When I first saw the paintings of Hilma af Klint, I was taken by surprise: expansive canvasses, three metres tall, awash with flannel-pink, tangerine and dusty mauve. They show pastel-coloured gatherings of organic forms, highly organised but entirely abstracted. In one image, a powder blue oval splits, creating a mirror image in maze-yellow. Above, a pale-green spiral echoes a sea mollusk. There are pink discs, like stylised roses and chains of white fingers, perhaps honeysuckle. Dotted lines trace ellipses: these are formal experiments in colour and geometry, replete with constellations of letters, numerals, and crescents.

They were painted by a woman born in 1863.

Hilma af Klint, a Swedish mystic, began these paintings, which depart entirely from representation, in 1906, some years before the familiar giants Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich claimed to make the historic break into abstraction. Klint’s work has only recently been consolidated – it was not until 2013 that all her paintings were restored and presented at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, a show that positioned Klint as the first abstractionist in the western canon.
These ideas actually gained ground in the era considered unreasonable, wild, vain, wasteful. Centuries, in which women were accused of emotionality, uncontrollable feeling, and excess. The spirit world was pathologised, seen as ‘weaker sex’ spawned, as women’s engagement was trivialised, and theories around the Séance has always been feminised. A Victorian phenomenon, its popularity grew with the rise of Spiritism in the nineteenth century, a movement that counted Klint among its followers. Spiritists believed the dead could be contacted through séance sessions, and many leading members (and mediums) were women, some Suffragists too. Klint’s sessions were first in Stockholm in the 1890s, and later at a studio built in Munsö, a former island, thick with forests and almost completely surrounded by water, located forty miles west of the city. Munsö became a retreat for Klint and her all-female collective, known as The Five, who met most Fridays to conduct séance, as a meeting point of the human and spirit world over which hands and glasses might slide. “My work is a method to communicate with various spirits,” she tells me, from her workshop in Nuutajarvi. “The cups and dishes act as offerings. Once there is a table and there is an offering, then I can invite the guests – and the party begins.” The guests include Frida Kahlo, John Donne, and Alejandro Jodorowsky. “I often wrap the guest in cloth, sit atop lithograph prints, laid out like cloths, and have sex with animals. Because these were attitudes part of a conversation, between men, taking place across the centuries, in which women were accused of being unreasonable, wild, vain, wasteful. These ideas actually gained ground in the early fifteenth century, and have roots in the European witch hunts, a three-century period, when historians estimate 100,000 people – mainly women – were accused of and tried for the crime of witchcraft. What is clear to anyone looking at the period is that women lost their social status, and suffered a unique process of social degradation. Superstitions emerged around women, who were made into fearful, irrational things. One of the many insights that witchcraft accusations offer is the anxiety emerging in the fifteenth century, around female power. Witchcraft was thought to make men impotent, to harvest pens, to destroy infants, to fly out the house by night, to drink and revel, and hunt for treasure and become independently wealthy – all threats to male privilege. As the Enlightenment came about, Europe appeared to come to its senses. The fears that had escalated during the Witch Hunts – thousands of trials, mass hysteria – were made to seem silly, irrational, even absurd. Witchcraft was put away – or at least, put out of sight. It is well documented that just as the witchcraft laws were being enacted in Britain and across Europe, they start appearing in British and European colonies – in other words, witchcraft was quite literally exported. Meanwhile, in the capital, the occult, now fully feminised, had lost its sting. Women’s status was so decorated that it no longer posed a threat.

The new recognition of Klint’s work is no accident. It comes alongside a so-called spiritual turn in contemporary art, an epistemological climate of a renewed interest in witchcraft, tarot, cosmology, magic, and crystals. There is an acknowledgement of the influence of theosophy on the Modernists (otherwise a stereotype invested with masculinity, rationality, and reduction) – a recognition that, like Klint, Mondrian and Kandinsky approached abstraction through forms of spiritual practice. Estonian performance artist Kris Lemsalu, also showing her work in Helsinki, creates wild sculptures made of ceramic, fur and textile. In Kiasma, I find a parachute, suspended in the corner of the room. The falling body is faceted. She wears a ceramic hood and a gold party hat, pointed like a witch’s. Below her, two dishevelled porcelain dogs seem to yelp in delight, hybrids, I
When I spoke to Lemsalu, from her attic passageway, eventually, in the 1960s, "I don’t think of myself as a creator, more of a collaborator," Kavaliauskaitė tells me. She still lives in a small seaside village on the Atlantic coast of Lithuania, where she grew up. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world.

The supernatural collaboration Lemsalu describes has shades of Animistic beliefs, which invention and animals, objects and materials with agency — life, soul — insisting on a different kind of relationship with the non-human world. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world.

"In her novel The True Deceiver, which is set in a remote snowbound village in Finland, Tove Jansson demonstrates how the witch stigma remains a kind of cultural superstitia, a misogynist anxiety transmuted into fairytales and chanted by children. In Jansson’s story, an independent and unmarried woman, Katri Klang, is labelled ‘the witch’ by the local children, and isolated by the villagers. Eventually, she finds friendship with another outsider, Anna, a children’s book illustrator and recluse, who occupies an old mansion outside the village, where she paints watercolours and reads adventure stories. These self-sufficient, unorthodox women are suspicious, witchy, and as Jansson goes on to suggest, lesbian. Indeed, many of the inherited stereotypes around the figure of the witch — as a social outsider, living alone, a woman who threatens children — indicate that ‘the witch’ may also, always, have been a euphemism for lesbianism. Jansson lived as an openly gay woman in 1940s Finland, and Tooti, as she looks out at the leaves behind her to the back of the picture, another woman, also alone, sits at a glass of wine, spectral in a green ivory dress that is the same colour as her skin. She looks across at the smoking woman. They have not yet found each other.

The mural is, Party in the Countryside, also abounds with figures — a boy playing a violin, two loving couples, a woman staring into a mirror in the palm of her hand — but now there is an overflow of foliage. Ferns and long grasses, trees full of autumn leaves, all-maze-green, brimful and wheat. I can’t help but see Klint in the work — her shapes can move out the body, and that body can shapeshift. As a child, Kavaliauskaitė was initiated by an Altai shaman from the Siberian region and shamanism exists in oral histories in Lithuania where she grew up. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner — turning things into other things, joining forces with the non-human world.