

Season of the Witch

PETER LUNENFELD ON CAMERON IN LOS ANGELES

MARJORIE ELIZABETH CAMERON PARSONS KIMMEL—or Cameron, the name she preferred—was that rarest of figures, a seminal invisible. Artist, poet, witch, beacon of the counterculture, she knew everyone and materialized everywhere, though now her own name has all but vanished. Cameron showed with sculptor Edward Kienholz at Walter Hopps's Syndell Studio in Los Angeles. She played the Scarlet Woman in Kenneth Anger's 1954 film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*. She knew L. Ron Hubbard before he founded Scientology. She had a small part in a movie with Dennis Hopper, who said that she scared him out of his mind. One of her erotic drawings provoked the LAPD to arrest Wallace Berman (who'd championed her in his legendary journal *Semina*) at his 1957 Ferus Gallery show—arguably the scandal that put LA art on the map. And then there was John “Jack” Parsons, Cameron's first husband, who as cofounder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory was a crucial contributor to World War II aerospace technologies while at the same time being the primary American practitioner of infamous English occultist Aleister Crowley's Thelemic Magick. Parsons and Hubbard performed a ritual they called “Babalon [*sic*] Working” to usher in a new age, but before it could dawn, Parsons blew himself up in 1952, in a rocket experiment gone wrong. Just after his death, Cameron

burned her early paintings and drawings in a frenzied ritual of mourning and rebirth.

Cameron was one of those people for whom art was life and life was art, so her biography is essential to understanding the drawings, paintings, and poems she produced over the second half of the twentieth century, a period in which she didn't just encounter alternative lifestyles but pioneered them. In her first museum show in a quarter of a century, MOCA Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles asks us to consider Cameron as a creative force, showcasing her artwork and poetry, all of which remain spooky and seductive. MOCA's exhibition, like the concurrent show that was on view on at Mark Selwyn Fine Art across town, flaunts Cameron's midcentury freakiness, while defamiliarizing this much-examined historical period, even as her sorcery resonates deeply with contemporary longings for a return to shared emotions, meaning, and collective understanding.

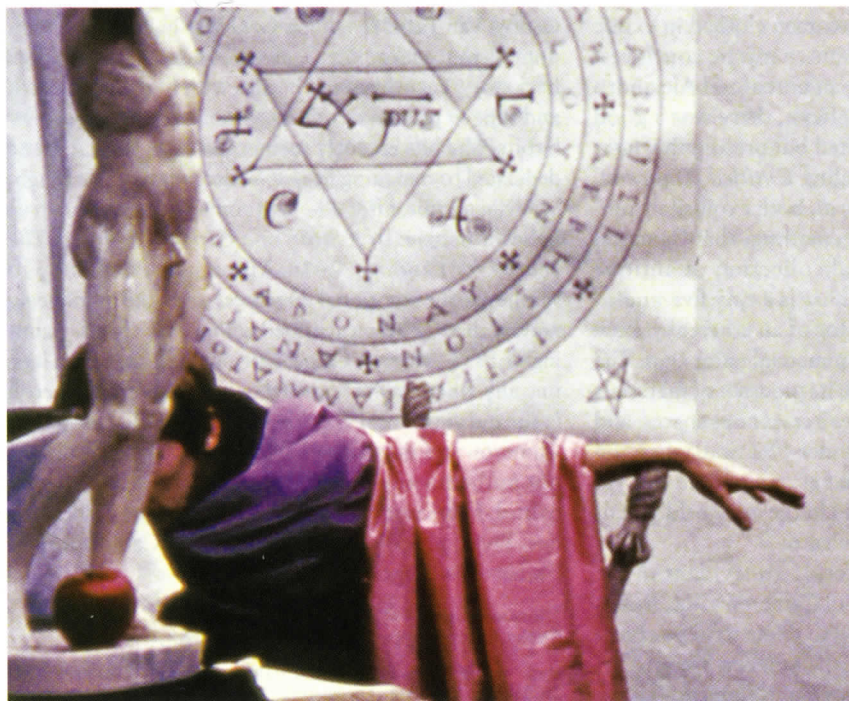
Like those of many of her peers, Cameron's life was turned upside down by World War II, but she did not quite fit the profile of the women workers who settled back into family life after V-J Day. She was more like Rosie the Riveter's jazz-obsessed gal pal who never retreated into the kitchen after the armed forces got her the hell out of her hometown of Belle Plaine, Iowa. As the nation geared up for the war effort, Cameron

joined the navy as a mapmaker and was stationed in Washington, DC, before being disciplined for going AWOL. After the war, Cameron followed her family to Pasadena, California. One night, she wandered into a wild party at a mansion on Millionaire's Row thrown by her future husband, the rocket scientist who just happened to be a warlock. Parsons had earlier written a poem cycle called *Songs for the Witch Woman*, hoping to conjure a suitably mystical mate, and when the red-haired Cameron walked into the room, he was smitten. For the next six years they remained in each other's thrall, casting astrological charts (two of which are on

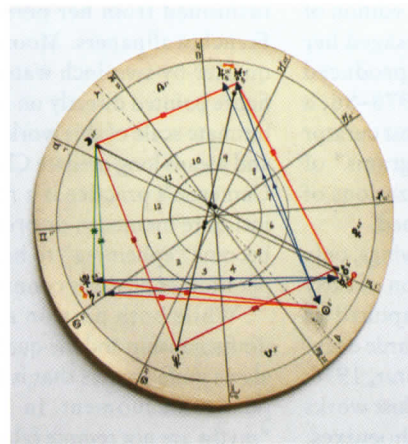
Cameron is the quintessential Californian: She made herself up.

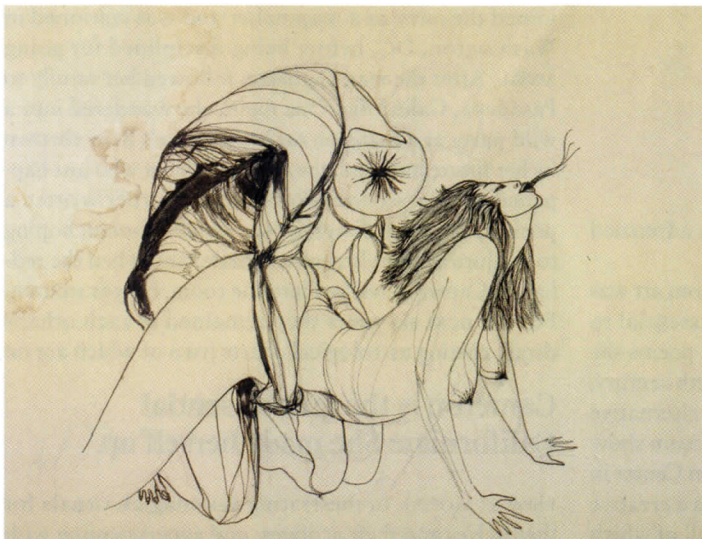
view at MOCA), orchestrating sex-magick rituals for themselves and their acolytes, and experimenting with physical and metaphysical science. Cameron and Parsons were bona fide members of the so-called greatest generation, but they belonged to a subset we might call the weirdest generation. They persevered through the war and then revolted against the imposition of peacetime conformity, living as free-loving protohippies—occult, esoteric, and libertarian leaning.

Cameron also hails from the last generation that can truly be said to have been unconscious of its unconscious. She experienced visions and suffered nightmares before culture had so embraced, deformed, and defanged Freudianism that the very idea of an unrecognized layer of cognition “beneath” consciousness became impossible. In *Untitled “Peyote Vision”*, 1955, which became her most famous work after it sparked



From left: Curtis Harrington, *The Wormwood Star*, 1956, 16 mm, color, sound, 10 minutes. Cameron's astrological chart for Jack Parsons, n.d., ink on paper, 8 × 8". Kenneth Anger, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, 1954, 16 mm, color, sound, 38 minutes. Production still. *The Scarlet Woman* (Cameron).





From left: Cameron, *Untitled "Peyote Vision"*, 1955, ink on paper, 17 1/2 x 22 3/4".
Cameron, *Moon Danse*, n.d., watercolor on paper, 5 1/4 x 2".

the *Semina*/Ferus/LAPD affair, Cameron drew from her fantasies and deliriums without submitting them to the epistemophilic sadism of overdetermined analysis. A finely rendered demon with what appears to be a peyote button for a head mounts a pneumatic succubus, the latter in ecstasy, her back arched, her forked tongue flicking out. This is Cameron's contribution to the imaginary of Jungian myth.

As befits a witch, the Manichaean struggle between black and white inherent to pen-and-ink drawing brings out the best in Cameron. *Dark Angel*, an undated work on view at MOCA, is a searing ink-and-paint-on-paper portrait of Parsons emerging from a blank background, clad in a robe that seamlessly morphs into two outstretched wings, his eyes glowering, chthonic winds blowing a dark mane of hair above and behind him. Here Cameron harnesses her passion for the subject to produce a ferocious, paradoxical line work—simultaneously precise and seductively unrestrained—that functions as both figurative depiction and unabashed emotional talisman. Another highlight of the MOCA exhibition is a four-by-five grid of twenty of her Aubrey Beardsley-esque pen-and-ink illustrations for the 1952 edition of Parsons's *Songs*, the same poems that presaged her entrance into his life. Decades later, she produced "Pluto Transiting the Twelfth House," 1978–86, a series of delicate line drawings that MOCA guest curator Yael Lipschutz refers to as "electrocardiograms" of Cameron's psyche, casting them as visualizations of esoteric data, accessible only to the enlightened.

Of the work that led up to these later drawings, only a few tantalizing glimpses remain. A selection of early watercolors she later destroyed can be seen captured on film in Curtis Harrington's ten-minute avant-garde documentary about Cameron, *The Wormwood Star*, 1956, projected in a loop at MOCA. Some of these lost works depict a dazzling array of multicolored phoenixes,



wizards, warlocks, and werewomen clothed in exotic robes, riding fantastical mounts to mystic conclaves. They are like storyboards for an unrealized Alejandro Jodorowsky film. At Marc Selwyn, there was a good selection of the smaller, undated but presumably later works in various media including *Untitled (Dancers)*, and *Untitled (Woman with bird)*, both exquisitely rendered in color ink with custom mattings that Cameron fashioned from her personal collection of antique French wallpapers. *Moon Danse* is a tiny five-and-a-quarter-by-two-inch watercolor of an ethereal yellow figure painted directly on a commercial paint chip. The intimate scale of this work and its modesty of materials and means long predate Chelsea's cavernous spaces, and Cameron's practice is a reminder of a time when the intimate memento or private perversion had not yet become "ephemera" to be sold in the art world's recuperation of postwar countercultures.

While both passion and craft are evident in the draftsmanship and the quality of Cameron's line, there's also a guilelessness that is hard to relate to in our post-postironic moment. In 1953, Cameron wrote that "myths are not remote fables for entertainment, but the

real archive of the human race." For her, these works were not fantasy but rather documentation of both history and lived experience. It takes an effort of will for some spectators (and I count myself among them) to deal with the direct nature of her references, to appreciate that we are not looking at these sprites, elementals, and warrior women as commercial appropriations or sly reenvisionings of ancient archetypes, but instead as artifacts of one witch's life. And, of course, any serious assessment of Cameron needs to take into account how differently the art world treats the witch and the warlock. When no longer hot and young, the former becomes a crone and suffers either invisibility or derision. The latter ages into a magus and accrues followers, as did Cameron's friends Harry Smith and George Herms. Her 1967 casein portrait of Herms—on a luminous green ground, his hair sculpted into the suggestion of horns, his eyes blank spaces—not only stands as her finest painting but refutes the claim that Cameron's status as muse overshadows her contributions as maker.

Cameron's willing embrace of sincerity in the service of the true should endear her to a new generation of makers, street, guerrilla, postgraffiti, and lowbrow artists, eager to present their audience with recognizable—and above all, genuine—material, risking identification with illustration, commercial art, and mass-market culture in order to find a viable contemporary mythology as "real" as Cameron's magick. In Southern California, figures as diverse as Miranda July, the Karl sisters (Joanne, Nancy, and Patty), and Jennifer Moon refract elements of Cameron's craft, albeit in idiosyncratic ways. July lives the dream of earnest, unfettered creativity in her novels, films, albums, and performances. The Karl sisters' recent restoration of the Integratron (a dome constructed between 1953 and 1978 by engineer-turned-ufologist George Van Tassel) channels Cold War high-desert freakdom. Perhaps most like Cameron, Moon has a complex backstory, encompassing battles with heroin and crack and time in prison for crimes committed to support her habits. She has recently reemerged onto the LA scene dedicated to remaking herself—autopoiesis is the toughest drug to quit, after all—as a romantic heroine, a true believer in love. In *A Story of a Girl and a Horse: The Search for Courage*, 2014, Moon uses Photoshop to synthesize the emotional directness and squirm-inducing naïveté that Cameron achieved with her *Sun Horse* painting of 1952. Moon is Cameron's indebted acolyte, a karmic ally whether she knows it or not, because Cameron is the quintessential Californian: She made herself up. Cameron and those who have followed in her wake are not authentically authentic so much as authentically hybrid: hybridizing machines for pre-extant authenticities. This, I propose, is the genius loci of California, and Cameron is its incarnated avatar. □

"Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman" is on view at the MoCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, through Jan. 18.

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