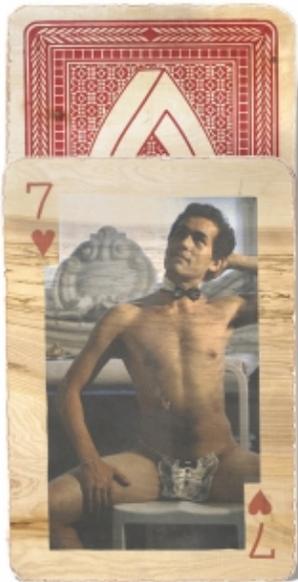


Interview

X CLOSE WINDOW

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PLAYING WITH NUDES



LAUNCH GALLERY »

ABOVE: Z BEHL IN NEW YORK, JANUARY 2015. PORTRAIT BY ELISE GALLANT.

Known for her life-size wood cutouts of creatures, humans, and objects that expand on her background as a theater set designer, the artist Z Behl has shaped a practice that draws on myths and fairytales while it creates new ones. As the scenic director for *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), Behl designed the widely acclaimed aesthetic for the film's fantastical Louisiana bayou setting that heralded a dark side of childhood in the vein of Maurice Sendak. Last summer's show at Mana Contemporary featured a monstrous, ceiling-height pied piper that Behl depicted as female. Inside, there was a funhouse for children to climb in to, but for the adults outside, kids appeared to be imprisoned in the piper's belly.

For her latest show, on view now at Kai Matsumiya on the Lower East Side, Behl, 29, tackled a major photography project for the first time. Unlike many of her storybook-ready pieces, this one is not for kids. Staying true to the artist's playful nature, however, games—and a little adventure—are involved. Beginning last July, Behl photographed 52 men posed in the buff in 52 locations to create a custom deck of cards. Willing model in tow, Behl journeyed everywhere from a Philadelphia movie theater to a luxury New Orleans sports club to a private wedding reception to a New York City subway car to get the shot. On two cards, the artist herself impersonates the Joker, wearing a onesie and mischievously holding a camera. The graphic design on the cards' flip sides is meant to signify a woman's eye.

Two-foot tall wooden versions of the cards are arranged throughout the gallery, either freestanding or as part of a hand, like a three-of-a-kind or full house. The walls are covered in green felt evoking the top of a poker table. 500 standard-size card sets are sold separately, and visitors can give a deck a test run at a back table.

Underlying the show, titled "Joker's Solitaire," is the idea of a female trickster, which also informed *Pied Piper* at Mana. "[The 'trickster'] character in myth [is the one] who takes the myth apart or creates a break in the world," says Behl. "It's always a male, and androgynous. But also very free and has a big sexual appetite." In an effort to explore a female counterpart, Behl decided to play Joker herself and turn the gaze on her male subjects. In a symbol of impish power, a video in the gallery shows Behl, in costume, playing solitaire with the wooden cards.

We met the artist at Kai Matsumiya in the midst of installing.

RACHEL SMALL: I'm sure it was a very interesting process getting 52 men to pose naked for you.

Z BEHL: [*laughs*] Yeah. The idea came to me because I had been playing around a lot with the idea of female tricksters. I read this Lewis Hyde book *Trickster Makes This World*, and then I went down this sort of rabbit hole of like, "Well, where are the female tricksters?" I started looking at this woman Deldon Anne McNeely's book [*Mercury Rising: Women, Evil and the Trickster Gods*], about femaleness and the place it occupies in myth. I've always used photography as a resource for painting images. I've always made figurative large-scale works, but I've never used photography as an end to itself. My dad does jewelry photography, and he always pointed the camera at me as a kid. I also found a deck of his nudie playing cards when I was about 10 years old that I thought was amazing and weird. I've been holding onto it for a long time.

So I was thinking about photography in a new light and trying to make a body of photographs. I thought, like, "Wow, what if I made this deck of nudie cards?" Those were the three ingredients: Having had an experience personally with that deck of female cards, wanting to do more photo work, and then the ambition of scale—52 shoots as a goal [with] 52 different men gave the project energy. I tried to capture a mix of gazes—mine and theirs—[in] a variety of contexts. There was my own naiveté approaching the men, the shoots, the camera, that made the pictures more interesting. As the project evolved, I had to keep challenging myself to keep my comfort zone at bay.

SMALL: What was your most adventurous location?

BEHL: There was one with this guy who I had never spoken to. I'd only seen him at a party in New Orleans [and] got his number. He met me at the New Orleans Athletic Club, which only very recently

became public. It's old school. Marble, gorgeous, swimming pool. Everything in there is kind of insane. There's a bar in the gym. So my model, Akrum, and me had to arrive separately at the gym and pretend to be interested in membership. [*laughs*] Then we made a plan to meet in the handball room. He's totally game. We just went around the gym because it was so beautiful, but we thought it would be closing and people would leave, and they didn't. [But] we really wanted a swimming pool shot, and there were these guys doing laps in the background. We had to time the shoot so he could pull his pants off. We would be like, "Okay, 10 seconds, go!" And we would try to take the picture and then he'd put them back on. We did a bunch like that.

SMALL: In all the shoots, did you ever get in trouble?

BEHL: Never got in trouble!

SMALL: Amazing. Well, going back a bit, I know you first started working on theater sets, and I feel like narrative has always been an important part of your work. Can you talk a little bit about that? And, do you usually have a narrative more or less start-to-finish in your mind, or is it open-ended?

BEHL: I think theater set design has totally informed my approach. I also acted a lot as a little kid, and I think the way I played as a little kid, too, was about building worlds a lot. I teach little kids, and I think a lot about the way you can only think as big as the environment you can conceive. If you make a different or larger new place, with different rules to it, then your ideas grow in that. I think I haven't always known what story I'm telling, which is part where this curiosity comes from. So, I'm still learning how to work with narrative.

SMALL: I feel a lot of these guys don't necessarily have ideal bodies, whereas the playing cards that belonged to your dad, I'm assuming those were more *Playboy*-esque models.

BEHL: I can show you that, too, if you want to see it. [*Behl fetches the deck*] So, this is the deck that I found.

SMALL: How does your dad feel about you taking these?

BEHL: I think he's just pissed that I took them and I never told him. But I asked him, really recently, I said, "Papa, you know..." I actually stole them twice. I took them once and then I found the same deck, another copy, again, and I took them again, much more recently. After starting to make all this work, I said to my dad, like, "Yeah, so, I took these from you!" He had this shocked look, and I said, "Where did you get them?" and he said, "Oh, from Canal Street, you know? Canal Street in the '90s, they used to have a lot of junk."

SMALL: "Okay, sure, Dad, whatever."

BEHL: Well, I grew up right near there, and so...I wasn't buying nudie cards as a kid, but he was. But then, sure, there's some idea of what's an ideal body. Like, none of these women are overweight. What fascinates me—and I've done a little bit of research now about the history of erotic playing cards—is that a lot of the images are appropriated and taken by different photographers. There's no crediting of any sort. Some of these images are really dated. This woman, this is my favorite card. It's got like this leopard print, diamonds on a skull.

SMALL: It looks cultish.

BEHL: Apart from her tits, there's nothing sexy about it. There's a skull over her crotch. She's not looking at you. She doesn't look happy. It doesn't feel particularly accessible. There's this death in between you and her.

SMALL: It looks like these are pulled from different decades—'40s, '50s, through the '90s...like stock images before the Internet.

BEHL: [For my project], I was not trying to imagine female fantasies. I never thought, "Oh, I would be

turned on if I saw a man naked on the subway...or if I saw a man naked in a movie theater..." I was interested in getting men naked in positions where the narrative felt very open-ended. Not necessarily sexual at all. For instance, I wanted a video game setup, because there's a relationship there that I don't quite have my hands on, that I'm interested in exploring.

SMALL: I feel like walking in the gallery without you there to give background on them, it's more of an experience, like, "Who are these men? Where did they come from?"

BEHL: I really wanted diversity in what the pictures looked like. I used a film camera specifically because I wanted a [safe-feeling] distance between me and someone else. Rather than an iPhone, which makes people really uncomfortable.

SMALL: A lot of your work, like *Pied Piper* at Mana and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* involves children and touches on themes of childhood. This project is not so kid-friendly.

BEHL: For me, I think it's coming out of the same sort of line of questioning about being an adult woman of a childbearing age, and trying to be really productive, heroically productive. That's what I've been doing, and I don't know how you can necessarily achieve that if you're also making something alive at the same time. I see this work as coming out of the same impulse to challenge how women's careers develop and what the trajectory is and the timeline is for having a kid, or making work...I don't know if there's another point in my life where I would have been as excited to execute this, but in some way, it felt like a denial of domesticity.

SMALL: It's hard to think about domesticity without thinking about the history of women's traditional place being in the home—which of course, is still very much a thing, and was all but totally pervasive until pretty recently. I can see how this is a rejection of that. You traveled far and wide to complete this project, which is something that's hard to do if you're tied down with kids or domestic tasks. Then it's also that you're someone who's confident enough to approach 52 men and ask them to take their clothes off.

BEHL: I mean, that's something men seem to do all the time without any problem, you know? [laughs]

SMALL: Exactly! Also, I was wondering about the general look of a lot of your works. I feel like they often have a storybook quality. I was wondering what your aesthetic inspirations are, or what has made an impact on you as you've developed as an artist?

BEHL: In terms of depiction, I love Gennady Spirin books. He's an illustrator who works with fairytales in immaculate watercolors. Also artists like Andrea Zittel, who I saw when I was pretty young, had a way of transforming art for me to be beyond the visual, which I really hadn't considered when I was first introduced to her work.

I think the best answer to your question is that my artistic inspiration comes mostly from my creative community. People are so incredibly passionate about making things, and interested in the most arduous path. It's less about sharing an aesthetic and more about sharing a work ethic. It's an approach to not knowing how to do something and throwing yourself into it. It's a lifestyle. Additionally, my father always drew; in addition to being a photographer, he would make beautiful drawings. I think that a lot of my aesthetic language came from him.

SMALL: It sounds like this creative community is a really solid group of people.

BEHL: I mean, they don't all call themselves artists, and that's interesting, too. But they're all incredibly talented and visionary people.

SMALL: What do you have in common, do you think, that keeps you guys together?

BEHL: A sense of adventure, an interest trying to create unforeseen circumstances and engaging with unknown environments. It's a confidence in your own vision and a willingness to move through a lot of chaos and remain open and totally willing to...

SMALL: Improvise?

BEHL: Yeah. A lot of trust is what it's about, and I think that's what the nudity is about, too: a lot of trust. It's taking that lived experience, the decisions that you make, and the way it's recorded and documented, and looking at it and trying to get outside of yourself and look at it. Sometimes that becomes the fodder for the work itself.

Z BEHL: *THE JOKER IS ON VIEW AT KAI MATSUMIYA NOW THROUGH MARCH 8.*

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