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URBAN GARDNER

Urban Gardner: In the Buff: Nudie Playing Cards That Call Your Bluff

Artist creates a deck filled with naked men striking all manner of cheesecake poses

The artist Z Behl put two jokers in her take on the risqué playing cards of her youth; both are of Ms. Behl. *PHOTO: JASON ANDREW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



By

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I don't understand the precise chronology, but the artist Z Behl was approximately 10 years old when she stole a pack of nudie playing cards from her father.

"I found the same deck again 10 years later," she told me last week as we stood in the Kai Matsumiya gallery on the Lower East Side.

That's where the end result of her thievery, the show "Joker's Solitaire," was on display. It is her take on the risqué playing cards of her youth, except using male rather than female models.

"He told me he'd gotten them on Canal Street," she said of her dad and his playing cards. "They used to sell a lot of weird stuff on Canal Street in the '80s."

What I'm confused about is whether she stole the same deck twice, or if there were two decks of randy cards.

I suppose it doesn't really matter. What does is what the effect that seminal experience of discovering ladies in various states of undress had on Z Behl's art.

"I made a drawing of my favorite one," a memento mori featuring a woman, a skull and a leopard rug, Ms. Behl went on. "I don't really look at porn or anything. It was bizarre I had this relationship to it."

Next, the artist asked herself: "What would I like to look at?"

The answer provided the inspiration for "Joker's Solitaire," 52 oversize playing cards of nude men striking all manner of cheesecake poses.

Unfortunately, the show closed over the weekend. But individual, standard-size decks of the playing cards can still be purchased through the gallery.

"I knew immediately I could find 52 men who would pose naked for me and be excited about it," Ms. Bell said, "given the kind of friendships I cultivated. I also knew my boyfriend would be OK with it."

Perhaps this is the appropriate moment to provide a brief biography of the artist, in an effort to determine whether the nature of her friendships are different from yours and mine.

Or whether millennials, males in particular, are quicker to strip in public than they were in my day.

Ms. Behl, now 29, grew up in Tribeca, attended P.S. 234 on Greenwich Street (several of the male models are friends from her school days), Stuyvesant High School and Wesleyan University.

After college, she moved to New Orleans where she was part of a community that included her former boyfriend Benh Zeitlin, who made the Oscar-nominated "Beasts of the Southern Wild."

I neglected to ask whether Mr. Zeitlin has a cameo role in "Joker's Solitaire." I'll assume not. I know her current boyfriend, Justin Cox, doesn't.

In a follow-up email, Ms. Behl told me, "I had a hard time finding ANY female artists who used the male nude in their work. Women have often turned the camera on themselves, but there are very few examples of women taking on men."

I couldn't think of any either.

"I wanted to reveal men and what they'd be comfortable revealing," she added.

The short answer is—quite a lot.

One gentleman, with glasses and a beard, is posed on his tummy atop some sort of giant animatronic dog.

Another model is making use of a whisk, but only to cook dinner. A third is taking public transportation. Indeed, I believe he's on the B train.

Then, there is the image of a fellow wearing nothing but red socks and dreadlocks.

“This guy is a friend from Wesleyan,” Ms. Behl explained.

The setting is pleasantly arboreal. Indeed, he seems to be pausing in a forest clearing, the foliage exclusively marijuana plants.

“This is his dad's grow house,” Ms. Behl explained.

Some of the cards—the ace of diamonds, for example—are downright studious.

“That is my old roommate who's a lawyer,” the artist reported. “I knew I wanted to show his [private parts] on a pile of books.”

A movie house provides the backdrop for the three of clubs; apart from the originality of “Joker's Solitaire,” and the casting, one must credit Ms. Behl with a talent for set design and especially logistics.

In the picture, a moviegoer has settled in with a supersize box of popcorn, soda and candy for a late showing of “Ouija,” a horror film that came and went pretty quickly last fall. Except, of course, he's buck naked.

“There were actually people in the theater,” Ms. Behl recalled. “I used an iPhone to light it,” she boasted. “I shot a roll in the dark during previews.”

Perhaps my favorite card—the three of diamonds—shows a gentleman with bearlike amounts of body hair. He's posing in the buff at the venerable New Orleans Athletic Club. Ms. Behl gained access by applying for a trial membership.

“People were swimming laps in the pool,” she remembered, apparently unaware there was a photo shoot in progress, albeit furtively.

The pack of playing cards includes two jokers. They're of Ms. Behl, posed with her Pentax, in a black-and-white spandex bodysuit.

I suppose that is the equivalent of maintaining your aesthetic distance.

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