

T MAGAZINE

An Artist Fascinated by the Art of Magic

The Story of a Thing

As told to EMILY SPIVACK MAY 24, 2016

In this series for T, the writer and author of “Worn Stories,” Emily Spivack, interviews creative types about their most prized possessions.

For her current show at Yerba Buena, “A Trap in Soft Division,” the artist Samara Golden works within the limitations of physical materials to conjure intangible realities and disorienting environments, an approach similar to how magicians embrace the tools at their disposal to create illusions. Here, Golden considers the intersection between her work and that of illusionists through her collection of Genii: The International Conjurers’ Magazine.

I have a stack of about 15 magazines called Genii: The International Conjurers’ Magazine that I got when I first moved to Los Angeles about seven years ago. The magazines are low budget — with graphic design you’d use if you were putting together a yearbook — but there’s a poetry to these special almanacs. They’re trade magazines for metaphysical things. The issues in my collection range from 1981-97 and they all include drawings for how to do magic tricks and fancier stage-show tricks, a short story section, obituaries for magicians and ads at the end. One ad is selling something called an “Illusion System,” which looks like something you’d stand on onstage. Some of the covers feature old magicians, but the one I’m looking at right now is a photo of a guy with a leather jacket, feathered blond hair that’s backlit and a beam of light coming out of his hands.

I know in L.A. there are a lot of people who are really into magic, but I'm more of a voyeur and appreciator. I admire how people commit to it like a religion and model their lives around it. It's definitely a form of art; it requires a different kind of life to pursue it fully.

I've always wondered whether being a magician is tricking someone into believing something or if what a magician does is part of his belief system. I think that magicians need to be able to believe in what they're doing in order to make people believe it too. In my own work, I have to believe in the realities I'm trying to create and only after that can it start to mean something to anybody else. I want to create an impossible place, a place that nobody could actually go in real life. Like, for a show I had at Canada, I wanted you to hover over four different scenes and in seeing them from an aerial view, you might think of the gallery space as a brain that you were inside.

This might get too abstract, but I like the idea of making art where I have to pull a thought down into a material form and then push it back into an unattainable space. If I had a choice, I would never use mirrors in my work, but I have to use existing materials that reflect and twist the scene enough so that you can experience something unknowable. I don't want to use too many tricks but the ones I do use are tools to make something that isn't really of this earth. In that way, what I'm doing is related to what's inside these magazines, what the magicians are trying to create. That structure they're building to believe — that's what I want to be doing, too.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Samara Golden's "A Trap in Soft Division" is on view until May 29 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission Street, San Francisco, ybca.org.