

## Artist Jamie Ross is a witch — and he's using his practice to help prisoners improve their lives

The Montreal-based artist uses witchcraft to confront injustice and violence in Quebec's correctional system

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Jamie Ross, 2017, Klondike Institute for Art & Culture, Dawson City (YK); Dancers: Kiki Barua, Justin Apperley. (Michael Maclean)

Let's deal with the word "witch" first. When people talk about the practice of witchcraft, they often feel like 7th grade sex ed teachers waiting for the giggling to stop before the real conversation can begin.

So, go ahead. Think of the plutonium-hued eye shadow on Agnes Moorehead in the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched* (Moorehead, by the way, was in *Citizen Kane*, no less, and was nominated for four Oscars over her career). Think of Halloween cut-outs with oversized green noses. Think of Dorothy and her bucket of water. OK, are we done now?

Montreal-based artist Jamie Ross is also a witch — a witch with a day job. He brings his religious practice to Quebec's correctional system, where he acts as an officially recognized Pagan chaplaincy volunteer. His job is the same as any other correctional facility healer and advisor: he works with prisoners whose religious beliefs include Pagan rituals to improve their lives. It's really not all that strange, he tells me.



Jamie Ross. (Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy)

"I wrap my tarot pack in a satin bag, and books to donate to the chapel library, and we celebrate the solar observances that are holy to [Pagan] traditions. Pagan faiths are Earth-based practices and most of our rituals establish connections with the elements of the world, so incarceration has big implications. Above all, I listen."

On April 29, Ross — in partnership with Laval's artist-run hub [Verticale](#) — will present a three-part performance/mini-conference/exhibition titled "[Unscrew the locks from the doors! \(Un sortilege de liberation\)](#)". The project begins with a ritual walk-cum-witch parade-cum-ceremony in the Laval neighbourhood that contains the correctional centre he works with — an action that simultaneously celebrates the fact that Pagan practices are now part of the religious framework of the corrections system while resisting that very "acceptance".

Bottom line: people are not disposable. As witches, healing is our craft. I believe my generation is being called to roll up our sleeves and confront the injustice and violence in this world head-on and to heal this scarred world.

- Jamie Ross, artist

Why problematize acceptance? Because Paganism is by its nature uneasy with formal, coded and authority-built systems. And yet, Ross and his cohorts — a selection of local and international queer and Pagan artists — want to recognize the value of these healing practices within the prisons. It's tricky being both inside and outside a system, and the performance hopes to capture and cheer on that blurry liminality.

The second and third parts of the exhibition are a roundtable discussion with religious scholars from Quebec — a discussion which will inevitably include the ever-fraught "minority accommodation" debate that preoccupies Canada's most mono-cultural province — followed by an exhibition of Ross's latest sculptures and video works at Montreal's Eastern Bloc artist run centre.



Jamie Ross, 2016, *Outdoor School*, Doris McCarthy Gallery. (Yuula Benivolski)

"This is the first time I'm connecting two parts of my life: my religious practice and my art practice. For [Pagans] the May Day Full Moon is one of the holiest times of the year. It's a time when we move into the summer pasture of the mind, when we advocate for the world we work toward coming into being and when we dance the May Pole in ecstasy. Family friendly!"

The parade is both performance art and joyful "manifestation" (an action undertaken by witches intended to prompt a specific, positive response).

"[The performance] is inspired by the tradition of New Years Eve noise demonstrations where people show up at prisons worldwide on one of the noisiest nights of the year to celebrate with prisoners. The gesture is the same — we are proving to the Pagans inside that they matter to us and that they matter so much that we will celebrate our holy day with them. Prison walls may

prevent us from forming a circle of hands, but our energetic noise demonstration will be completed symbolically by the simultaneous ritual on the inside."



Jamie Ross, 2018, video still from XII. (Jamie Ross)

What does Ross hope viewers, especially non-Pagans, will learn from his conflation of the mystical and the (literal) concrete?

"I've been humbled to tears by the power of providing something as simple as a hug or to connect through the palms of our hands. In our traditions, divinity is immanent and it is experienced in our bodies."

"Bottom line: people are not disposable. As witches, healing is our craft. I believe my generation is being called to roll up our sleeves and confront the injustice and violence in this world head-on and to heal this scarred world."

**Jamie Ross — *Unscrew the locks from the doors! (Un sortilège de libération)*. April 29-May 19 at Verticale. Laval, Que. [www.verticale.ca](http://www.verticale.ca)**

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