their potential for resistance,” says Whittle, whose work dives deep into the exploration of the uncanny: the enduring influence of ancestry, and the phantom-limb type sensations of having been uprooted, being out of place or out of time. For Whittle, spiritual and ritual practice in art is powerful, and subversive: “Thinking in other ways is a key idea of freedom.”

Not Without My Ghosts will be at Millennium Gallery, Sheffield in December; [Tantra](#) is at the British Museum, London until 21 January 2021; [The Botanical Mind](#) is at Camden Art Centre, London until 23 December.