

10 Oct–5 Jan



*La Casa Encendida, Maru Serrano, 2024*

## ***The Inverted Tower: Art, counter-culture and the tarot***

- La Casa Encendida presents *The Inverted Tower: The Tarot as Form and Symbol*, an exhibition that examines the widespread renewed interest of contemporary art and the counter-culture in tarot cards.
- Curated by Pilar Solar Montes, the show is structured around the works of a series of artists who have used the meaning and potential of the tarot in their artistic creations: Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Johanna Dumet, Dorothy Iannone, King Khan & Michael Eaton, Raúl de Nieves, Plastique Fantastique, Betye Saar, Niki de Saint Phalle, Suzanne Treister, Aldo Urbano, Agnès Varda and Andy Warhol.
- It will be on display, with free admission, in four rooms at La Casa Encendida from 10 October until 5 January

On Thursday 10 October La Casa Encendida de Fundación Montemadrid presents *The Inverted Tower: The Tarot as Form and Symbol*, an exhibition that explores the recurring relationships between contemporary creation and the tarot. Curated by Pilar Solar Montes, this is a group show that brings together selected works by artists from the 1960s and pieces by contemporary creators, highlighting an enduring relationship from the origins of the tarot, through the avant-gardes and surrealism, to the renewed interest today.

Why the tarot now? In these fast-paced times when every prediction and prior consensus quickly become outdated and uncertainty is the only certainty, both personal and political, human nature reacts by seeking other sources of meaning, other symbols, a shelter from the storm.

This also explains why artists have drawn inspiration from the tarot and have come back to it cyclically, fascinated not only by its symbolism and the search for 'new', non-normative knowledge but also by its iconographic flexibility and its potential to stimulate the imagination, channel subjective visions, utopian ideas and alternative futures, challenge rational thinking, and pave the way to reflection and self-knowledge.

Moreover, the fact that the images and symbols of the tarot are organised and associated randomly lends it the quality of a poetic game that is read from the image to the word, open to personal interpretations regardless of their origin, and throughout history it has therefore been an object of interest for all social classes, from highest to lowest; for high-brow and low-brow culture, and for the counter-culture.

"To enter into the subject of the tarot is to enter into a kaleidoscopic study involving multiple points of view," explains the curator Pilar Soler. "This is why I propose a small journey, without a linear narrative order—like the structure of the card game itself—composed of a series of artists who have used the tarot and its meaning in their works, continuing with the counter-cultural notion of magical thinking as a means to explore the complexity of human experience and to question the dominant narratives."

### **An open symbology**

*The Inverted Tower: The Tarot as Form and Symbol* therefore showcases the different ways in which recent artists have used the tarot as a tool for channelling their desires, revealing transformations, counteracting hegemonic histories, and proposing utopias from very different perspectives. According to tarot readers, an inverted Tower card means that it is time to confront difficulties and make changes, abandon repeated errors, seize the opportunity for a new start, create something new and better.

**Raúl de Nieves** (Morelia, Michoacán, 1983), whose work is rooted in the inexhaustible imagery of Mexican handicrafts, Catholicism, the tarot, drag and punk, presents four sculptures which, like nearly all of his other works, investigate histories of transformation and symbolic journeys. These particular pieces are inspired by "The Fool", card number zero, which makes it the first and last card of the tarot deck. "The Fool" is therefore an element of exploration, freedom and ambiguity. Raúl de Nieves, whose work can be found in the collections of the MOCA in Los Angeles and the Whitney Museum, and whose performances have been seen at Documenta and MoMA PS1, will give a **performance during the opening of the exhibition.**

In her work **Hexen 2.0**, recently acquired by the Tate and “based on actual events”, **Suzanne Treister** (London, 1958) shows us an entire tarot deck of 78 cards that she made to envision alternative futures derived from parallel histories between scientific programmes, government programmes of social control, histories of the counter-culture and activism, the development of technologies like the internet, unmanned aircraft systems and GPS. “Death”, a Major Arcana card, is represented in the work by the mathematician John von Neumann, who was behind the development of the atom bomb; “The Magician” is Timothy Leary, one of the fathers of psychedelic drugs; and “The Hermit” is embodied by the anarcho-primitivist Unabomber, known to have sent letter bombs to US universities and institutions until the mid-1990s. All these figures create a vision of a possible future which, as with tarot cards, can be revealed through different combinations.

In a format which, like Treister’s tarot, stems directly from the world of comics, **Aldo Urbano** (Barcelona, 1991), who exhibited his work *You are too alert to sleep any longer* in association with Daniel Moreno Roldán at La Casa Encendida in 2020 as part of the *Inéditos* show, has created his own tarot for the occasion, **Catedral debacle** [Cathedral Debacle] (2024). Sold jointly with the exhibition catalogue and composed of the Major Arcana cards, the deck draws inspiration from the Tarot of Marseilles to create a new iconography for a subjective discourse by the artist that taps into the subconscious.

**Johanna Dumet** (Guéret, 1991) also uses painting, albeit with an aesthetic more akin to Naïve art and Fauvism, to create her cards on wood, like the original Tarot of Marseilles. She will also do an ad hoc intervention in charcoal on the wall in the exhibition room.

The work of **Betye Saar** (Los Angeles, 1926) is more overtly political. A pioneer of readymade art and a legend of contemporary art and the Black Artists Movement, she habitually explores the intersections between spirituality, mysticism, anti-racism and feminism. Saar embraced syncretism by re-imagining a distinctly white symbology like the tarot with black symbols which, in the 1960s and 1970s, were frowned upon by the art establishment. *The Inverted Tower* features her works **Moon & Stars** (1986), **Sinking Heart** (1986) and **House of Fortune** (1998), the latter an installation comprising a card table and tarot cards as a meditation on spirituality and the future.

The exhibition also includes **Black Power Tarot** (2014), a work by **Arish Ahmad Khan** (1977, Montreal), frontman of King Khan & the Shrines, illustrated by **Michael A. Eaton** and created in collaboration with **Alejandro Jodorowsky**. In the work, the 22 Major Arcana cards of the tarot are represented by historical African-American figures, adding a new dimension to the deck and the history of anti-racist struggles.

Art brut is a more accurate description for the work of **Frédéric Bruly Bouabré** (Zéprégüuhé, Ivory Coast, 1923–Abidjan, Ivory Coast, 2014) an artist who, after a “divine revelation”, embarked on an intense career documenting every type of knowledge he came across with paper, cardboard, ballpoint pen and coloured pencils. One example of these efforts is the *Alphabet Bété*, comprising 448 signs—some of them are now in the collection of the Museo Reina Sofía and were shown at the MoMA in 2022—each of which represents a syllable and transcribes the language of the Bété people. *The Inverted Tower* also features the *Connaissance du Monde* series and **Mythologie Bété**.

The work which the sculptor, painter and film-maker **Niki de Saint Phalle** (Neuilly sur Seine, 1930–San Diego, 2002) produced in relation to the tarot has a more explicit connection to the origins of the cards. It was the powerful families of northern Italy who, with the advent of the Renaissance in the 15th century and then, more intensely, during the Baroque period, merged the imagery with Christian

values, Platonism and classical sources, giving rise to a humanism that was reflected in elaborate allegories for initiates only. In addition to games like the tarot, these allegories found their way into parades and festive representations, literature, poetry, music, theatre and the new gardens that were emerging. In fact, it was in Tuscany from 1978 until 1998 that Saint Phalle built her “life’s work”, the **Tarot Garden**—clearly inspired by the Bomarzo garden in Rome, the quintessential Baroque *giardino*—featuring huge sculptures loosely based on the Tarot of Marseilles by Rider Waite (1910). As in the gardens from the 16th and 17th centuries featuring grottoes and *trompe l’oeil* wall decorations, Saint Phalle’s garden is packed with quotations, messages and allegories, albeit closely related to the female world. On display in *The Inverted Tower* are her tarot drawings and a lithograph of the Tarot Garden itself.

Contemporaries of Saint Phalle and similarly influenced by the counter-cultural explosion of the 1960s and 1970s were **Agnés Varda** (Ixelles, 1929–Paris, 2019) and **Andy Warhol** (Pittsburgh, 1928–New York, 1987). In her masterpiece *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), Varda tells the story of a young singer in Paris who has to pick up some medical results at 7 pm, but at 5 pm visits a tarot reader who informs her that she has cancer. In the space of those two hours, which in the film elapse practically in real time, Cléo undertakes a journey of knowledge about the love of life, humility and death. It is the fragment of the card reading, which lasts barely five minutes, that is featured in *The Inverted Tower*.

Four years later Andy Warhol made *The Velvet Underground Tarot Cards*. Screened in its entirety as part of the exhibition, the film is about a riotous party at a New York apartment where, one by one, the members of the Velvet Underground—John Cale, Nico, Sterling Morrison, Lou Reed and Maureen Tucker—as well as other Factory frequenters, have their tarot cards read in an atmosphere of confusion and chaos. The tarot foretells successes, separations, strengths, problems with other people, wealth and an endless stream of predictions that are hard to follow because of the din in the apartment. Part documentary, part drama, the action primarily consists of the characters simply chatting rather than playing specific roles, but it is difficult to make out what they are saying because of the noise and the fact that the camera doesn't focus on them.

From the same era and a similar cultural background, the artist **Dorothy Iannone** (Boston, 1933–Berlin, 2022) spent her entire career working with sexually explicit autobiographical texts, films and paintings but employing an aesthetic akin to the representations of Classical Greece, the Baroque, Japanese art, eastern religions and even African sculpture. In 1967 Iannone met the Swiss artist Dieter Roth, for whom she left her husband and to whom she dedicated *(Ta)Rot Pack* (1968/69). Censored when it received its first public showing at the *Friends* exhibition in Bern in 1969, the work is now on display at La Casa Encendida.

## Public activities

### **Raúl de Nieves. Performance. Thursday 10 October, 8.30 pm. Exhibition rooms**

A performance based on the art of GIVING. The sun, as a powerful source of life, gives abundance to life, illuminating the day in the night. A transformative act occurs and the voice becomes sound. The performance includes the collaboration of the musician Alexander López, who has created the sound fragment *LA MOSCA*, a burning source of life that feeds on the reminiscence of time. A true divine intervention.

**“Conversations on the tarot and the great mysteries”.** With Servando Rocha, Mery Cuesta, Lurdes Martínez, Eva Espeita and Diana Calabaza Cósmica. Live podcast. Friday 15 November,

### 6.30 pm

The writer and publisher Servando Rocha converses with four artists and specialist thinkers about the world of the tarot, in its broadest, most transgressive and most heterodox sense. Accompanied by live music and an immersive experience, the participants reflect on art, the avant-garde and the occult, proposing mystery and dreams as alternative ways of viewing the world. Lurdes Martínez is a writer, poet and member of the Madrid Surrealist Group; Eva Espeita is a researcher specialising in mysticisms and musics of the world; Diana Calabaza Cósmica is an artist and member of the Comegente group; and Mery Cuesta is a cultural critic, exhibition curator, comic critic and drummer.

### “Painting the tarot again”, with Aldo Urbano. 17–19 December, 5 pm to 8 pm

The artist Aldo Urbano, who has created a new tarot based on the original archetypes for *The Inverted Tower*, leads this workshop in which the participants will make a tarot card game. The tarot iconography provides a pretext for initiating a creative process focused on painting, drawing and, to a certain extent, writing as well. The workshop structure is based on an individual painting experience that nevertheless takes place in a group context, and all the material produced will be combined into a single piece. Participants do not need any prior knowledge of the tarot and neither do they necessarily have to know how to paint. However, the workshop is practical and uses drawing and painting, albeit in a non-conventional manner and more in keeping with Naïve or amateur art.

### Workshop related to the exhibition. “The Inverted Tower”. 22 Oct–19 Dec

As usual, La Casa Encendida de Fundación Montemadrid will offer workshops and activities related to the exhibition for members of the educational community in the Madrid region. The [Schools Programme of La Casa Encendida](#) broadens learning contexts by turning them on their head in an innovative, fun and educational manner. The contents supplement the syllabus of all academic levels, from preschool to upper secondary and including special education, transitional support for immigrant students, vocational courses and other educational formats. The Schools Programme focuses on topics related to the usual themes addressed by La Casa Encendida: environment and science, human rights and cultural diversity, gender and diverse relationships and sexual orientation, solidarity, performing arts, exhibitions, audiovisuals, etc.

Aimed at students of primary, secondary, upper secondary and vocational education, the [workshop](#) on *The Inverted Tower* exhibition explores the creative aspect of the tarot and its use as a tool to tell stories, both to define the present and envision the future. Through the works, which focus on themes such as how we read and different types of narratives, the students will have fun as they tour the rooms and think about the matters raised, and will then experiment in the classroom. What future can we imagine together?

### The tarot table. Library. From mid-October

The Library tables contain collections and new releases related to the themes and lines of work addressed by La Casa Encendida. Library card holders can borrow the titles free of charge. On this occasion, the curator of *The Inverted Tower: The Tarot as Form and Symbol*, Pilar Soler Montes, has proposed a bibliography to accompany the exhibition and highlight the different approaches that novelists and essayists have adopted to the theme of the tarot. From October, **the tarot table in the Library of La Casa Encendida** will display titles (in Spanish translation) such as *Poems* by W.B. Yeats (selected by Seamus Heaney), *Mnemosyne Atlas* by Aby Warburg, *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey* by Sallie Nichols, *The Way of Tarot* by Jodorowsky, *Thoth Tarot* by Aleister Crowley, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, and *Triumphs* by Petrarch.

**Guided tours and advice from room attendants. Saturdays, 12 noon to 2 pm and 5 pm to 8 pm. Sundays, 12 noon to 2 pm**

La Casa Encendida offers guided tours to the exhibition for groups. The tours are free of charge and do not need to be booked in advance. Participants should simply arrive at the stated time and enquire at the Information Point. During the same time as the tours, room attendants will also be on hand to answer any questions about the exhibition.

**[The Inverted Tower: The Tarot as Form and Symbol](#)**

**Date:** 10 October 2024–5 January 2025

**Place:** Rooms B, C, D and E at La Casa Encendida

**Price:** Free admission

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