

The witching hour

BY CHRIS DUPUIS

Published Mon, Sep 8, 2014 5:45 pm EDT



Jamie Ross looks to calligraphy and hidden messages for his new piece.

Artist Jamie Ross channels teenaged angst and coding for an enchanting evening

There's probably no object more symbolic of tortured youth than the diary. Whether leather bound, cat-stickered or (in my case) plastered with pics of Johnny Depp and Winona Ryder, it serves alternately as historical record, psychotherapist and (occasionally) personal erotica collection.

It's tucked under mattresses, hidden in closets or toted around in backpacks. Nothing spells drama quite like having it fall into the wrong hands. Particularly crafty kids will even go so far as to confuse potential spies by attempting to encode their musings.

Toronto-born, Montreal-based artist Jamie Ross took this practice to the extreme, developing an entirely new alphabet for his teenaged journals. For his upcoming performance piece *A Script of Desire*, Ross has rediscovered and expanded his personalized mode of writing into a new form of ritual calligraphy.

"I needed to keep the sexy and the witchy," Ross says. "I was quite advanced as a young child and orchestrated some really sexy things. Through the years, coming out and finding a community with which I could express both my sexuality and my interest in ritual magic, I didn't need to keep the diaries secret in the same way, and I eventually lost the alphabet."

Born out of self-preservation, his script blended Latin letters with other shapes he found interesting. For *Desire*, he relearned his method of coding to share with audiences.

"I relearned my alphabet and developed a cursive form as a way to reclaim secret teenage writings from shame and assume total acceptance of my queerness and ritual and magic," he says. "For me, reworking the world through ritual magic is crucial to self-care and survival in a sometimes-hostile world. It's a lens through which I can heal the rift between what is and what ought to be."

A self-described "lover of language" from his earliest days, Ross was playing with an Egyptian hieroglyph kit as a toddler and begged his parents to put him in Cantonese classes at seven. He also spent time learning his family's ancestral tongue on a small island off the coast of Scotland. Always a "low-flow diarist," he's used his notebooks over the years to record quotes, epiphanies and dreams that he draws on in his work. Like many queer kids, his journal also became a confessional when he had no one else to talk to about his flirtations with boys and the occult.

"All adolescent psychic space encompasses a certain anxiety for all kids, queer or not," he says. "I'm interested in how we can support queer youth by making systems of queer kinship and models of meaningful social interconnectedness accessible. A lot of young queerdos I talk to don't know that part of our collective history. They think they don't have ancestors. We're missing life-cycle rituals and coming-of-age ceremonies. The homo-normative affluent, whitewashed gay family image that's emerged, especially since the legalization of gay marriage in Canada, can be profoundly alienating."

A Script of Desire
Mon, Sept 8, 6-7:30pm
8-11 Art Space
233 Spadina Ave
jamieross.org