



Cover image: *Witch's Hammer* 2011, watercolour on paper, 38 x 57cm

Back image: *Members Nest*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 50 x 65cm



BEDKNOBS AND BROOMSTICKS

Monika Behrens & Rochelle Haley

Bedknobs and Broomsticks

An exhibition of collaborative paintings by
Monika Behrens & Rochelle Haley

24th March - 10th April 2011

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Henbane, 2011, watercolour on paper, 30 x 30 cm



Hemlock, 2010, watercolour on paper, 28 x 19 cm



Bedknobs and Broomsticks

The vilification of witches reached a zenith in the 15th and 16th century, when witch trials were epidemic. Through time, they appear in myths and fairy tales as ugly hags and devouring monsters. But as a source of mysterious female power, witches have also fulfilled an early role as owners of their own sexuality and makers of their own stories.

For their recent work, collaborating artists Monika Behrens and Rochelle Haley have drawn on the rich work of witchcraft - toxic potions, rhapsodic plants and hallucinatory flowers that induce inebriation. Their co-productive watercolour paintings are a magical blend of fine botanical illustrations, with the splendour of dildos - made of glass or shaped like rabbits, nobbled or pink - and accompanied by the uneasy, discomfoting presence of invisible demonsv or spirits hovering behind the sacharine facade.

The phallic dildos sway in an imaginary breeze of the fairy tale wonderlands, where the symbolically erotic rabbit and the slimy-skinned toad can wander, free from condemnation. Potent herbs and aphrodisiacal flowers - hemlock, deadly nightshade, henbane, monks-wood, fox glove and mandrake - fill these dreamy sequences. 'Parsley,' explain the artists, 'is a strongly hallucinatory ingredient for a witches' flying ointment.' The artists discovered a book by Pollan - *The Botany of Desire* - in which it is explained that flying ointment, of toad skin, hash, belladonna, poppies and mushrooms was applied vaginally using a special dildo or broomstick.

Through their dedicated research, Behrens and Haley found a 1486 witch-hunting handbook called *The Witch Hammer* wherein witches are described as stealing men's virile members and hiding them in birds' nests. One of Behrens' and Haley's larger watercolours relates to this cautionary tale, but the misandry is absent.

These paintings of the potential eroticism found in the natural world, reflect the contradictions of witchcraft: witches are often portrayed as ugly hags but their experiences and impulses are of pleasure - sexual and drug-induced - however ill-sought or ill-gotten.

Through these exquisite and meticulous watercolours the artists explore an antithetical world where religion and the supernatural coexist, where atheism works against religious hysteria. During the eighteenth century, the church declared the legitimacy of witches and witchcraft, as an argument against atheism. This kind of absurdist moral contradiction fuels the work of Behrens and Haley.

As an extension of this variance, the illogic of their Mad Hatter-style garden of dildos makes rational sense, relying as the paintings do on the awe of the unnatural natural world. Within the dark realm of witchcraft and sorcery, these two collaborating artists have found a place to explore sexuality and identity, botany and fairy tale.

Prue Gibson

Prue Gibson is a freelance visual arts writer based in Sydney. She recently released her first book, The Rapture of Death.



Opposite page: *Holy Trinity*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 28 x 38cm
 Above: *Flying Ointment*, 2011, watercolour on paper, 28 x 38cm (detail)