

A Pictorial Compendium of Witchcraft

William Mortensen

1897–1965

William Mortensen Reconsidered

by A. D. Coleman

Witchcraft and Demonology: William Mortensen and the Hereward Carrington Collection

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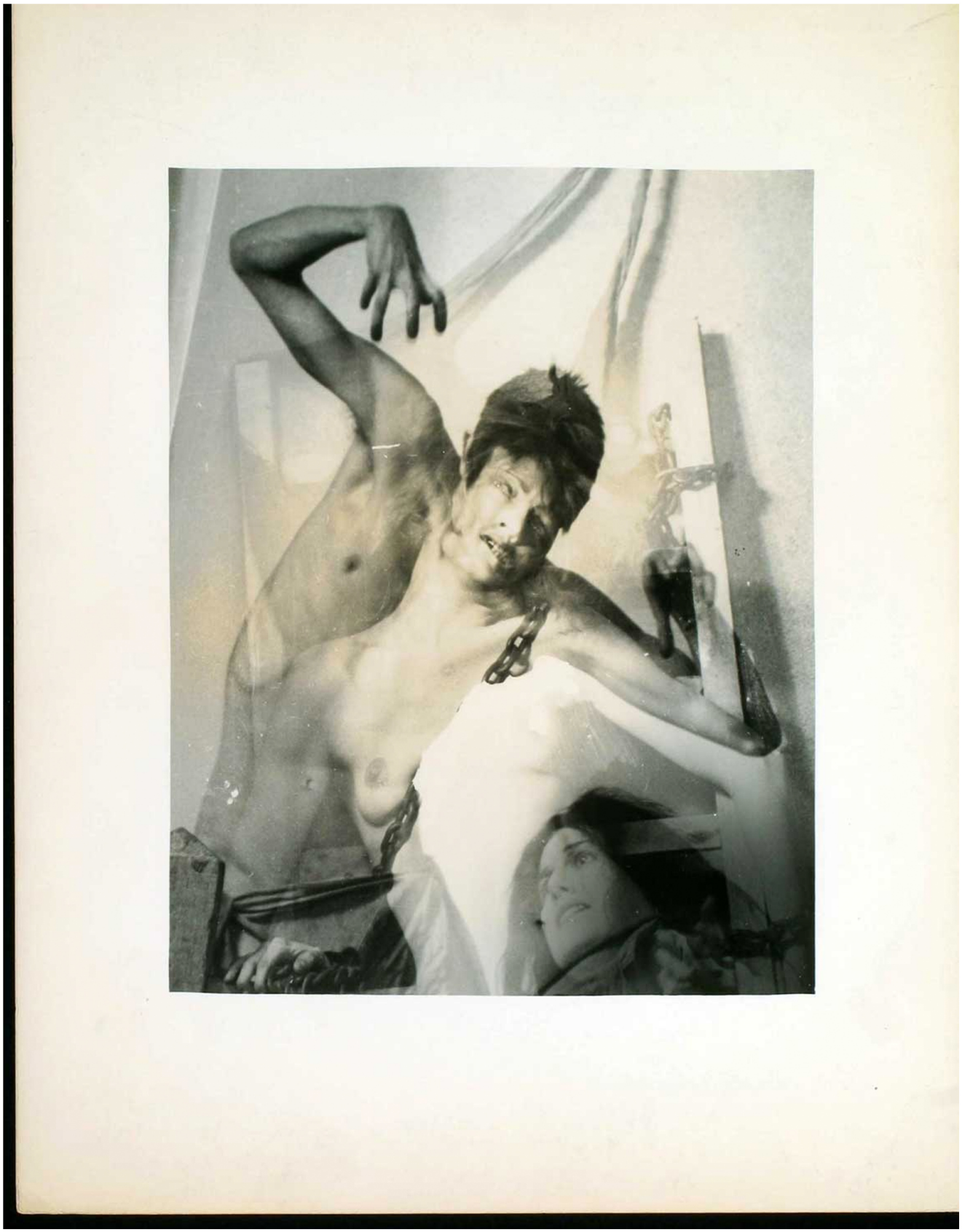
Beauties and Priests, among other Beasts: William Mortensen's Images of Witches, Demons and Sadistic Inquisitors

by Tom Patterson

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The inclusion of William Mortensen in our current understanding of the history of photography marks an end to the long-term injustice done to the man and germinal work.

Anathematized, ostracized, and eventually purged from the dominant narratives of 20th-century photography due to the biases of a small but influential cluster of historians, curators, and photographers, Mortensen plunged into an obscurity so deep that by 1980 most considered him unworthy of even a footnote. Yet the approach to the medium that he advocated, under the rubric of "pictorialism," included practices central to photography of the past four decades: events staged for the camera, image text combinations, photomontage, "alternative processes," and more.

Morensen not only exemplified those tendencies in his own widely exhibited and published works but argued vigorously for them in cogent, controversial articles that appeared in the photo magazines of his day, therein contending articulately and persuasively with such vehement antagonists as Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall. Furthermore, he invented several unusual darkroom processes, devised and marketed some printmaking tools, ran a school for photographers in Laguna Beach, CA and authored a series of highly regarded tutorial texts that guided several generations of practitioners.

So, inevitably, the cycle of appreciation and disregard that affects art and artists in all media returned him to our attention. Regrettably, however, the neglect of Mortensen and his contributions in the last years of his life and for several decades thereafter resulted in the apparently haphazard dispersal of his archive: master prints, work prints, negatives, manuscripts, correspondence, notes... scattered and, for the most part, presumed lost. So we must cherish those salvaged bits and pieces that survive. If the critical literature on this notable figure seems thin, we can attribute that in good part to the scarcity of primary source materials. The recovery of any substantial slice, such as these works from the estate of Hereward Carrington, brings us a step closer to grasping the full scope of his work as a picture-maker and the relation of his images to his ideas.

Witchcraft and Demonology: WilliamMortensen and the Hereward Carrington Collection

by Larry Lytle

In "Monsters and Madonnas" written with George Dunham, William Mortensen says, "Some years ago I planned and partly carried out a 'Pictorial History of Witchcraft and Demonology.' This picture and several others that follow belong to that series."(l) In the aforementioned book there appears to be only three images that fit: "Preparation for the Sabbot" (1927), "The Heretic" (1926), and "Belphegor" (1935), which gives us some dates to start from concerning the photographs in this collection.

In other publications by Mortensen and Dunham there are undated images that would seem to be part of the same era and series: "The Tribunal," "Black Magic," "The Incubus," "The Priestess," "The Warlock," "La Chatte," "Fear," "The Possessed," "The Death of Hypatia" (also titled "Fragment of the Black Mass"), "Mark of the Borgia," and "The Succubus." (2) The project apparently abandoned in his closing years in Hollywood; Mortensen having moved to his new home in Laguna Beach would once again pick up this theme in the early to mid 1930›s. During this period he produced such photographs as: "Belphagor," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Tantric Sorcerer," "Torquemada," and "The Three Witches."

The Carrington Collection - It appears that at some point Hereward Carrington came to possess 20 or so photographs that Mortensen produced in the years between 1925 and 1928. How he came to own these photographs is not know. However, one could reasonably speculate that Carrington, an author on such subjects as The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism (1907) and Introduction to the Maniac (1937), either came into contact with Mortensen directly or through an association with noted Los Angeles spiritualist and philosopher Manly P. Hall (3), who was a good friend of Mortensen. In order to facilitate a more comprehensive analysis I have broken up the collection into four categories: finished signed prints, prints using published images, prints repeated at The Center For Creative Photography (CCP), and work prints at CCP that incorporate elements from the previous images. Look to the catalog list for size and other image references.

Finished Signed Prints-- Of the 20 images in this collection (as I originally viewed it in 2004) two are signed with Mortensen›s

recognizable signature, stamped with the monograph red stamp used on prints from this era, and are titled. The photograph referred to here as «Lucii Ferraris» is untitled by Mortensen, but in CCP's print archive it is referred to as "No Title (Lucii Ferraris)." It is interesting to note that this large book is used in several of Mortensen›s photographs and is probably the book that the hooded figure is referring to in "The Mark of the Devil" now in the collection of UCLA. Just below the title in another print, "Off to the Sabbot" is a subtitle, "A Pictorial Compendium of Witchcraft." This subtitle is the first written mention on any print (known by this author) of Mortensen›s witchcraft and demonology project. At CCP, in the Grey Silva archive is a box of what appears to be proof prints that measure approximately 3.5» X 5», are three different variations of "Off to the Sabbot."(4)

Prints using published images-- Mortensen often used drawing and especially montage in his early work. Through the use of printing techniques as bromoil, bromoil transfer, paper negatives and his own his Texture Screens and/or his Abrasion Tone Process he was able to seamlessly meld different negative and handwork together into one image. The prints discussed below use these methods but as work prints they are unspotted, uneven in tone, and the combination of elements is much more obvious than one is used to seeing in Mortensen›s exhibition prints. However, though rougher in workmanship, they are unmistakably Mortensen›s work. But more importantly, they give us a rare insight into his selection and thought processes.

To begin with, "Untitled- nude with Shrapnel" and "Untitled- nude with Incubus" are examples of his experimental nature. Both use the same nude figure but each with a different creature montaged into the image. In one photo he uses an element from his montage titled. "Shrapnel," in the other the elongated, distorted figure that is known as "The Incubus."

Next we will look at four photographs that use his image "The Tribunal." One of the prints, "Untitled- the Tribunal", is an unsigned but seemingly finished print. A notable difference between this print and other held in CCP's collection and used in Projection Control, is that the photograph in this collection has not been cropped and the rope pulled by the torturer operating the wheel device is in a different place. This type of variation is typical of Mortensen. The strangely montaged photographs that appear to overlay male and female bodies and faces are a combination of, "The Heretic," "Shrapnel" or "The Warlock" and an unidentified head of a woman in the lower right corner. It employs the same double or triple exposeure/montage effect as «Shrapnel» with faces overlapped for a singular effect of unease giving us a male/female duality. The two photographs of the nude

with the voodoo doll can once again be traced back to the Grey Silva Archive. The photograph of the double exposed nude also has a doppelganger in the same box at the archive.

Prints that incorporate elements from the previous images - Although page 21 montages an architectural scene and a nude figure that we haven›t seen in any of the previous photographs, the box or "Hollywood Coffin" as Mortensen called it is the same used in the work on the back inside cover and elsewhere.. The scene of the witch being burned at the stake has an appearance by Myrdith Monaghan(5), Mortensen›s future wife as the figure clutching the pole from which the witch hangs. Finally, page 20 maintains Mortensen's use of montage, the rack of spears probably from the King of Kings (1927), where Mortensen was a still photographer for Cecil B. DeMille. Once again we see use of the monk costume and the nude, which appears to be the same hanging from the pole in the previous photos. To balance out all the elements Mortensen has drawn into the right foreground a silhouetted figure.

Conclusion - Without a doubt, while these photographs by William Mortensen constitute the best record of his project on the history of witchcraft and demonology, they also offer us a singular look into Mortensen›s creative process.

NOTES

(1) William Mortensen, Monsters & Madonnas, A Book Of Methods, San Francisco, Camera Craft Publishing, First edition 1936. [Unpaginated.] This quote appears in paragraph 5 of the information for "Preparation for the Sabbot", which is a different image than number 3 in this catalog, "Off to the Sabbott."

(2) These appear in: "The Tribunal"- Projection Control; "Black Magic"- The Command To Look, "The Incubus"- Projection Control, "The Priestess"- The Model, "The Warlock"- Projection Control, "La Chatte"- Projection Control, "Fear"- Projection Control, "The Possessed"- The Model, "The Death of Hypatia"- The Model, "Mark of the Borgia"- Camera Craft Magazine, April 1934, "The Succubus"- Print Finishing,

(3) Manly P. Hall (b. 1901- d. 1990) Hall wrote many books on philosophy, spiritualism, tarot, the Freemasons, the Rosecrucians, and astrology. He opened the Philosophical Research Society in 1934 on Los Feliz Ave. in Hollywood where it still runs a library and research organization. Mortensen photographed Hall twice, see The Model pg. 235 and the frontispiece to Hall's book, Lectures On Ancient Philosophy; An Introduction To The Study Of Rational Procedure, Los

Angeles: The Hall Publishing Company, 1929.
(4) Grey Silva was a student of Mortensen's in the mid 1950's and remained a friend until Mortensen's death in 1965. In 2001 Silva's family donated his archive to CCP.

(5) Mortensen had met Myrdith about 1926. They were married in Laguna Beach on April 1, 1932. In the 1930's Myrdith took on the role of prima model in many of Mortensen's best work.



Beauties and Priests, among other Beasts: William Mortensen's Images of Witches, Demons and Sadistic Inquisitors

by Tom Patterson

If he were resurrected today, almost 50 years after dying a marginalized and maligned figure in his field, photographer William Mortensen would surely have no trouble finding work or creative kindred spirits. His influence and affinities to his work are evident across a range of art and popular culture. Techniques he pioneered for manipulating photographic images--a practice for which he was once disparaged--now have digital equivalents that are widely employed and accepted in photography. A few decades of hindsight reveals him as a visionary and a consummate artist ahead of his time. In addition to his prescient technical innovations, his photographs prefigured the imagery and visual mood that have become the stock in trade for horror films, horror comics, bondage porn, sorcery-themed fiction and all things goth.

These aspects of Mortensen's work are foregrounded in this selection of 20 prints he made in the mid - to late 1920s. Most are from a never-completed project on witchcraft and demonology, evidencing a fascination with the occult and reflecting his predilection for juxtaposing images of seduction and fear. These relatively early examples of his work yield insight into his personal interests, his ideas about beauty, his affinity for the grotesque, his experiments with montage, and other means he devised for manipulating images to amplify their effect.

The prints were left among the worldly goods of Hereward Carrington following his death in 1958. A British writer and psychic-phenomena investigator, Carrington spent most of his life in the United States and wrote books on subjects including magic, conjuring and the paranormal. While he and Mortensen shared some apparent common interests, there's no record of their having known one another, and it remains unclear how Carrington came to possess this group of Mortensen's prints. Given the lack of information about possible connections between the two

men, reasonable speculation about Carrington's ownership of the prints might center on their specific themes, the figures in them, and whether Carrington considered them relevant to the subjects he was exploring in his books. Those he published between 1920 and 1930 focused on astral projection, spiritualism, the development of psychic powers, the science of psychic phenomena, the origin and nature of life, death and immortality, and women's love lives. It's easy to imagine how he might have seen reflections of these subjects in this group of photographs.

The prints Carrington owned are refined to varying degrees and in some cases intentionally flawed as a result of Mortensen's brave, vivid experimentation and physical interactions with his models and in the darkroom. This would indicate that Mortensen didn't intend them for exhibition or sale at the time, but rather as the basis for a series only occasionally perpetuated beyond these intense images. Among the more likely-seeming reasons Carrington had them would have been for study purposes, as imaginative illustrations of psychic or paranormal phenomena he was investigating. Aside from any scientific interest they might have held for him, he was perhaps turned on by the bodies and poses of the nude women who appear in most of the images.

Mortensen certainly intended these photographs to carry a strong sexual charge. He considered sex the first of three elements--along with sentiment and wonder-contributing to an image's appeal and its impact on viewers. "The picture must command you to look at it," he wrote. This power to draw and hold a viewer's gaze he termed "the pictorial imperative." Like countless artists who preceded and followed him, he understood that young, beautiful women will always attract attention--all the more so when they're unclad and provocatively posed. He also knew that other forms of taboo imagery had a related effect, which he exploited in images that make ironic use of religious icons and regalia, as do several of the prints in this group. Moralizers of Mortensen's day would have been doubly offended by the latter images because they're not only sexually provocative but also spiritually transgressive and implicitly critical of religious authority.

In this connection, the untitled image on the cover and the variation of it on page 4 are of special interest. Both portray a young woman, nude and seated on a pedestal as she stabs a dark doll with long spikes. The straightforward cover image is characterized by a spirit of playful innocence that distinguishes it from the others in this group. The model wears an almost childlike, unselfconscious smile as she prepares to plunge the last of three spikes into her little doll. The image on page 4 conveys avery different kind of mood, even though the model is similarly posed and, again, smiling. The effect is almost entirely due to Mortensen's warping

of the image, apparently by manipulating the negative during the printing process. The distortion lends the image a vaguely sinister, hallucinatory quality.

Did Mortensen intend these images to represent early stages in a young woman's engagement with the black arts? Might he have meant to trace that process from innocent experimentation through seduction by demonic forces to more advanced knowledge and practice? Unfortunately, information to help answer those questions remains scarce.

Another aspect of the two voodoo-doll photographs that has drawn speculation is the identity of the model. It's been suggested that she is Fay Wray, best known for her role in the 1933 film King Kong. Mortensen had known Wray since she was in her early teens, about five years before the estimated dates for these photographs. If the dates are accurate, the session with the voodoo doll took place just as she was about to emerge as a Hollywood star. (She signed to Paramount Pictures in 1927.) These may have been among Mortensen's immodest photographs of Wray that caused a scandal on their publication in a movie magazine in 1928, the same year she was cast in her first leading role. Although intriguing, this angle on the two images perhaps constitutes a diversion unrelated to the issues of how they might have fit in with Mortensen's witchcraft-and-demonology project. On the other hand, if one associates the young Wray's corruption in the hedonistic milieu of Hollywood with a rite of initiation to the inner circles of power, then it's no major stretch to draw a metaphorical connection with these two images.

While the model toying with the voodoo doll takes something of an active role in connecting with demonic forces, the young women in images pages 19, 23 and 24 are more passively posed, evidently at the mercy of the eerie-looking, supernatural beings intruding on them through the magic of Mortensen's manual and mechanical interventions. In conjuring these mutant figures, Mortensen aimed to evoke a mix of fear and repulsion so as to compel a sustained gaze. Meanwhile, of course, he knew his young female models would attract a completely different kind of attention. These images are driven by the tension between lustful attraction and fearful repulsion--beauty and the beast. He set up a related confrontation on page 20, in which the figure menacing the vulnerable, disrobed female model is a black-robed cleric instead of a demon. The scene has been contextualized through the use of props and suggestions of a theatrical set that might represent a medieval dungeon.

The latter photograph is one of several elaborately contrived images in this group that depict women being tortured or prepared for execution by black-

robed, hooded figures, some brandishing crucifixes. (See pages 12, 15 and 16, all variations on Mortensen's photograph titled "The Tribunal," as well as page 17.) Distinguished by settings that incorporate medieval architecture, monumental devices and other evocative, gothic details, these images highlight the sense of theatricality that he developed from working behind the scenes on Hollywood films such as Cecil B. DeMille's King of Kings. They're clearly intended to suggest scenes from the Inquisition--young women being persecuted for witchcraft by sadistic, misogynistic priests.

Two closely related, untitled multiple-exposure prints in this group (pages 3 and 22) superimpose nude female and male figures that also appear in other images which Mortensen titled "The Heretic" and "Shrapnel" or "Warlock." The most effectively terrifying images in the entire group, at least to my eye, they look like they're intended to illustrate demon possession. Because the victim is as usual a young, nude woman-chained to a bed, no less--and the presumably demonic figure (also nude) is male, the image hints at sexual violation. Grimacing, contorting his body and spreading the fingers of his upraised hands like the talons of a predatory bird, this malevolent entity also exudes a Dionysian vibe as he looms threateningly over the immobilized woman, whose face registers a terrified delirium.

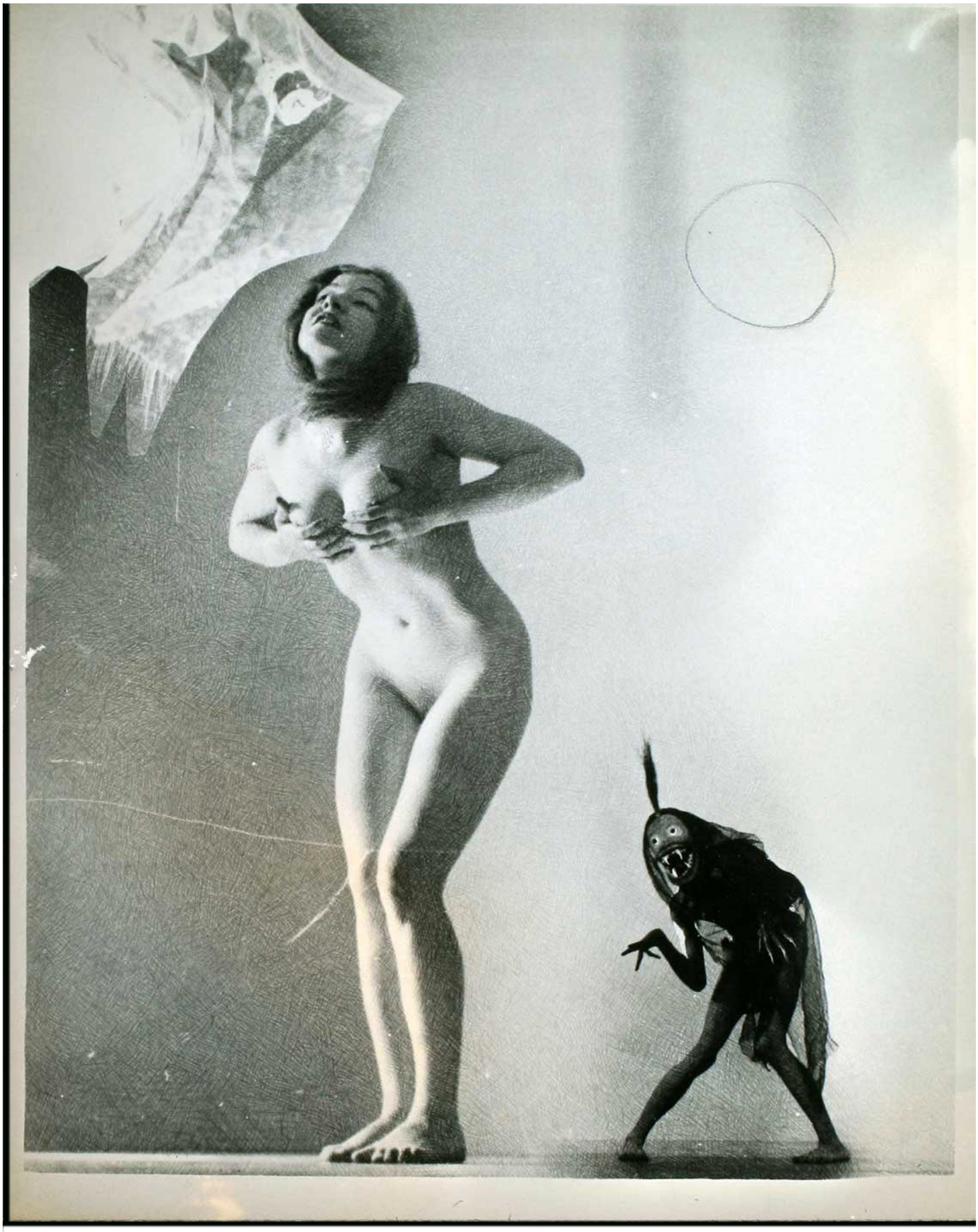
A very different note is struck by the final image in this publication, page 25, "Off To The Sabbot." In this signed, finished print we have the world's sexiest naked witch getting off on her phallic broom--performing her gracefully orgasmic aerial ballet while (as the title tells us) spiriting herself off to join other practitioners in celebrating the Black Mass. If the images of the young maybe-Fay Wray with the voodoo doll represent a preliminary stage of a witch's initiation, then this closing image represents a well-versed sorceress, writhing in ecstasy on her magic broom as she glides above and away from the old city whose rooftops spread out across the bottom of the scene, where spiritually somnolent squares go about their dreary routines.

No fear of flying for her. Her simultaneous self-pleasuring and defiance of gravity hint at other more formidable skills. She seems to epitomize Mortensen's ideas about witchcraft and its appeal--a woman liberated and empowered. His bold portrayal of a beautiful woman in the throes of sexual ecstasy while masturbating with an occult object must have been deliciously shocking almost 90 years ago--a metaphorical middle finger to the moral and photographic establishment of the day. One suspects this is exactly what Mortensen had in mind.






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William Mortensen

"Off For the Sabbat"

From "A Pictorial Compendium of Witchcraft"





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Larry Lytle is a Lecturer in Art at California State University Channel Islands, a contributing writer to Black & White Magazine and an artist. His biography of William Mortensen will be coming out in the Fall of 2014, published by Process Media.

Tom Patterson is a freelance art writer, independent curator and the author of several books on visionary artists. His writings have appeared in Aperture, ARTnews, Art Papers, BOMB, Raw Vision and other magazines. His latest exhibition was "Farfetched: Mad Science, Fringe Architecture and Visionary Engineering," co-curated with Roger Manley for the Gregg Museum of Art and Design in Raleigh, North Carolina, January-April, 2013.

All works c. 1925 - 1927
cover nude with voodoo doll
pg 3 uses "The Heretic" and "Shrapnel" or "Warlock"
pg 4 variation nude with voodoo doll (elongated)
pg 5 double exposed nude
pg 12 part of "The Tribunal"
pg 16 known as "The Tribunal"
pg 17 burned at the stake
pg 18 "Lucii Ferraris"
pg 19 nude with experiment and small masked figure
pg 20 nude, monk and arch. element
pg 21 chained nude with architectural background
pg 22 variation uses "The Heretic" and "Shrapnel" or "Warlock"
pg 23 nude with "The Incubus"
pg 24 nude with "Shrapnel"
pg 25 "Off To The Sabbot" "A Pictorial Compendium of Witchcraft"
back inside cover nude with the wheel from "The Tribunal"

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