

Isabelle Frances McGuire

Joy is a Puppet

October 3 – November 28, 2026

Opening reception: Saturday, October 3, 6-9pm

For their first solo exhibition at Bel Ami, Isabelle Frances McGuire conjures the foundations of a game world set in a fictionalized colonial-era Salem, Massachusetts. McGuire's mise-en-scène includes a playable segment of a video game, bronze statuettes of our heroine *Joy*, and her amphibian cohort—all named *Sister*—as well as a series of hand-woven baskets. Situated amongst character design and establishing narrative fragments is a call to adventure, or at least, to survive. The mission of this game is not just to triumph over the dark sorcery taking hold of a small town. Rather, you must decide how to play when you find yourself the accused: culpable and *capable* of inciting fear in others. What action do you take?

This exhibition invites you into the making of a full-length video game and also to take part in the fate of *Joy*, who is both hero and anti-hero, familiar and strange, and representative of... a woman. In previous work, McGuire has studied historical male figures, fictional heroes, and monsters, from Nosferatu to Napoleon. McGuire freely retools their stories, toying with their mythological status to ask just how and why they seem to live on forever in the popular imagination.

Here, McGuire shifts attention to notable women in history who played the cards they were dealt—and sometimes won, but often lost. *Joy's Hands* is the first game to come out of a collaborative design studio, Recurseware, by McGuire and Will Lee. In this scenario, Joy has been locked in a rustic shed with only a bowl, a knife, some snails, and a writhing ferret. She must puzzle through a series of spells and summon the devil, who will alleviate her excruciating loneliness by engaging her in a game of cat's cradle. Though aided by magical objects, Joy's powers are limited and the rewards are nebulous.

To McGuire, the Salem Witch Trials (1692–93) stand out as extraordinary cases of the government stoking paranoia and fear to find scapegoats and maintain a grip on power. Perhaps it is not surprising that the first three suspects were poor and 'deviant' outcasts of the community; Tituba was a slave, Sarah Good was a beggar, and 'Gammer' Osborne was an elderly woman. What is more remarkable, McGuire observes, is that the men and women targeted were also endowed with so-called abilities, and their confessions (often coerced) were platforms to air grievances, accuse others, and to captivate the attention of townspeople living a rather hardscrabble existence with little entertainment. Apparently, those channeling visions of the devil had something to teach. The accused were coached and provoked to feed a real fear and a secret yearning that bad magic was to blame for what was going wrong. The myth was being written in real time by the accusers and the accused, leaving 25 people dead.

In the center of the room, a museological display of 'cursed' baskets pays homage to the tragedy. While each basket is unique, they almost disappear as artworks into the historical realm of women's craft and labor. And supposedly, these vessels carry a hex: fruit will rot, bread will go moldy, the item delivered may make you sick. McGuire is interested in how seemingly innocuous objects and innocent beings are suddenly perceived as threats. Three bronze bull frogs, the *Sisters*, sit in a row with pink mouths agape, hungry; they feed on your paranoia. This work references a 1754 incident in the Connecticut colony of Windham, known colloquially as the Battle of the Frogs. On a summer night during a severe drought, the people of the town were awakened by a loud roaring sound. Fearing an attack, a group ventured into the forest with weapons, only to find that a large population of bull frogs fighting over a drying pond had turned on each other, creating a terrible outcry.

Isabelle Frances McGuire brings elements together in a way that is more like concocting a potion than building a case of incriminating evidence. However, McGuire endeavors to mix magic and matter. By taking on well-known histories that have already been fictionalized and embellished, McGuire twists the story again, pulling the great epic in another direction. And, it's open ended. Joy, tied to the past, doesn't have that many moves, but nevertheless she will keep playing.

Isabelle Frances McGuire (b. 1994, Austin, TX) lives and works in Chicago. They received their BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Past solo and two person presentations include *Year Zero*, The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2024); *LOOP*, King's Leap, New York (2023); *The First Machine*, What Pipeline, Detroit (2023); Scherben, Berlin (2022); *Dresses Without Women*, Mickey, Chicago (2021); *P**** B**** ARENA*, Good Weather at Et al., San Francisco (2020); *Digesting Duck Entry Level Position*, From The Desk of Lucy Bull, Los Angeles (2020); and *I'm A Cliche*, Prairie, Chicago (2018). A large-scale installation by McGuire was presented in the Whitney Biennial 2026. Other recent group shows include *Ornament & Information*, Gertie, Chicago (2026); *Claire's Camera*, N/A, Seoul (presented by King's Leap, New York, 2026); *Phone Sleeper*, Drei, Cologne (2025); *My Story Gallery*, High Art & Sister, Seoul (2024); Artists Space, New York (2024); *Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)*, Petzel Gallery, New York (2024); *Descending the Staircase*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2023); *Tell Me What You Want*, Bel Ami, Los Angeles (2023); M. LeBlanc, Chicago (2023); In Lieu, Los Angeles (2020); and *At the End of the Game You Will Be Forgotten*, Alyssa Davis Gallery, New York (2018). McGuire received an Artadia Award in 2025.