Divine Visualisation

Text Francesca Gavin

Tarot, like most forms of divination, sits in the no-mans-land between belief and ridicule. Devout Christians have renounced it, scientific logicians see the cards as a childish game and devotees look to cards for answers to the questions of life. No matter your take on the subject, the system of tarot has entered our cultural subconscious. The iconic visual of the 78 cards has informed archetypes as we know them.

The tarot deck as a whole forms a narrative. The 22 cards of the Major Arcana – as opposed to the 56 Minor Arcana cards that more closely resemble the structure of playing cards – present a story of a journey from Fool to Magician. Naïf to master. The human journey depicted – often referred to as The Fool's Journey – is epic. Like Ulysses, tarot presents a pathway through life overcoming obstacles and gaining experience. The French mystic Eliphas Levi referred to tarot's narrative as "the primitive bible". In fact, the interpretation of the narrative in each card is fundamental to its understanding. We look at each card's imagery in order to see reflections of our own stories.

Tarot's history is assumed to have emerged from oral traditions. The oldest known decks date from the Middle Ages – initially growing out of Turkish or Middle Eastern card games. Some believe the cards had earlier roots in the *I Ching* or Egyptian hieroglyphics. Ornate gilded decks were given as gifts in the Renaissance courts of Milan and Florence – an era when interest in Graeco-Roman mythology, symbology and Christian mysticism emerged. By the 16th century, tarot had evolved into a divinatory system. It was the 19th century explosion of spiritualist ritual and secret societies, however, that made tarot popular. Embedded with ideas around sacred geometry and numerology, tarot became part of masonic, hermetic and Kabbalistic practises.

An example of one of these 19th century societies was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Established in Britain in 1888 and devoted to the study of the paranormal and occult, at its height it had 100 members including William Butler Yeats, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde's wife, Constance, and artist Pamela Colman Smith. The latter was an artist and actress who in collaboration with scholar Arthur Edward Waite channelled the images of the best-known tarot deck the Rider-Waite-Smith deck. (Rider was the publisher – notably Smith's credit was often ignored in the past.) The deck was published in 1910 fusing the aesthetic of historic Italian decks with a more contemporary interested in theatre, myth, Arthurian legend and mysticism. Aleister Crowley – also a former Golden Dawn member – created his own 'Thoth Tarot' deck with different iconography between 1938 and 1942 in collaboration with painter Frieda Harris.

It is interesting that tarot as we know it was often made in collaboration between artists and esoteric scholars. Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky argued in the *The Symbolism of the Tarot* (1913) that only someone trained in deciphering symbolism would be able to understand this special intersection between the physical and spiritual realm.

Artists have used tarot as a creative starting point for a century. Surrealists in particular were drawn to creating their own takes on tarot imagery – including Leonara Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, Ithell Colquhoun, Remedios Varo and Salvador Dali. André Masson collaborated with other artists including Max Ernst and René Char to create a deck while in the south of France escaping World War II. Andy Warhol was an avid deck collector, and his 1966 film *The Velvet Underground Tarot Cards* documents the band having cards read at a party. More recently artists such as Betye Saar, Francesco Clemente, Niki de Saint Phalle and Penny Slinger have incorporated tarot imagery into their work. As artist Penny Slinger wrote, "I always felt that these traditions offered a direct way to access energy, the energy of one's inner self."

Outside of straight visual art, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky is devoted tarot reader. He wrote a highly detailed book on the subject, *The Way of Tarot: The Spiritual Reacher in the Cards* (2004), and published his own (collaborative) version of the original middle ages Marseille deck. "Art can be anything," Jodorowsky has stated. "The art that I am interested in is an art with which one can heal."

Rose Eken's take on the tarot took the form of a largely commissioned exhibition of artworks responding to the Major Arcana. There was a ritualistic take on the way artists were chosen. The artist-curator created a small séance laying the Major Arcana face down and allocating the initials to each card. The allocation was 'tarocchian'. This was also echoed by the central work – a multimedia ceramic sculpture made by Eken to resemble a psychic's cartomancy table. 'As with the purple velvet curtain framing the entrance [to the exhibition], the table functioned to set a scene. Striking a balance between a sterile white cube gallery and a more welcoming and esoteric universe," Eken explains.

Each artist was given the identical size to interpret their chosen card – 70x 45 cm – an upscaled version of a card. The result brought together as an exhibition and within this book demonstrate their breadth of interpretation and approach. Here, cards are reworked in different styles in oil, acrylic and watercolour painting, hand cup collage, embroidery, relief sculpture and ceramic. Some directly reference the imagery of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck (for example, Emma Kohlmann's sensitive subconscious in the Moon, Camilla Mihkelsoo's stylised graphic version of The Chariot), while other pieces are more open takes on the card's subject or title (such as Loji Höskuldsson's Fool as the depicted remnants of a trip to Ibiza and Siri Elfhag's Magician reimagined as an octopus).

Suzanne Treister notably had already produced and published her own deck – HEXEN 2.0 (2009-11). Her piece here is part of an update deck in progress, HEXEN 5.0. Her take on the cards is notably contemporary – and political. Cards that reflect corporate and governmental forces, socio/political theory, science-fiction, the ecosystem and climate crisis among other ideas. The aim is to explore paths for the "positive survival of humanity." Working in a tarot format provided, as she explains, "a way for people to navigate and interact with the work, and use the cards to develop ideas for better alternative futures."

Interestingly a number of the artists here, alongside Eken herself, are influenced by the cosmic or esoteric in a wider sense. Werle notes that fortune telling is one of the main themes in his artistic practice creating interactive artworks to generate poetic and

symbolic conversations and movements. Dreams and different states of consciousness are ongoing themes in Seana Gavin's collage works. Here her card reflected her childhood in Woodstock, New York. "The use of Astrology, tarot cards and other forms of divination were considered very 'normal'."

What ties these artworks together is how the artists and we as viewers relate to tarot's symbolic language. These are pictures and scenarios that are embedded in popular culture. Even for those who do not know the cards intimately, their imagery is recognisable or relatable. They depict characters and compositions that have emerged in film, literature, visual art, photography and in the media at large. We are defined by our images. To paraphrase Carl Jung, it is the role of symbols to give a meaning to the life of man.