



# DIRECTOR'S CHOICE: NANCY BOWEN'S SPECTRAL EVIDENCE

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# SPECTRAL EVIDENCE



Inspired by a true story of Colonial American judgement and repentance, Bowen creates a visual interpretation of guilt and remorse. Bowen's ancestor Samuel Sewall was a judge in the Salem witch trials who later publicly recanted and confessed his sins in church. The installation visually interprets his penitence and gives space for the people killed as witches as a result of the trials. Twenty gravestones face off their accuser while he bears the burden of their deaths. Each of the tombstones represents someone accused by Samuel Sewall: Alice Parker, Ann Pudeator, Bridget Bishop, Elizabeth Howe, George Jacobs Senior, Giles Corey, John Proctor, John Willard, Margaret Scott, Martha Carrier, Martha Corey, Mary Eastey, Mary Parker, Rebecca Nurse, Reverend George Burroughs, Samuel Wardwell, Sarah Good, Sarah Wildes, Susanna Martin, and Wilmot Redd, with Samuel Sewall at the front.

Riffing off Early American gravestone imagery Bowen deconstructs the "death head" image to create winged creatures with feet stuck in the amorously shaped stones. The dead could rise again- at least in spirit. While these sculptures were originally conceived as grave-stones honoring the wrongfully killed, they took on layers of meaning during their making. They became markers of Covid death, of gun violence death, and of other senseless killings. They took on a feeling of collective mourning for all that has been lost during these difficult times.

The sculpture inspired by Samuel Sewall himself depicts a rambunctious version of a hair shirt standing atop a scaffolding covered with gallows. More tiny gallows hang from shanks of hair in the shirt and cascade onto the scaffolding. The figure offers a bowl to the heavens



in hopes of better times. This representation of guilt and shame is a vibrant and slightly humorous apparition, a visual cautionary tale. Along with the sculptural installation Bowen is showing a suite of collages that accompany the 46 stanzas of Elizabeth Willis' poem, *The Witch*. Willis, herself a descendant of one of the alleged witches, has written a luminous poem that combines folklore and observation into a celebration of women.

Nancy Bowen is a mixed media artist known for her eclectic mixtures of imagery and materials in both two and three dimensions. Her sculpture and drawing exists in an in-between zone of form and idea, of abstraction and representation. Her work offers a poetic commentary on our quickly changing material culture. Bowen has had over a dozen solo exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe

including the Lesley Heller Gallery in NYC, Annina Nosei Gallery in NYC, Galerie Farideh Cadot in Paris, the Betsy Rosenfield gallery in Chicago, and the James Gallery in Houston. She has been included in group shows in various museums around the country. She has won awards from Anonymous was a Woman, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, The MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, The Jentel Foundation and the European Ceramic Work Center among others.

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## **THE WITCH** by Elizabeth Willis

A witch can charm milk from an ax handle.

A witch bewitches a man's shoe.

A witch sleeps naked.

"Witch ointment" on the back will allow you to fly through the air.

A witch carries the four of clubs in her sleeve.

A witch may be sickened at the scent of roasting meat.

A witch will neither sink nor swim.

When crushed, a witch's bones will make a fine glue.

A witch will pretend not to be looking at her own image in a window.

A witch will gaze wistfully at the glitter of a clear night.

A witch may take the form of a cat in order to sneak into a good man's chamber.

A witch's breasts will be pointed rather than round, as discovered in the trials of the 1950s.

A powerful witch may cause a storm at sea.



With a glance, she will make rancid the  
fresh butter of her righteous neighbor.

Even our fastest dogs can-  
not catch a witch-hare.

A witch has been known to cry out while her  
husband places inside her the image of a child.

A witch may be burned for tying  
knots in a marriage bed.

A witch may produce no child  
for years at a time.

A witch may speak a foreign lan-  
guage to no one in particular.

She may appear to frown when  
she believes she is smiling.

If her husband dies unexpectedly, she  
may refuse to marry his brother.

A witch has been known to weep  
at the sight of her own child.

She may appear to be acting in a silent  
film whose placards are missing

In Hollywood the sky is made of tin.

A witch makes her world of air,  
then fire, then the planets. Of card-  
board, then ink, then a compass.

# SPECTRAL EVIDENCE



A witch desires to walk rather than be carried or pushed in a cart.

When walking a witch will turn suddenly and pretend to look at something very small.

The happiness of an entire house maybe ruined by witch hair touching a metal cross.

The devil does not speak to a witch. He only moves his tongue.

An executioner may find the body of a witch insensitive to an iron spike.

An unrepentant witch may be converted with a fittle lead in the eye.

Enchanting witchpowder may be hidden in a girl's hair.

When a witch is hungry, she can make a soup by stirring water with her hand.

I have heard of a poor woman changing herself into a pigeon.

At times a witch will seem to struggle against an unknown force stronger than herself.

She will know things she has not seen with her eyes. She will have opinions about distant cities.



A witch may cry out sharply at the sight  
of a known criminal dying of thirst.

She finds it difficult to overcome  
the sadness of the last war.

A nightmare is witchwork.

The witch elm is sometimes referred to  
as “all heart.” As in, “she was thrown  
into a common chest of witch elm.”

When a witch desires something that is  
not hers, she will slip it into her glove.

An overwhelming power compels her to  
take something from a rich man’s shelf.

I have personally known a nervous young  
woman who often walked in her sleep.

Isn’t there something witchlike  
about a sleepwalker who wanders  
through the house with matches?

The skin of a real witch makes a delicate  
binding for a book of common prayer.

When all the witches in your town have  
been set on fire, their smoke will fill  
your mouth. It will teach you new words.  
It will tell you what you’ve done.

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