

397 views | Nov 20, 2020, 07:00am EST

This Exhibit About Witch Hunting Is Not About Donald Trump (But It's Still Politically Spellbinding)



Jonathon Keats Contributor ⓘ

Arts

critic-at-large

The four years that Donald Trump has spent in the White House have amounted to one prolonged witch hunt. At least that's what future generations may believe if they read his Twitter feed as an accurate representation of history. He has tweeted about mistreatment in those terms several hundred times, and even referenced witch hunting in a letter sent to Nancy Pelosi during the impeachment hearings. Trump may therefore be disappointed to learn that *Witch Hunt*, a new exhibition at the Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Denmark, isn't about him.

At least Trump's presidency is not the official topic of the exhibit. The Kunsthall instead examines the little-known history of witch hunting in Denmark under King Christian IV, whose paranoia about black magic rivaled Trump's suspicions about the deep state. Initiated by an ordinance that Christian passed against "witches and their accomplices" in 1617, witch hunting legitimized gossip as a basis for persecution. Over the next several decades, approximately one thousand Danish citizens – primarily women living at the margins of society – were executed on charges of collusion with the devil. Many were burned at the stake.



Virginia Lee Montgomery, *Water Witching*, 2018, video still. Courtesy the artist. VIRGINIA LEE MONTGOMERY

The numbers were even greater in other European countries such as Germany, which conducted more than sixteen thousand trials during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sentencing nearly half the defendants to death. The mania also spread to the American Colonies, most famously Salem, Massachusetts, where nineteen women were hanged and a man was crushed to death following an investigation of some two hundred people suspected of practicing black magic.

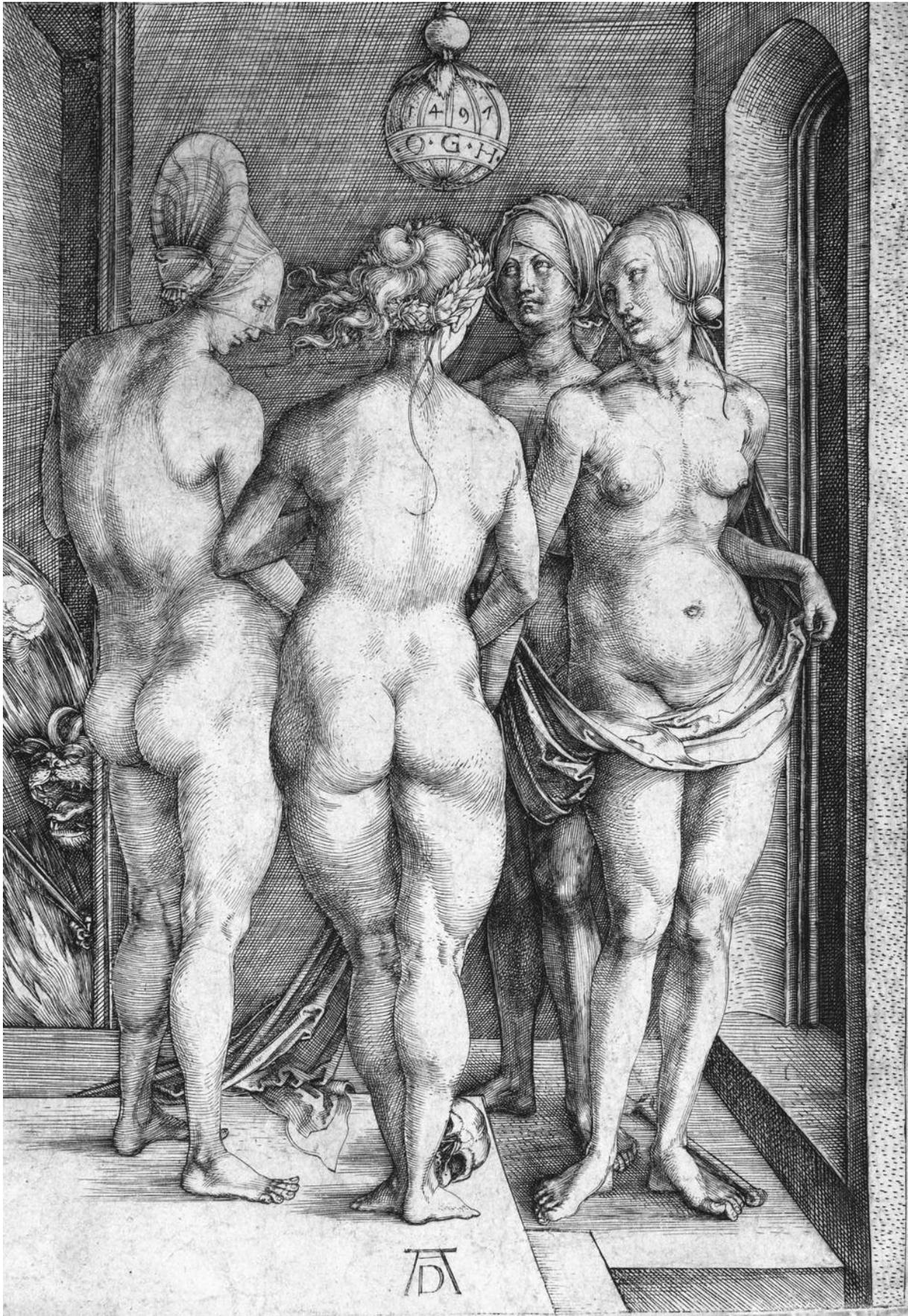
Trump referenced Salem in his letter to Pelosi – claiming that “More due process was afforded to those accused in the Salem Witch Trials” than he received before Congress. Although that complaint was as unfounded as his grievances about the deep state, the Salem Witch Trials were indeed historically relevant because it was the story of Salem that introduced the language of witch hunting into modern political discourse through a play written by Arthur Miller.

First performed on Broadway in January of 1953, *The Crucible* was an allegory for the Red Scare instigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthyism operated much like the witch trials in Massachusetts Bay, and also those in Denmark, stoking paranoia through gossip and eschewing hard

evidence. False convictions (whether for allegiance with the Soviet Union or the devil) encouraged new accusations driven by escalating fear and opportunism.

The persecuted in both instances bore little resemblance to Trump, who has persistently red-baited Democrats and enlisted the religious right to crusade against secular society. This inversion is an extension of Trump's presentation of himself as an outsider inside the White House: an effort to add the moral righteousness of the politically powerless to his political capital. Claiming to be the subject of a witch hunt, he cloaks himself in the mantle of victimhood while also providing cover for witch-hunting his own political opponents.

The historical materials shown in the Kunsthall Charlottenborg exhibition provide background for understand these machinations, much as Arthur Miller's historical drama did for McCarthyism in the '50s. (The discussion of gossip in 17th century Denmark in an accompanying reader is especially insightful and apposite.) Also like Miller's play, which was written to be performed on a contemporary stage, the exhibition overtly makes the past present through the inclusion of contemporary art.



Albrecht Dürer, De fire hekse, 1497, Nürnberg. Michael Fornitz collection. 'Heksejagt', Kunsthal ... [+]
DAVID STJERNHOLM

Some of the artwork leaves so little to the imagination that it merely amplifies historical themes including terror and misogyny. Other work is more nuanced, especially a Louise Bourgeois sculpture from the late 1940s, a sort of abstract monument to trauma that is as powerful as it is universal. Her sculpture subtly reminds us that the sociopolitical basis and psychological impact of witch hunting are not unique to any one time or place.

Of course distinctions are also important. The lack of direct reference to Trump in the exhibition is more meaningful than if he'd been scrutinized. Representing this atrocious history on its own terms can help make people today more wary of the political manipulations enlisted by Christian IV and Joseph McCarthy. Denying Trump the honor of being called a witch honors the legitimate victims of witch hunts, and may even break the spell of his self-aggrandizing fake news.



Jonathon Keats

I am a critic and artist, most recently the author of "You Belong to the Universe: Buckminster Fuller and the Future" and "Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our...

Read More
