

Witch's Crew
Fiery artist Marjorie Cameron was Los Angeles's original mistress of the occult. A half-century later, says Tim Blanks, the fashion world has fallen under her spell.

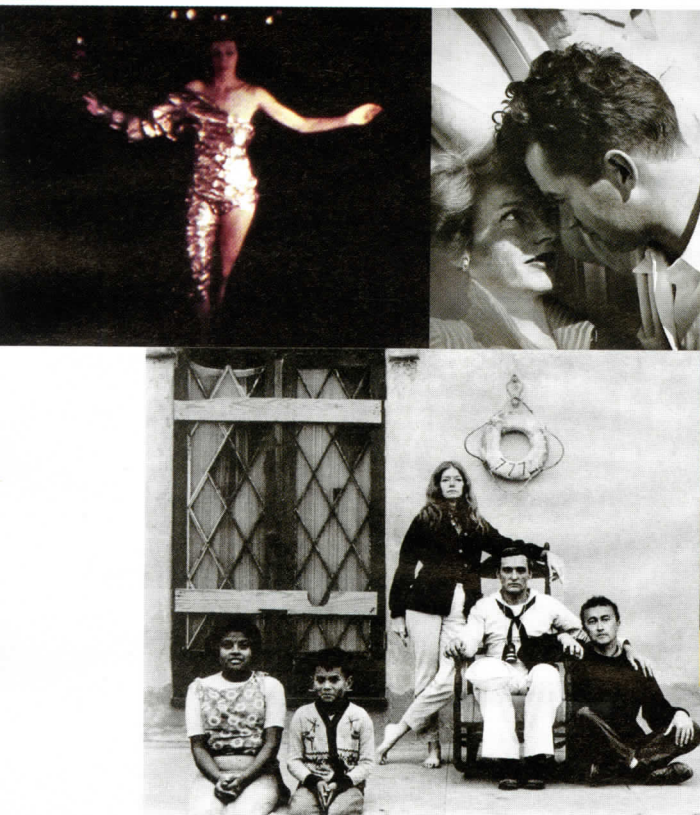


Clockwise, from far left: Marjorie Cameron as the Scarlet Woman from Kenneth Anger's 1954 movie *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, photographed by Anger; Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac, New York, 1979; Wallace Berman's photograph of Cameron, *Semina* 1, 1955; two looks from the Saint Laurent spring 2013 collection; a postcard Berman sent to Cameron, 1955.

IF IT IS INDEED TRUE THAT GEOGRAPHY determines fate, Hedi Slimane, the recently appointed designer for Saint Laurent who decamped to Los Angeles from his native Paris five years ago, has found the perfect spot for himself. The city's iconography—sun, sea, and film stars—is well known, but that shiny facade belies a more shadowy world that has always fascinated Slimane. Orson Welles described Los Angeles as “a bright and guilty place”—exactly the kind of feeling Slimane captures in his photographs of spectral palm trees, dead neon signs, and stretches of empty sand eerily resonant in black and white. Call it L.A. noir.

The emotional impact of Slimane's debut collection for Saint Laurent was rooted at least as much in the culture—or should that be *occulture*?—of his new hometown as in the legacy of the house he inherited. The floating chiffons, sweeping floor-length capes, wide-brimmed hats, and dangling tassels evoked a particular kind of L.A. woman: the gypsy sorceress who has inspired and ensnared generations of easily led men. In the '70s, the look was popularized by Stevie Nicks, who gave the archetype a name with her song “Rhiannon.” A close friend of Nicks's, the jeweler Loree Rodkin, was dating Don Henley at the time and was a source of inspiration for the Eagles' “Witchy Woman.” “We were the dark, slightly unavailable Goth hippies,” Rodkin says. “We were stuck somewhere between Romeo and Juliet and the Wicked Witch of the West: We personified drama, fear, and romance.”

Once upon a time there was a *real* Witch of the West. Her name was Marjorie Cameron, and since her death in 1995 at the age of 73, her art—as well as her peculiar life story—has quietly emerged from the city's secret history. Cameron was part of the coterie of artists that revolved around Wallace Berman's *Semina* magazine, launched in 1955, and the Ferus Gallery, which opened in 1957 and incubated local talents like Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, and Ken Price, and introduced Andy Warhol to California in 1962. In fact, it was *Untitled (Peyote Vision)*, an erotic drawing by Cameron in *Semina*, that prompted the now legendary police raid on Ferus and the subsequent obscenity trial that saw Berman jailed. Though



Clockwise, from top left: Still from *Wormwood Star*, 1955; Cameron and Jack Parsons on their wedding day, 1947; Cameron's painting *Crowley's Holy Guardian Angel*, 1966; Cameron in 1947; her painting *Cameron's Angels*, 1964; stylist Rachel Zoe; Juicy Couture's Gela Nash-Taylor (left) and Pamela Skaist-Levy; Cameron, Dennis Hopper, and Curtis Harrington (from left) on the set of *Night Tide*, 1961.



Cameron vowed never to show again, she was included in "Beat Culture and the New America" at the Whitney Museum the year she died; she was part of the groundbreaking 2005 "Semina Culture" show organized by the Santa Monica Museum of Art; and in 2008, her portrait *Dark Angel* appeared at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in an exhibition called "Traces du Sacré." Spencer Kansa's biography, *Wormwood Star: The Magical Life of Marjorie Cameron*, was published in 2011.

As much as her paintings, it's the "magick" that makes Cameron so magnetic to a modern audience. She was a charismatic woman in the mid-century macho art world, so it's not hard to see how she galvanized the men of Ferus as well as the Hollywood mavericks who attached themselves to the coolest scene in town. (At one point, she was roommates with Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell.) It's also not hard to imagine how alluring and dangerous she must have seemed to them because of her intimacy with California's occult underbelly.

Jack Parsons, Cameron's first husband, pioneered the propellant systems that literally fueled America's space race. By day, he was the scientific genius of Caltech rocketry and Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory; by night, he was an ardent acolyte of British sorcerer and poet Aleister Crowley, whose nom de guerre was the Great Beast 666 and who was an eager practitioner of the demonic rituals of his quasi-Masonic organization Ordo Templi Orientis. In the early '20s, the British gutter press had accused Crowley of satanic practices, including human sacrifice—and it's certainly true that the O.T.O.'s ceremonies played into every black magic cliché, with mystical incantations, sacerdotal garb, and orgiastic sex rites sparked by mind-altering substances. A shared interest in sci-fi brought Parsons together with a then unknown young naval officer named L. Ron Hubbard, and in early 1946 Hubbard assisted Parsons in a long-running magical operation to summon up the Scarlet Woman, or Babalon. Within days, Cameron materialized at a party at Parsons's house. It was, at the very least, obsession at first sight. He promptly celebrated his "witch woman" in a series of poems.

Parsons died in a home-laboratory explosion in 1952; Hubbard would eventually use his sorcerer's apprenticeship to notoriously lucrative ends. And over the years Cameron came to believe that she was, in fact, the incarnation of Crowley's

Babalon. When she met Parsons, she was all immaculate maquillage and Suzy Parker coif. Years later, swishing around Hollywood in flowing dresses, she looked like the incarnation of something ethereal. That was all it took for arch occultist and indie icon Kenneth Anger to sideline leading lady Anaïs Nin in favor of Cameron in his 1954 film *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, in which, fittingly, Cameron played a character called the Scarlet Woman. *Inauguration* endures as an extraordinary artifact of the Hollywood underground of the time.

And that was essentially what Cameron herself became. Her life was difficult and dogged by poverty, so it's tempting to see her as another casualty of the fast-living, easy-loving, free-thinking Beat generation. But she never stopped painting, and she never gave up her ardent commitment to the elemental spirituality she'd explored with Parsons. In the '60s and beyond, as the general public's interest in matters of the spirit and the occult blossomed (and Crowley gained enough currency to be included on the cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*), Cameron struck those who met her as a kind of medicine woman, an eccentric creature whose access to dark knowledge was sanctified by urban legend.

It's telling that Cameron's once subversive aesthetics have now become firmly entrenched in the mainstream—thanks not just to Slimane's floor-skimming frocks but also to more current incarnations of the "witchy women" Rodkin had described in the '70s. Rachel Zoe made a name for herself as the stylistic den mother of a coven of reed-thin starlets clad in flowing gowns who could have been cast in a dark fairy tale. Pamela Skaist-Levy and Gela Nash-Taylor, the founders of Juicy Couture, recently launched Skaist-Taylor, a label they admit is at least partially inspired by Cameron—and not just when it comes to the diaphanous robes. "Although we never crossed paths with Marjorie, her artistic, magical spirit is something we have tapped into," Skaist-Levy says. "In the late '80s, Gela and I would frequent this dicey Santeria store. Early on in our fashion journey, we had a candle blessed and subsequently lit it every day for many years. The unanswered question was 'How did it burn for so long?' That blessed candle was the only thing we took from the office when we left Juicy. We always felt that it had something to do with the magic of our success."

Only in L.A. ♦

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