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At LES Gallery Kai Matsumiya, Z Behl Ups the Ante With Nude Male Solitaire

Kurt McVey, Saturday, March 7, 2015

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Installation view of "Joker's Solitaire."
Photo: Courtesy of Kai Matsumiya.

Can men, especially when their raw (nude) maleness and masculinity are not only displayed, but celebrated, be considered sex objects? With "Joker's Solitaire," artist [Z Behl](#)'s current show at [Kai Matsumiya](#), which showcases 52 oversize custom playing cards featuring male nudes, the artist steps up to the table to find out.

The cards, made from Lauan wood, are hung in diverse arrangements or "hands" on green felt-covered walls in the front of the gallery. Each card features a male nude of varying race, age, and sexual preference in all his

full frontal glory; a modified throwback to Behl's own father's taboo nude female playing cards (now vintage) from back in the day. (See [10 Powerful Women Artists Breaking Social Taboos.](#))

The images are created using Ink Jet prints on rice paper and other delicately layered tissues, which render the cards soft to the touch. Behl then sands the image down and adds generous layers of adhesive, helping to create the worn and vintage aesthetic. The backs of the cards, which evoke standard red playing card patterns and motifs, are done with silkscreen and feature a pervasive, cryptographic "female eye," an obvious gender reversal that permeates all elements of the show.

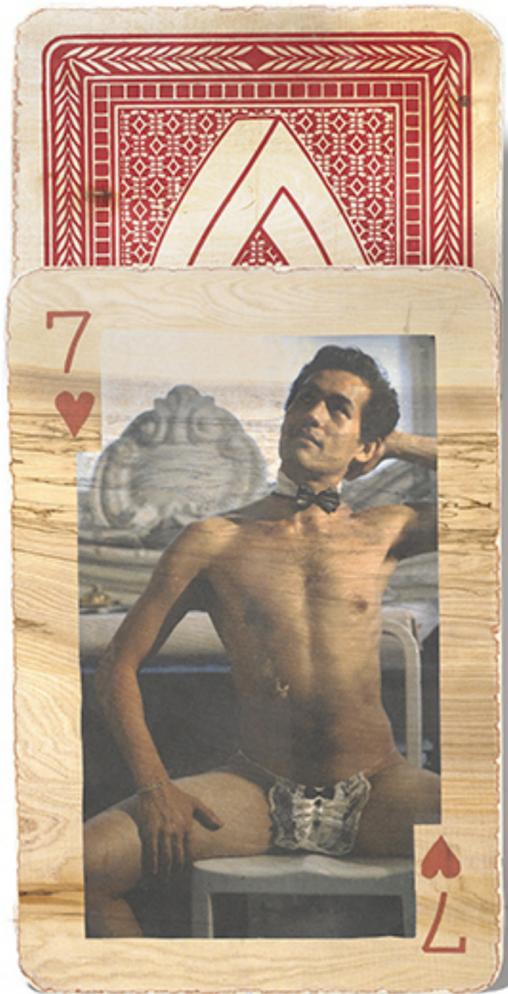


Installation view of "Joker's Solitaire."
Photo: Courtesy of Kai Matsumiya

While preparing for "Joker's Solitaire," Behl spent many hours in the library researching ancient medieval texts that, one could imagine, positioned the female gaze as a sort of viewfinder for devilish or, to a lesser degree, mischievous intentions. Behl, who is featured on two "Joker" cards, inhabits the trickster role willingly, like Shakespeare's steward Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

In the ancillary room to the back of the gallery is a video installation of Behl playing Solitaire with the same outsize cards on a green felt carpet. This is a meditation on choice, possession, domination, and systematic competition with oneself, tropes too often associated with maleness alone.

During the show's opening on January 22nd, guests were encouraged to play card games of their choice with a run of 500 custom, normal-size playing cards in the same room as the Solitaire film. Matsumiya says Behl was drawn to his tiny space immediately, due to the fact that it was shaped like a card deck in its own right.



Z Behl, *Seven of Hearts Solitaire Stack*.
Photo: Courtesy of Kai Matsumiya

It's interesting what the reversal of gender roles achieves when approached in a controlled environment. It's easy to speculate, when it's permitted without political judgment or professional consequence, that even if the same aesthetic, tools, and approach were to be taken, but the characters on the cards remained women, that the show would invite allusions to pornography, just as Behl's dad's cards were once classified.

With men as "subjects" in their place, despite scant murmurs of implied homoeroticism (even despite the overtly implied female gaze) the work stands definitively and perhaps defiantly as art (see [Gay Art History Tours Homoerotically Rethink the Metropolitan Museum's Artwork](#)). Similarly, Behl is having quite a bit of fun dissecting what does and does not make a "sex object" to the point where *Joker's Solitaire* exists as a sort of alchemical social experiment seeking to deconstruct the concept of human beings as tools for recreation and personal gratification.

Is it pornography, like the women in the throwback card decks of old? Regardless of the answer, Behl has crafted a show that asks the audience to reconsider our prevailing notions of gender, sexuality, intention, and our enduring puritanical hang-ups regarding pornography, the nude form and its relationship to artistic expression.

After checking out the Armory Show (see [The 10 Best Contemporary Artworks at the 2015 Armory Show](#)), the Independent (see [Youthful, Edgy Independent Art Fair Looms Large in the Art World](#)), or Volta (see [Must-See Single Artist Booths at Volta 2015 Dazzle and Delight](#)), you're craving something a little different, head to the Lower East Side and check out Z Behl's titillating and thought provoking show before it comes down this Sunday, March 8.



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