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BY CASSIE CROFTS 06 JUNE 2016

# THE WITCH OF KINGS CROSS

Was Rosaleen Norton a depraved Satanist or a talented artist? It depends on who you ask.

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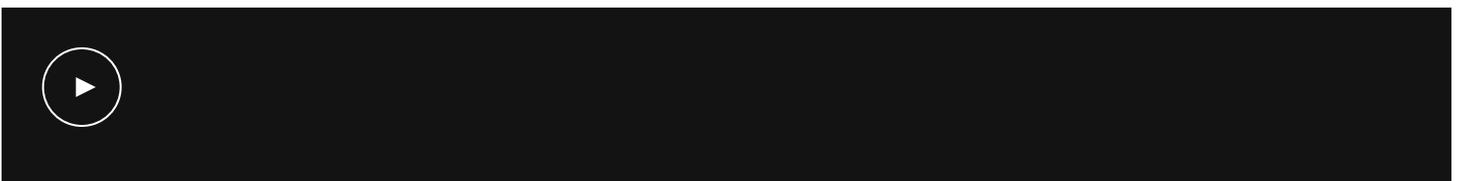




With her wildly arched eyebrows, occult beliefs and provocative artwork, it's little wonder Rosaleen Norton became Australia's most notorious witch.

More than 35 years after her death, it's a difficult task to gain a clear picture of Rosaleen. The tabloid newspapers of the time splashed her life across their pages but their taste for the sensational leaves little credibility in their pearl-clutching tales of a satanic witch out to corrupt society.

Many of those who knew her have either passed away or are hesitant to speak with the media, long discouraged by populist opinions of witches and their craft.





A skilled painter and follower of the pagan god Pan, for most of her life Rosaleen was known as “Roie” to her friends but The Witch Of Kings Cross to everyone else.

“The 1940s and 1950s in Australia were very morally conservative,” says Marguerite Johnson, an Associate Professor at The University of Newcastle, whose childhood interest in Rosaleen has continued into her academic career.

“And here you had this radical woman announcing to people she was a witch, dressing in men’s clothing, smoking in public, living with men in squats and being independent.”



Professor Johnson's long-held fascination led her to extensive research into Rosaleen's occult beliefs and her representations of the magical spirits and beings that visited her during trances.

For Rosaleen, there was no "black" or "white" magic; it was a force and power above morality. Her artwork included images of Pan, the pagan god she worshipped who is often mistaken for Satan.

When she displayed paintings at a Melbourne art gallery, the exhibition was closed down and Rosaleen was charged with obscenity, though the case was later dismissed.



To this day, she remains the only Australian artist to have her work destroyed by order of the courts.

“They thought they were rude and disgusting, but they were actually, for her, her belief system put down in art,” says Professor Johnson. “To Roie these are sacred experiences, but to the general public, they’re blasphemous.”

One police officer became particularly obsessed with Rosaleen, hounding her for the practice of sex magic with men including poet Gavin Greelees and English conductor Eugene Goossens.

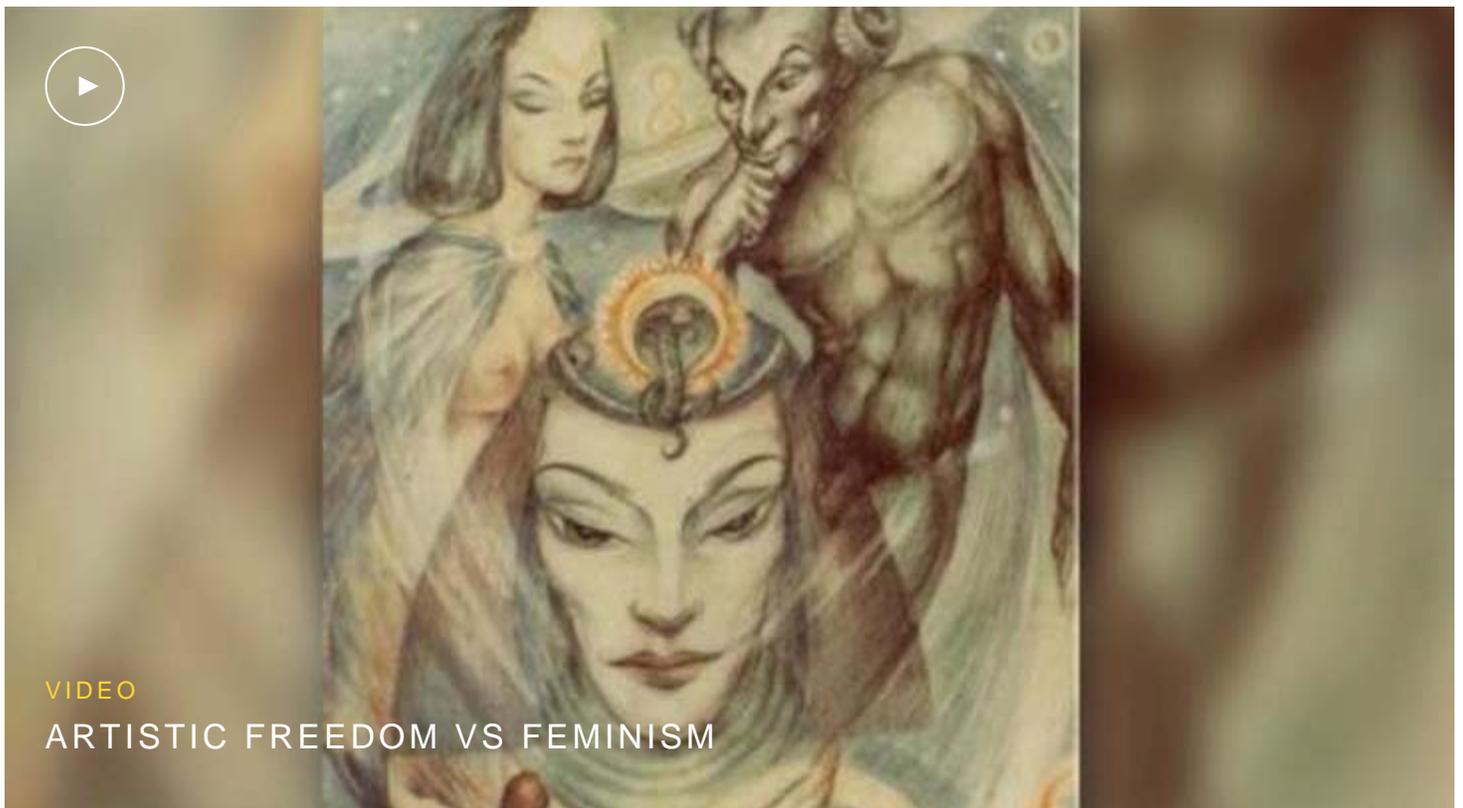


“There was anal intercourse between men. The obsession with homosexuality, in the 40s and 50s, when it was illegal, that was what drove those police,” according to Professor Johnson.

“People don’t understand sex magic and it’s a really, really complicated thing. It’s connected with contacting the divine and gods and goddesses. They actually believe that they are bringing sort of super sensual powers into their own bodies.”

While Rosaleen would have never defined herself as a feminist, for Professor Johnson says “she embodied a female freedom that was particularly unusual during the time she lived. She was an outlaw of Australian bohemian culture.”





According to her biographer, the late Neville Drury, she was more than anything else a free spirit who lived at a time when her actions and beliefs were little understood by a naïve and narrow-minded public.

Like many who knew Rosaleen or come across her story, Professor Johnson remains enthralled with the tale of the skilful painter with a passion for the unusual.

“I never left Rosaleen behind because she was one of these very rare things. She’s not a witch who belongs in a fairy tale book, but she was, in fact, a living breathing person who during the 20th century defined herself as a witch.”

*[All images: News Ltd/Newspix]*

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