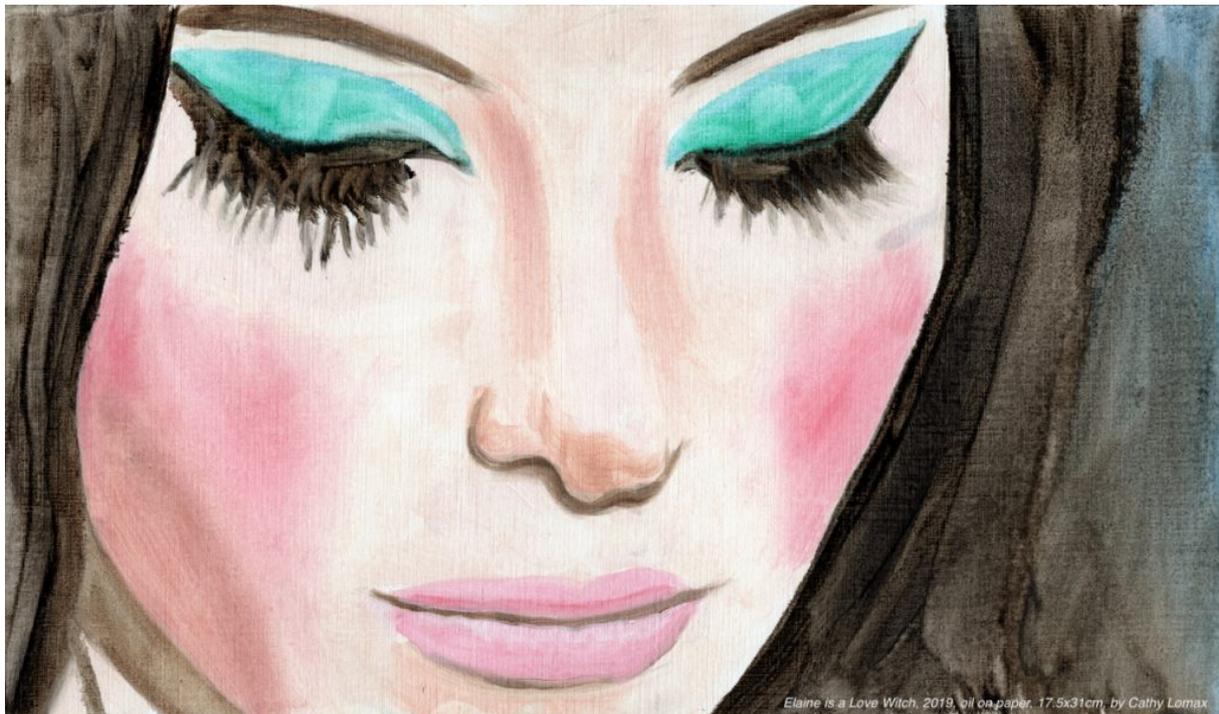

Makeup as Dark Magic: The Love Witch and the Subversive Female Gaze

By Cathy Lomax

The Love Witch (Anna Biller, 2016) is a colour-saturated conundrum that uses surface level notions of femininity to foreground the female gaze. In the words of the director, *The Love Witch* presents the female image “not as an image to be possessed, but as an image in the mirror”.^[1] Against the backdrop of a sugary-pink Victorian tearoom, a primary-coloured gothic apartment and a blood-red burlesque bar, Elaine (Samantha Robinson), a beautiful, young witch, practices sex-magic in order to snare a man. Her strategy eventually leads to disappointment and deathly consequences.



Elaine is a Love Witch, 2019, oil on paper, 17.5x31cm, by Cathy Lomax.

Arguably, the most striking feature of Elaine’s appearance is her extraordinarily made-up face (courtesy of makeup artist Emma Willis) – which is part 1950s Technicolor heroine and part 1960s sex siren. It is this too-perfect glamour mask that immediately makes Elaine fascinating, but also situates her apart from the other women in the small Californian town she has moved to.

In the film's press pack, Anna Biller states that "[t]he witch is a very loaded female image, as she stands for both female power and the male fear of female sexuality."[\[2\]](#) This chimes with Barbara Creed's thoughts on the witch, that she "is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order."[\[3\]](#) The witch is therefore located in what Heather Greene terms "wild femininity", a characteristic of women situated outside of accepted norms, who are at odds with "true womanhood" as exemplified by domesticity, religiosity, sexual purity, and subordination to the male.[\[4\]](#)

In this essay, I will specifically examine the connections between makeup and witchcraft, taking into consideration the notion that makeup may be used in both a disruptive and a transformative way. Drawing upon film and cultural history I will investigate the ways that *The Love Witch* uses the connotations of makeup alongside an extraordinary mise-en-scène to simultaneously critique the symbolic order and supply satisfying levels of visual pleasure.

Painting and Magic

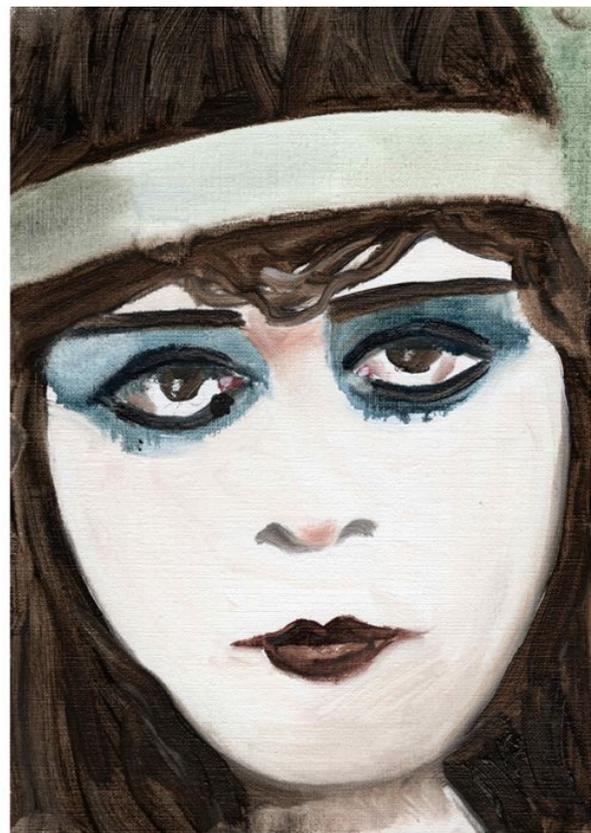
Laura Mulvey writes that "a mask-like surface enhances the concept of feminine beauty as an 'outside'. As artifice and masquerade, which conceals danger and deception."[\[5\]](#) Makeup's ability to transform and accentuate facial features connects it to theatricality and sexualised femininity, marking it as an agent of deception and positioning it as a dangerous and corrupting medium. Because of this, the wearing of visible makeup has - at frequent points in history - been deemed socially unacceptable with its use veiled in secrecy and connected with feminine wiles, magic potions and witchcraft.[\[6\]](#) Kathy Peiss demarcates the distinction between "cosmetics" and "paints" in 19th century America. Peiss advances that cosmetics were thought to assist nature and were part of a woman's "knowledge of beauty and the body", while paints masked nature's handiwork, "aroused social, ethical and health concerns" and in extreme cases contained noxious chemicals that led to illness and even death.[\[7\]](#)

In *Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing* (1616), Puritan Thomas Tuke wrote "a painted face is a false face, a true falshood [sic], not a true face".[\[8\]](#) This connection between "painting" and feminine trickery evoked a fear that any woman with a bewitching face - whether naturally or artificially enhanced - might secure a husband and make her fortune. This idea is played upon in *The Love Witch*, where Elaine's brightly coloured face is used as a tool to lure the hapless men who desire her. Biller notes that Elaine is "a totally 'constructed' woman, with layers of makeup, lashes, fetish lingerie, a wig, and Victorian costumes - all of which she hides behind and uses as a weapon".[\[9\]](#) The subversion here,

however, is that Elaine has been so conditioned by patriarchy to equate sex with love that she is disgusted by the sentimentality and emotional neediness that her beaux exhibit. She is, in Biller's words, "a woman seeking love, who is driven mad by never really being loved for who she is, but only for the male fantasies she has been brainwashed to fulfil".^[10]

Wicked Women

The mise-en-scène of *The Love Witch* pays homage to mid-century films by directors such as Vincente Minnelli and Douglas Sirk, with nods to their Brechtian distanciation. This was a period when makeup was emphatically visible on-screen, designed to promote the visual pleasures of Technicolor and sell products to a rapt female audience. In interviews Biller mentions specific makeup products used on *The Love Witch*, but it is the general vintage look of Elaine's makeup that connects it with current day fashion. This has earned the film extensive publicity via numerous articles on fashion and beauty websites and blogs.^[11]



(L) *Sadie Thompson*, 2019, oil on paper, 25x18cm, by Cathy Lomax. (R) *The Vamp*, 2019, oil on paper, 25x18cm, by Cathy Lomax.

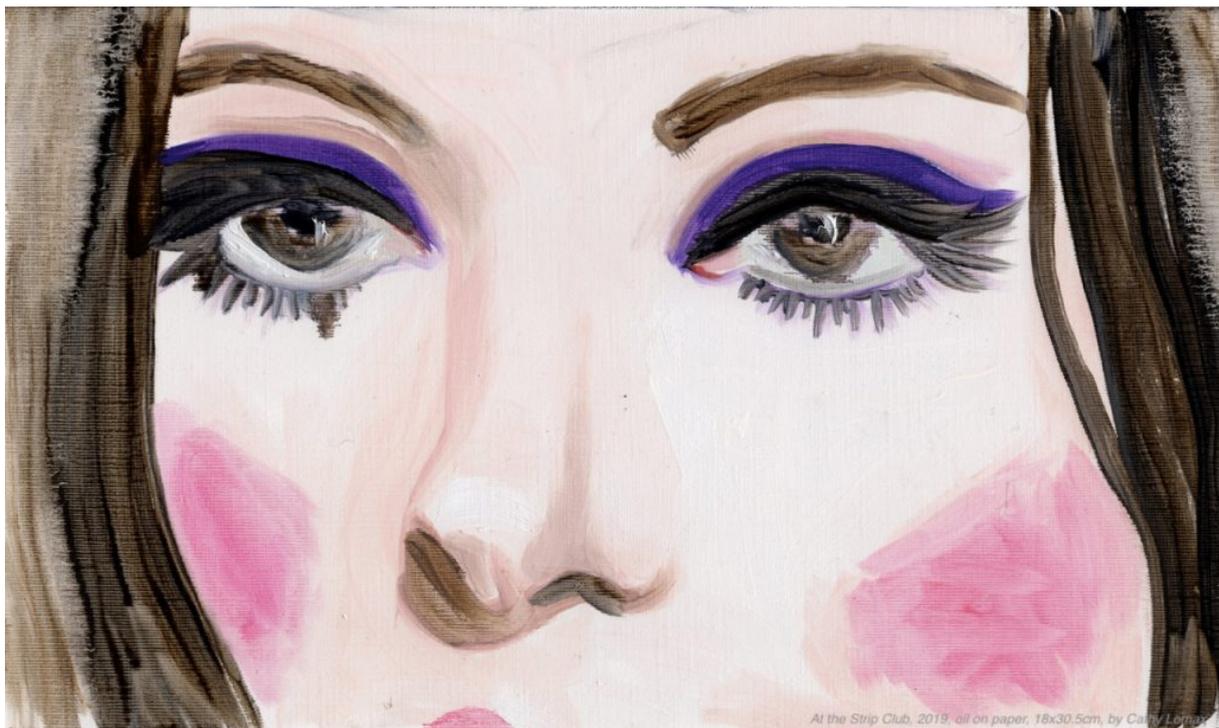
Film and makeup's symbiotic relationship began in the early 20th century, when makeup was seen and admired on the faces of popular cinema

stars, thereby liberating makeup from the puritanical diktats that had equated it with immorality. The normalisation of the everyday wearing of makeup forged innumerable opportunistic commercial ventures and initiated brands such as Maybelline and Max Factor (which are still widely popular today). However, despite makeup becoming a requisite for the smart, urban face, excessive makeup was still a marker of transgression. Trading on this, early cinema categorised the over-painted woman as “Other”, fixing her image as *exotic* and labelling her as a vamp. Theda Bara with her waist-length hair, darkly kohled eyes, and what Marjorie Rosen calls “crude, exotic makeup”, is widely credited as the first screen vamp.[12] She personified, in Rosen’s words “still-primitive but enticing notions of depravity and wanton lust,” and was seen as the embodiment of sex.[13] Bara was even described in publicity material for *The Devil’s Daughter* (Frank Powell, 1915) as “The Wickedest Women in the World” and her career was played out in exotic roles, such as Carmen, Salome and Cleopatra.[14]

In her examination of on-screen witches, Greene conflates the vamp and the witch to create the category of ‘fantasy vamp witch’, who she observes first appeared in the guise of the Evil Queen in Disney’s 1937 animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. [15] The Evil Queen is obsessed with her appearance and is shown in the film as both an older, haggard figure (which the original Grimm Brothers story says she achieves by colouring her face) and a hard-edged beauty – widely cited as being inspired by Joan Crawford.[16] The Evil Queen’s constructed glamour, which Greene sees as an indicator of her power, is shown in opposition to the beauty of the sweet natured 14-year old Snow White, who the Queen’s magic mirror describes as naturally having “Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow.” [17]

The inspiration for the Evil Queen’s glamour look can be specifically pinned to one of Crawford’s more extreme character-driven roles, Sadie Thompson in *Rain* (Lewis Milestone, 1932), a prostitute who pushes against the morality of a puritanical priest on a remote South Sea island. *Silver Screen* magazine noted that “Joan Crawford started a fad when she painted Sadie Thompson’s lips so heavily. Now everyone’s doing it.” [18] Drawing on the 19th century view that an overly painted woman is always a prostitute, who in the word of Peiss is, “brazenly advertising her immoral profession through rouge and kohl”, Crawford worried that this appropriation of her own heavily made-up look would corrupt the morals of her fans.[19] In a 1937 article in *Motion Picture* entitled ‘The Most Copied Girl in the World’, Crawford explained that it was character makeup for both Sadie Thompson and the eponymous *Letty Lynton* (Clarence Brown, 1932); “both weak, wanton women [...] It should never have been put to use in private life.” [20]

The Evil Queen, who indulged in dark magic to maintain her position as the most beautiful of all, seems to have little in common with Sadie, a good time, “tart with a heart”. However, for moral judgement makers, too much makeup signals excessive and unrestrained sexuality, which it seems is just one small step from having murder in mind. This is at the root of the satire at play in *The Love Witch* in which Elaine masquerades as a male fantasy of the perfect woman whilst in reality having sociopathic tendencies. When Griff, the police chief, tells her he is going to arrest her for illegally burying a previous lover who she had mistakenly poisoned, she is wearing her usual full face of flawless makeup, including purple eyeshadow, black winged eyeliner, false eyelashes, deep pink blusher and glossy pink lipstick. Griff tells her “you doll yourself up and do the Stepford wife thing. Thinking every man is going to fall at your feet. But your creepy little sexy act doesn’t work with me [...] what you call love is a borderline personality disorder.” The joke is that we, along with Elaine, suspect that this tough and emotionally unavailable man has a narcissistic personality disorder of his own, albeit one that is shared by a large percentage of the male population.



At the Strip Club, 2019, oil on paper, 18×30.5cm, by Cathy Lomax.

The association between bold makeup and wickedness is played out – although in a more playful manner – by the makeup products produced by a myriad of current-day makeup brands. In 1999 Elizabeth Wurtzel wrote, “The cosmetics industry has helped paint the forbidding face [...] of the woman with trouble in mind”, by giving the very strongest makeup

colours, red black lipsticks, extreme violet eyeshadows and midnight blue nail varnishes, names like Vixen, Seduction, Vamp, Naughty, Circe and Delilah.[21] A 2019 sweep of makeup products reveals that this practice continues with lipsticks called Plum Fatale, Original Sin, Love Crime, Bitch Perfect, Too Bad I'm Bad, Dominatrix and Witchy, a blusher called Poison, and nail varnishes called Queen of Tarts, Mad Woman, Wicked and Tart Deco.

Colouring the Gaze

The Love Witch does not merely draw on the smoky eyes and lavish dark lips of the black and white vamp, but instead offers its own edition of over-made-up, made distinct by an overt use of colour. This look is arguably inspired by the aesthetics of mid-century Hollywood Technicolor, which Dudley Andrews describes as “purer than reality [...] aggressive, almost whorish”. [22] Biller cites Hitchcock's 1950s colour films as a particular influence. [23] However, although coloured eyeshadows – notably blue and green – became fashionable in the 1930s, a close examination of the makeup of Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (1958) and Grace Kelly in *Rear Window* (1954) reveals neutral coloured eyeshadow with red lipstick the only vibrant colour on their faces. [24] Elaine's makeup – although reflecting some makeup trends of the 1950s such as the boldly coloured lips and arched brows – is notable for its brightly coloured eyeshadow which draws from makeup fashions of the 1960s and 70s (a period when lips tended to be downplayed and even blotted out altogether with foundation), as exemplified in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (Russ Meyer, 1970). Consequently, I would suggest that rather than drawing on one specific period the makeup in *The Love Witch* may be more accurately described as unspecifically vintage.

Biller says that she uses symbolism to tell stories and create meaning, which includes most importantly the symbolic use of colour. [25] This is startlingly illustrated by the overtly feminine, pink tearoom which the upbeat and optimistic Elaine visits when she first arrives in town. This extraordinary concoction is both reflected and opposed by the colours of Elaine's makeup. Her pink blusher is fully integrated into the colour scheme but her turquoise eyeshadow – while bright and upbeat (to signify her optimism) – creates a strong, yet complimentary, contrast to the pinks of the décor and costumes of the other tearoom guests, thereby marking her as “Other”. Bright colour as a marker of transgression resonates with Rosalind Galt's observation that “even in the moment of Technicolor's ascendance, deep and bright colour was read in the language of suspicious, even criminal feminine seduction.” [26] Elaine's shifting eyeshadow colour is a particularly visible indicator of her mood, morphing from turquoise in the tearoom to a practical, at-one-with-nature green when she is creating potions and painting in her apartment. Later

the deep purple she wears when her romances go wrong becomes a soft lilac when she thinks she has found “The One”. These changing makeup shades, the wearing of hairpieces and a strikingly coloured wardrobe are clear indicators of Elaine’s feminine masquerade, a strategy that conflates her with other complex Technicolor heroines. For instance, in *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) – a film Biller said had the “Technicolor look” she was seeking in *The Love Witch* – colour is used, albeit in the accessories that surround Marnie (Tippi Hedren) rather than on her face, to describe her unstable identity and disturbed state of mind.[\[27\]](#)



“It was a guilty pleasure for me to create Elaine - she’s like Frankenstein’s Monster” [\[28\]](#)

Although Biller glibly notes that, ‘style is substance’ in *The Love Witch*, I would argue that it really is more complicated than this.[\[29\]](#) Biller claims that when she watches a beautiful woman in a film she is “inspired by her hair and makeup. I want to look like her [...]. Maybe I have a fantasy of being that beautiful.”[\[30\]](#) The character of Elaine springs from this idea of a female gaze, which Biller goes on to say is:

The same gaze that exists in the beauty and fashion industry. Women look at other women in fashion magazines, and they’re wearing a ton of makeup, and they look beautiful [...] We know the fashion and beauty industries are created for women. And they’re mainly run by women. I don’t know why you can’t have that in a movie. [\[31\]](#)

The Love Witch manages to simultaneously celebrate and critique women who harness male desire to achieve their goals. An important part of Elaine's arsenal of magical tools (which also includes potions and spells) is her makeup, which she equips like a layer of armour in her quest to secure true love. Elaine's hotchpotch of vintage makeup aesthetics, inspired by a portrait gallery of Hollywood heroines, paints her as an image in a high-end fashion magazine to be consumed by the fashionable female gaze. Yet set against this is Elaine's less empowering rationale that she needs to become a male fantasy figure in order to succeed in her search for love. This reactionary idea is made slightly more palatable when we realise that Elaine has been wounded by a failed marriage and has emerged psychologically damaged with a warped sense of perspective. With our sympathy engaged we are better able to appreciate her brand of magical glamour and empathise with her narcissistic avenging behaviour, which has more than a little in common with the femme fatale of film noir.

By highlighting the glamorous surface of constructed (and damaged) femininity *The Love Witch* foregrounds the way that women are demarcated by how they present themselves. That can primarily be understood by considering the way men find painted women alluring but purport to prefer women to look natural, as exemplified by the male fear of the vamp witch - a sexually enticing woman who duplicitously subverts nature to manipulate men.

Naomi Wolf writes, "The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance."[\[32\]](#) This rings true when thinking of Joan Crawford's worry that the fans who emulated her Sadie Thompson look would be mistaken for prostitutes. Biller however, while understanding the gender politics, antagonistically refuses to engage with them. Her "wanton" heroine is excessively overloaded with signifiers of femininity, the very accoutrements of colour, ornament and decoration that Galt identifies as "pretty" and as such have been downgraded by the patriarchy. This excess marks Biller's vamp witch - with her characteristic disregard for societal rules - as a figure of fascination for a female audience, allowing us to live in the fantasy mirror of the film without having to worry about being judged. As fellow director Allison Anders notes:

Anna Biller pushes back against the feminist resistance to the "gaze." Cinema is gaze, it's all about how you play with it, and how we as women can empower ourselves by taking charge of that gaze. [\[33\]](#)

All artwork by Cathy Lomax

Notes

[1] Anna Biller Productions. "The Love Witch Press Kit."

[2] *ibid*

[3] Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 75.

[4] Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 37.

[5] Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 71.

[6] Noted ingredients in recipes for cosmetic preparations include herbs, roots, May dew and even frogspawn. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 15-16.

[7] Peiss, *ibid*, 10 & 12.

[8] Quoted in Peiss, 26.

[9] Anna Biller Productions. "The Love Witch Press Kit."

[10] *ibid*.

[11] For instance on online sites such as hellogiggles.com, saffron_sugar.com and theabasilou.com

[12] Rosen, *Popcorn Venus*, 60.

[13] *ibid*.

[14] Cochrane "If looks could kill."

[15] Greene, *Bell, Book and Camera*, 54.

[16] *ibid*, 55.

[17] *ibid*, 56.

[18] Colman, "Fads."

[19] Peiss, 26-27. Abel Green in a contemporary review of *Rain* for *Variety* writes, "It turns out to be a mistake to have assigned the Sadie Thompson review to Miss Crawford. It shows her off unfavourably [... her] getup as the light lady is extremely bizarre." In Quirk, *The Complete Films of Joan Crawford*, 102.

[20] Spensely, "The Most Copied." Quoted in Jeffers McDonald, 135.

[21] Wurtzel, *Bitch*, 6-7.

[22] Andrew, "The Post War Struggle", 44.

[23] Anna Biller Productions. "The Love Witch Press Kit."

[24] Eldridge, *Face Paint*, 168-169.

[25] *ibid*

[26] Galt, *Pretty*, 45.

[27] Anna Biller Productions. "The Love Witch Press Kit." Allen, "Hitchcock's Color", 138.

[28] Anna Biller quoted in Fuller, "Why the Erotic Feminist Satire *The Love Witch* Puts a Hex On Men."

[29] Anna Biller Productions. "The Love Witch Press Kit."

[30] Anderson-Moore, "The Love Witch."

[31] *ibid*.

[32] Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 13-14.

[33] Anders, "Fear of the Female Planet."

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Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (Russ Mayer, 1970)

The Devil's Daughter (Frank Powell, 1915)

Letty Lynton (Clarence Brown, 1932)

The Love Witch (Anna Biller, 2016)

Marnie (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)

Rain (Lewis Milestone, 1932)

Rear Window (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (David Hand, 1937)

Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

About the Author

Cathy Lomax is a PhD student at Queen Mary University of London. Her research investigates the role of makeup and artifice in the creation of the Hollywood female star image. Publications include 'Ghostly threads: Painting Marilyn Monroe's white dresses', *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, 2015 and 'Inverted Reflections in a Silver Spoon: confused sexuality in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*', *Feast*, 2016. Her project about Gloria Grahame, 'The Girl with the...', is published in *Fandom as Methodology*, edited by Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love (Goldsmiths Press, 2019). Lomax is a practising artist, director of Transition Gallery, London and edits art and culture magazines *Arty* and *Garageland* (in 2019 she edited *Arty 41: Witches*). Lomax won the Contemporary British Painting Prize, 2016 and was Abbey Painting Fellow at the British School at Rome, 2014.