

# Berkshire Landscapes

★ ★ ★ ★  
C1

Weekend Edition | Saturday & Sunday, November 11-12, 2023 | BerkshireEagle.com

## We can all use a little **MAGIC** in our lives



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

“Prayer is a big part of my spiritual practice, of my life practice. I just got this feeling, like tenderness and empathy for the internet,” says artist Petra Szilagyí of the inspiration behind their work, “Bless Your Hard Drive.”

### ‘Like Magic’ explores the tools and rituals we use to survive and thrive in times of chaos

By JENNIFER HUBERDEAU  
The Berkshire Eagle

Seated cross-legged on the floor of a gallery in a meditation chair, the space around me fills with the sounds of a gospel choir.

The song is ethereal; spiritual despite its language being foreign to me: “zero/one, zero/zero, zero, zero/one/one, zero.”

It’s binary code. I don’t know what it means. I don’t care either. The song is familiar; soothing. I’m aware there are others around me, standing at, sitting on and kneeling on a variety of hybrid gaming/prayer chairs and mats. I’m in a small non-denominational prayer space, “Bless Your Hard Drive,” part of “Like Magic,” a group exhibition recently opened on the second floor of Building 4 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition, which includes 10 artists — Simone Bailey, Raven Chacon, Grace Clark, Johanna Hedva, Gelare Khoshgozaran, Cate O’Connell-Richards, Rose Salane, Petra Szilagyí, Tourmaline and Nate Young — is on view through August 2025.

Here in this sanctuary — its oval cob walls crafted by Szilagyí with sticks, straw, subsoil and linseed oil — the connections between the natural, spiritual and technological realms ebb and flow. There are signs of technology everywhere. A prayer rug’s woven design is made to look like a circuit board. The legs of a carved wood prayer table are made to look like computer towers. A prayer written by an AI program adorns a wall.

On another wall, below a stained-glass window in the shape of a circuit board, another text reads: “May the internet support peace and well being for all life now and always.”

Szilagyí, who uses the pronouns they/them, invites

you to “Pray However to Whomever.” They want you to take a moment and pray for a “benevolent future for the internet.”

“It’s an opportunity to rethink our very entrenched, antagonistic relationship

with the internet,” they said during an interview at Mass MoCA. “We’re all engaging with the internet like eight hours a day but have this negative relationship with it, where it’s a source

of distraction, emotional discomfort. And then there’s all this talk about a techno-apocalypse, with AI taking over the planet. I wanted to make a space where we could imagine an alternative to that.”

Praying for the internet seems absurd, but, as Szilagyí continues, they speak about how they and others are contemplating if the internet is more than ... Could it be a living organism? Sentient? There are arguments in favor of both those designations. Biologist Shivas Amin, Ph.D., Szilagyí notes, described in a TEDx talk, how the internet meets the “7 characteristics of living organisms” with humans as a mutualistic host.

“And if that is the case ... If this is an entity ... Prayer is a big part of my spiritual practice, of my life practice. I just got this feeling, like tenderness and empathy for the internet,” Szilagyí says. “It’s a comparatively young technology that people aren’t friendly towards but use. I wanted to create an opportunity for positive projection, for positive imagination...”

“We don’t want a techno-apocalypse. We don’t want to feel like zombies to our phones. This technology isn’t going backward. We’re not going backward. So, what would the best-case scenario look like?”

Seeking the “best-case scenario,” stability in times of chaos and uncertainty, and the ways in which it is being done is an underlying prem-



Gelare Khoshgozaran’s “U.S. Customs Demands to Know,” a series of LED lit packages, illuminate the floor of a gallery as part of “Like Magic,” a group show on view at Mass MoCA through August 2025.

ise of “Like Magic.”

“The artists in this show are dealing with what I’m calling technologies of magic,” said Alexandra Foradas, curator of visual arts at Mass MoCA and of this exhibition. “The idea for the exhibition came about, because over the past, five years or so, I’ve noticed a number of people who I hold close, including but not limited to artists, adopting things like rituals, devices, charms, incantations, tarot, astrology or spell work into their daily practice is as a way of coping with particular moments of chaos and upset and threat. You can think of the 2016 presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic as a couple of those moments within the last five years or so.”

But, they said, while noticing that embrace of magical practices and objects, they also became aware “that imaging, that figuring out what that looks like is very hard.”

“But because so many artists and other folks in my world, especially folks of color, especially queer and trans folks, seem to be engaging in those practices, I was

#### Art review

What: “Like Magic”

Who: Simone Bailey, Raven Chacon, Grace Clark, Johanna Hedva, Gelare Khoshgozaran, Cate O’Connell-Richards, Rose Salane, Petra Szilagyí, Tourmaline and Nate Young

Where: Mass MoCA, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams

On view: Through August 2025

Information and tickets: 413-662-2111, massmoca.org

curious to talk with artists whose work I saw resonating with with those ideas about; what their own relationship to ideas of magic was, which was part of how the idea of technologies of magic came about,” Foradas said.

“You can think of ‘like magic’ as describing an affinity for magic or a particular friendliness towards magic perhaps. But you can also think of it as describing, something that seems to be but may not, in fact, be mag-

ical. This idea of describing something that we don’t fully understand the operations of as being like magic.”

Clark’s work, “In a new light (Healing Dirt),” pulls threads from religious practices — rituals, pilgrimage and faith healing, combining them with holistic wellness. Inspired by El Santuario de Chimayó, a Catholic chapel to which people make pilgrimages for its healing dirt, Clark’s piece is a reflection of her own healing process. Injured to the point of disability while working as a fabricator at the museum, the artist fell into a deep depression while trying to find a treatment that would ease her pain. In her journey, a friend recommended a pilgrimage to El Santuario. While she did not find a cure, she says in the exhibit guide that she did find, within herself, “a little higher power.”

At the museum, Clark creates her own version of El Santuario, a small chapel with a pit in the floor filled with charcoal which museum patrons can enter on the day of the new moon and spread charcoal on the parts

of their body that ail them. There is no promise of healing, no promise of anything, but, the wooden canes and crutches she’s constructed outside the chapel door — similar to those in El Santuario — suggest otherwise.

Perhaps, self-healing is the magic that we all seek.

But not all of the installations in the show are not necessarily reflective of those actual rituals.

Bailey’s three-channel video, “Hometraining,” is reclaiming the Scottish practice of the “Crann Tara,” or the fiery cross, a practice once used as a call for help, co-opted in America by white supremacists in the 1800s to invoke fear.

Bailey, a Black American with Scottish ancestry, is looking to the past, when the Crann Tara was a symbol of aid, and to a future where it is no longer a symbol of terror. The video, which features three crosses being set aflame as a cast of Black Americans of Scottish descent play the bagpipes, sing in Latin.

How is it like magic? The magic is in the imagery, both beautiful and uncomfortable all at once. It is confrontational at the same time that it is attempting to neutralize the corrupted symbolism.

This duality is seen throughout the show, as installations raise questions about religion, race, ethnicity, gender and inclusion. The answers required are not obvious, require introspection, will make you uncomfortable. It’s an exhibition that can be seen in a single viewing but will remain with you for days. You might want to, should, revisit it — once or twice or many times — to ponder each piece on an individual basis, to take in its magic.

In times of chaos, we can all use a little magic, no matter its form or shape, in our lives.

Jennifer Huberdeau is the features editor at The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at [jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com](mailto:jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com) or 413-496-6229. On Twitter: @BE\_DigitalJen