FRIEZE

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Isabelle Frances McGuire Summons Demons

At Bel Ami, Los Angeles, the artist restages the Salem witch trials, moving beyond banal binaries of good and evil

BY **GRACE BYRON** | 08 OCT 26



Isabelle Frances McGuire, 'Joy is a Puppet', 2026, exhibition view.
Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles

Isabelle Frances McGuire is building an army of the undead. Following a standout installation of witches and floating villagers at the Whitney Biennial this year, the Chicago-based sculptor has mounted an expansive, interactive solo show at Bel Ami in Los Angeles. Featuring a new sorceress, 'Joy is a Puppet' sees McGuire restaging the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century, as they consider how crones have since been vilified and remanded to the world of the diabolic. At the show's heart is a video game co-created with Will Lee, *Joy's Hands* (2026), which enables players to cast spells and even summon demons on a large flat-screen television from the comfort of the gallery.

The artist, who has in past works refashioned Santa Claus as a vampire and raised Abraham Lincoln's likeness from the grave, is fascinated by the weight such mythologized figures – whether fictional or historical – carry in contemporary American culture. In a 2025 interview with *PAPER* magazine, McGuire described their work as 'almost like Midwest emo'. The aesthetics that pervade emo – devils, depression – evoke the satanic panic that swept small towns in the US in the 1980s, making outright villains out of outcasts. It's a line that goes all the way back to Salem.

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McGuire has previously based sculptures on characters from the 1990s shooter game *Doom*, and has now developed a playable field to explore demonic idolatry. Set in an exaggerated colonial Massachusetts, the game *Joy's Hands* centres on a woman, Joy, who has been locked in a shed by her father after an argument about religious fanaticism. Players can stoke a fear of witchcraft in the village by creating a potion and playing cat's cradle with intestines. In the gallery space, the protagonist manifests as a bronze statue of a standing nude woman wearing a white cloth bonnet (*Joy*, 2026); her stance conveys a vulnerable ferocity. She is surrounded by elements from the video game that also materialize as sculptures in the space: wicker baskets (*Tableau*, 2026), small bronze frogs with wide-open pink mouths ('Sister', 2026) and brightly coloured piles of shit fabricated from polylactic acid, epoxy and putty ('Lucky Pile', 2026). In a second smaller room is a sinister female bust in a habit (*Idiot Woman*, 2026). The sculptures' twisted poses feel both masochistic and violent, and there's an intoxicating quality to the experience of walking around this eerie environment, not dissimilar to McGuire's shows at the Renaissance Society in Chicago ('Year Zero', 2024–25) and What Pipeline ('The First Machine' with Nolan Simon, 2023).



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The spellbinding nature of McGuire's work may be partly due to the fact that their witches don't aim to be too lifelike. While they are immediately legible as icons, they stop just short of entering the uncanny valley. McGuire is interested in twisting the familiar into something menacing: their work attempts to reinterpret the canon of mythological male figures and reclaim persecuted women as powerful protagonists. This is not to say their witches are well-behaved: playing the video game in the exhibit is certainly proof of that. Whether or not Joy is guilty of being a witch, the fun comes from leaning into the very accusations people hurl at her. Taking on the mantle of destruction in the video game becomes a thrilling experience. McGuire's work moves past banal binaries of right and wrong or life and death, to facilitate a visceral meditation on the nature of evil.

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