Twinkling Resistance

Alex Michon is Bewitched by the radical magical feminism of Samantha Stevens

The American TV series Bewitched aired from 1964 to 1973 and was in its time the highest rated show on the network. Based on the films I Married a Witch (1943) starring Veronica Lake and Bell Book and Candle (1958) with Kim Novak and James Stewart, this comedy sitcom told the story of a witch living in suburbia trying to live as a mortal married woman. The central role of the lovable yet domestically challenged witch Samantha Stephens was played by Elizabeth Montgomery, with Dick York (and later Dick Sargent) as her husband Darrin.

Laterally Samantha has been taken up as a proto feminist icon as she refused to play the part of perfect housewife - never learning to cook or clean the house preferring instead to resort to magic. She also tends to get one over on her hapless husband Darrin, who hates her using magic and as the stereotypical mid-century man expects her to stay at home and perform her wifely duties.

The post-rationalisation does not however stop there, as Samantha has also been held up as an early example of intersectionality. Audrey Lundhal writing in her thesis Samantha Stevens as the Third World Feminist Other: Border Theory and Bewitched (2012) considers that the Stevens can be seen as having a mixed marriage as Samantha often has to deal with problems arising from her being 'other'.

> The show very clearly defines Samantha's identity as a witch as a cultural and ethnic difference, which is different and opposite from the dominant mortal culture. Samantha's narrative relies on the conflict that is created when Samantha marries Darrin, a mortal. Several episodes set up Samantha's identity as a witch as an ethnicity that is oppressed by mortals.

At times the show attempted to deal directly with issues of racism. Most problematically in the episode Sisters Under the Skin where Tabitha, the Stevens' daughter, magics black polka dots onto her skin and white ones onto her black playmate so they can be 'truly sisters'. This episode also includes a racist boss who mixes up the black playmate as the Stevens' daughter and withdraws his account from the advertising agency for which Darrin works. Everything is nicely cleared up in the end and the boss comes to understand that he is a

racist but this is achieved with a problematic, to our eyes, bit of juju where all the players are turned into 'blackface'.

An interesting addendum to the Bewitched story is that Montgomery herself was personally devoted to liberal political beliefs, and she lent her name, along with a great deal of time, money, and energy to a wide variety of charitable and political causes. She was an outspoken champion of women's rights, AIDS activism, and gay rights. She was an ardent critic of the Vietnam War. Professionally, she narrated two political documentaries critical of US foreign policy, Cover Up: Behind the Iran Contra Affair (1988) and the Academy Award-winning The Panama Deception (1992). In June 1992, Montgomery and her former Bewitched co-star Dick Sargent were grand marshals at the Los Angeles Gay Pride Parade.

So it seems that Montgomery was very aware of how the light hearted kitschy sitcom in which she was involved did in fact have some power in challenging not only the prevailing hegemony but also right wing and racist attitudes of the times. As Audrey Lundhal concludes

> …the idea of a sitcom makes Samantha's important narrative subtle enough to be accepted by an audience who may not have largely accepted a more realistic mixed marriage. Samantha's struggles as an ethnic other and as an oppressed woman become very real to a 1960s audience, without a conscious realisation from the audience, because the show is primarily dealing with fiction.

OPPOSITE: Alex Michon, *Bewitched 2*, 2018, acrylic and ink on paper, 16x22cm. ABOVE: Alex Michon, *Samantha Stevens*, 2018, acrylic and ink on paper, , 21x15cm. Alex Michon, *Untitled*, 2018, acrylic and ink on paper, 20x15cm.