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Isabelle Frances McGuire at Bel Ami

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Isabelle Frances McGuire, *Joy is a Puppet* (installation view) (2026).
Image courtesy of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson.

Isabelle Frances McGuire's latest exhibition at Bel Ami centers around a woman named Joy, a witch in 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, whose father has locked her in a shack. The title *Joy is a Puppet* is quite literal: Joy is the protagonist of a video game designed by McGuire, *Joy's Hands* (all works 2026), which allows players to take on her POV using a wireless controller. In the game's dim, candle-lit interior, they are prompted by on-screen instructions to interact with objects like

snails and intestines with which they create potions and cast spells. Though the game's step-by-step mechanics and ambient music are mesmerizing, the boundaries of its world and objectives of its playable character are somewhat narrow and ill-defined, an ambiguity that carries through the rest of an exhibition where totem-like artworks are gathered as if part of some obscure ritual. While McGuire is inspired by the history of the Salem witch trials, here their political specificities are cast aside in favor of a more enchanting engagement with the occult.



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Visitors play *Joy's Hands* from the gallery's sleek modern sofa, an aesthetically incongruous setting that emphasizes the fact that digitally mediated entertainment is itself a sort of sorcery, a means of animating bodies and channeling visions across time and space. Also present are sculptures and objects that seem to be summoned directly from the game. Some are cartoonishly surreal, like the mounds of melting four-leaf clovers covered in bright pink, yellow, and green flocking featured in *Piles*. Others such as *Idiot Woman*, a mannequin-like bust whose weathered face is shrouded in a cotton shawl, are legitimately creepy. They all possess a solid, tactile materiality, immediately apparent in the doll-sized sculpture of our avatar, *Joy is a Puppet*, whose patinated bronze body and miniature cloth bonnet beg to be touched. Although viewing these works seems static in comparison to the interactive gameplay of *Joy's Hands*, their material allure becomes its own kind of magic, reminding us of the embodied pleasures of creating and encountering physical art.

For all the exhibition's mystical trappings, the Salem witch trials were ultimately an episode of state violence enacted by hysterical officials. Rather than reckoning with these power dynamics head-on, McGuire allows us to embrace the joys of the occult. As her character kills ferrets and communes with the devil on screen, we are implicated in a gamified history, taking on the role of both Joy herself and the powers that manipulate and maneuver her: the puppet and the puppeteer. Controlling the heroine of *Joy's Hands* can therefore feel like a morally ambiguous act, but the sensory delights of the exhibition make the experience of inhabiting Joy's world as satisfying as it is unsettling.



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