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Newsletter: Painter Ariana Papademetropoulos takes us into esoteric worlds at Deitch

by Carolina A. Miranda
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A detail from "Nymphaeum," 2021, a painting by Ariana Papademetropoulos on view in the "The Emerald Tablet" at Jeffrey Deitch.(Flying Studio)

Alchemical art

Sometimes the internet can be a magical thing. For about a year, I've used an extension developed by the Art Institute of Chicago in Google Chrome that shows a new piece of art from the museum's collection every time I open a new browser window. It's a good way of seeing obscure stuff buried deep in the collection, such as unfinished drawings or a pre-Columbian amulet from Peru.

Last week, I turned up a set of witch balls from the mid-19th century, the hollow glass spheres used to ward off or trap troublesome spirits, which are also employed as a tool of divination, most commonly in England and in the United States. The object – delicate, translucent glass striated with threads of white – stopped me in my tracks. It also sent me down a bit of an internet rabbit hole. I found out that New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art also has witch balls in its collection, as does the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

It made me wonder what other tools of magic were hidden in museum collections and what it meant to gaze into an orb and find within its contours a portal to other worlds.



Ariana Papademetropoulos' works often feature worlds and objects embedded inside each other, such as the painting "A Mellow Drama," 2021. (Flying Studio)

ARIANA PAPADEMETROPOULOS

All of this had me in just the right mindset as I wandered into Ariana Papademetropoulos' exhibition at Jeffrey Deitch the next day.

Her show "The Emerald Tablet," which is on view through next week, consists of two parts. In one gallery, Papademetropoulos presents six new, large-scale oil paintings that seem to embody the idea of bewitched worlds within worlds: In one canvas, a troupe of ghostly spirits frolics in a Victorian bedroom; in another, a delicate bubble containing a cosmic world floats perilously over a rocky landscape. In the rest of the gallery's voluminous space, Papademetropoulos has organized a group exhibition that brings together works by artists she is inspired by and whose works reverberate with esoteric themes.

"They all had metamorphosis in common," she says of the works in the show, "and that is alchemy."

"And in terms of alchemy, I was thinking about worlds within worlds, or bubbles within a painting or the object inside a crystal," she adds. "There is a theme within the show about vessels and transformations happening within a vessel."

The idea, she says, was to create a journey. "I thought of my paintings as the beginning of this journey," she explains via telephone. "And all of the paintings that followed are meant to be portals."

Those portals include a riotous and eclectic collection of work. A functioning carousel by artist Raúl de Nieves features an assortment of monstrous and fantastic figures riding slowly in circles. A sculpture by Isabelle Albuquerque depicts the body of a woman in the process of becoming feline. A pair of works by the late Henry Darger shows little girl fairies. Times and styles are compressed for a show that feels rather ageless and otherworldly.



Raúl de Nieves' otherworldly carnival ride, "When I look into your eyes I see the Sun," from 2018. (Joshua White)

The show, interestingly, ends up feeling very Los Angeles. By choosing alchemy as a theme, "The Emerald Tablet" embraces the occult and alternative spiritual practices that have long found fertile ground in the city. Featured in the show, for example, is the work of 20th century actress and occultist painter Marjorie Cameron – known simply as Cameron – who was quite famously married to fellow occultist and Caltech rocket scientist Jack Parsons.

Theosophy, a mystic practice that had a following among many artists in the early 20th century, also plays a role. Well represented in the show, for example, is Agnes Pelton, a SoCal spiritualist painter who had been interested in theosophy early in her life (and who was recently the subject of a terrific exhibition at the Palm Springs Art Museum).

Papademetropoulos, who grew up in Pasadena, first learned about theosophy after finding a book on the subject at the now-defunct Cliff's Books when she was 16. Her show's concept and title echo the work of a prominent adherent: L. Frank Baum, the children's book author who penned "The Wizard of Oz," a story centered on a journey to an idyllic Emerald City, which is thought to allude to the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, a key alchemical text.



The group show portion of "The Emerald Tablet" features a sculpture by Mike Kelley (foreground) and paintings by Agnes Pelton. (Joshua White)

"I wasn't trying to curate a show about L.A.," says Papademetropoulos. But it ended up working out that way. "I was interested in fantasy and reality, and L.A. is a place where cults are formed and spiritualities are established."

Which is what the path through the gallery will ultimately reveal – exalted states from different times, all coming together in the end in a brilliant, emerald space.

Ariana Papademetropoulos, "The Emerald Tablet, a Solo Exhibition and Curatorial Project," at Jeffrey Deitch. On view through Oct. 23; deitch.com.