

A Visit to *The Witch's House*

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The *Witch's House* is exquisitely alluring, dangerous, the subject of story and rumor. We dare not impudently approach the front door without invitation, so we must sneak quietly around corners, peering furtively into large windows partially obscured by heavy curtains, hoping to catch a glimpse of the shadowy interior. The nature of this hidden world is deliciously murky; there are languid figures draped over Victorian *chaises longue*, stern mistresses in veils and high neck collars, sweet demure faces, naked women with perfect, fleshy curves, fetishes we cannot determine or understand. This is a world of secret rites: a baptism, a sacrifice, domination, sex. We have discovered a clandestine domain of commanding women, self-possessed, seeking pleasure on their own terms. This is a world of opulent sensuality, of sapphic pleasures, of dominance and submission. Is this an alternative history, a fantasy, a time out of time? As we observe with wicked delight, we must be mindful that we are watchers here, hidden from view, and our position is most precarious.

In *The Witch's House* Ilona Szalay has created a world of beautiful restraint and control out of which spills a bold and uninhibited sexual spirit. The viewer is invited to reflect on what women might do in their own space, unfettered from the world and concerns of men. Yet this is not an egalitarian matriarchal paradise, it is a place of power, ritual, and dark sexuality. Szalay's forceful use of space and color creates a spotlight for visual potency. The palette of this collection is restricted, with black figures contrasted against shades of cyan and teal, producing an otherworldly and euphoric effect. Her use of oils is lustrous and when she applies them to glass or aluminum the effect produces a wetness and liquidity that enhances the sensuality of the pieces. The scenes are sparse, intense, and the minimalism supports the cultivation of an erotic environment. The lack of detail forces us to focus intently on the action and to further imagine the context of the scenes playing out before us. Yet despite the bold, gestural lines, Szalay still manages to communicate a great deal of information about the highly ornamented aesthetic of these women and their oddly archaic setting. She shows us lush, feminine beauty, delicate pouts, hair in ringlets, earrings, buttons, all conveyed with the single stroke of a brush.

What scenes do we glimpse in the Witch's House? There is definitely the implication of some sinister secrets. *Baptism* (2019) appears in many ways to be the most ominous piece in this collection, portraying women in black and restrictive Victorian dress, cradling an infant. The viewer observes this scene from some feet away, likely not as a participant. It feels cold and strange, evoking a child sacrifice, but that is not what we are seeing. Perhaps this group of women is making this child one of their own, a celebratory act of community. It appears menacing possibly because we are afraid of women's power and the potential of their collective sovereignty. *Sacrifice* (2018), however, presents a much more explicitly frightening scenario. It appears to be a scene showing three women holding daggers, bare breasted with flowing skirts, standing over a crumpled figure, possibly in a moment of triumph. Who was sacrificed, and why? Perhaps they were merely protecting their own, or was this a ritual act of ultimate cruelty required to secure their way of life?

As we continue our stealthy tour of *The Witch's House* we also encounter scenes of raw passion, oscillating between constraint and excess. Naked women here are comfortable in their own

authority and sensuality. In *Value* (2019) three women stand together, naked, poised, confident, bold. The woman in the foreground appears to be the focus of shared attention from her companions. Then, in *Three* (2019), we see the women engaging in more unconcealed and exploratory caresses. Paused in front of us, a striking woman in an impossibly high skirt with severe, slicked back hair is flanked by a wolf as her companion, clearly her equal, possibly even her familiar. Elsewhere in the house we observe intimate and extreme moments of rapture and vulnerability shared by lovers, both arousing and disquieting. No figure meets a viewer's gaze or acknowledges any audience. This is a woman's world of pleasure, and its inhabitants perform for no one, yet the power dynamics between the figures are not always clear. Viewers thus find themselves in the viscerally unsettling position of perpetual voyeurism, a tension which can also be a source of arousal.

Despite the suggestions of transgression, *The Witch's House* also carries a sweet and strange undercurrent of enduring domesticity, and a truly edgy sentimentality. It is a place of odd formless ghosts and memories, holding the energetic traces of powerful moments, transformative events and remembered loved ones. There are gentle portraits of caring sisters, a bride having her veil adjusted, a daughter in a moment of casual relaxation. There are also scenes of battles waged and overcome. In *Grid #4* (2019) a naked woman holds a dagger in one hand, and a monstrous tentacle in another, clearly victorious over a secret and personal struggle. In *Night Rescue* (2021), three bright figures emerge from blackness, two of them appear to be children carefully escorting a woman through the night. Are they escaping from *The Witch's House*, or returning to its comforts and familiarity?

Perhaps *The Witch's House* in actuality is that shadow space that lives in our imagination, the dark and potent expression of the anima. It is a rare, transgressive space, dominated not by men but by libertine women, brash and unashamed, fully inhabiting their authority. What is a witch but the embodiment of women's power and society's fear of it. Her house is her inner sanctum, her private realm. She bows to no one.