

The ties that bind: Christopher Bollen on Christian Holstad

IN HIS ESSAY "On the Shortness of Life," the Roman stoic Seneca writes: "We are in the habit of saying that it was not in our power to choose the parents who were allotted to us.... But we can choose whose children we would like to be." To any individual who does not identify with dominant culture, Seneca's pronouncement is particularly instructive. Reinvented genealogies are part and parcel of the personal lives of different-drummer children, who often align themselves with others according to political perspective, cultural subgenre, or--to cite that lodestone taken up by artist Christian Holstad in "Love means never having to say you're sorry," an exhibition that was on view last month in New York--sexuality.

Occupying the bleak innards of a former Middle Eastern deli called Prince's (renamed Leather Beach by Holstad), the installation was designed to trace an alternative lineage--in particular, that of the generations of "leathermen" who once populated the city's midtown area. (Before the homosexual hysteria of the AIDS-riddled '80s and, during the decade following, the city's famous--and infamous--creation of a marketable tourist area there, midtown was a gay bastion full of hustlers, drag queens, sex shops, and discos.) Holstad blacked out the deli's windows, giving the building the appearance of a sex shop; he also stripped the deli's interior and restocked it with totems of '70s gay s/m culture, sporadically mixing in samplings from '60s hippie bohemianism and, of course, the effluvia of a run-down corner store. Here we found the leather-daddy icons of the past: leather chaps, canvas-and-leather arm gloves, gas masks fashioned from briefs (made by 2(x)ist, Holstad's nod to the gay brand-marker of the present) fitted with an aluminum can over the mouth. But most of the fetishized items on display were fabricated by the artist out of cloth, as if he were literally stitching together his leatherman lineage. Among the standard trappings of a New York deli--glue traps littered the floor and a stack of Oldenburghesque fabric carrots sat in an open refrigeration case--were strewn such hippie relics as gaudy yarned bunting, bottles of organic medicinals,

and a backpack (albeit one made of a Louis Vuitton-like patterned fabric). In one of the most memorable pieces on display, Sissy Bar, 2005-2006, wheatgrass had been turned through a crank and dropped like manure to the floor.

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To some viewers, it might well have seemed as though this bundling together of society's peripheral zones--combined with the democratic prurience of the street--was haphazard, a kind of crass mix-and-match artistry. But others no doubt immediately recognized a thread connecting seemingly divergent cultures. For each object here evoked the pursuit of naturalism; a spiritual and sexual transcendence of straight, codified order; and overt sexual liberation as a refusal of constrictive societal conventions. Thus, Holstad's installation concerned previous aspirations to an emancipated future--the natural man posited as the hairy gay bear, the itinerant love child, the toughie on the street corner. It is imperative to note that the artist was never a member of any of these fallen utopian subcultures: He chose these past movements as his own pedigree precisely the way Seneca dictates--by deliberate claim, not absolute birthright.

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Holstad's artistic career has often centered on the public spectacle and campy aestheticizing of sexual dissonance. Leather Beach and its contents recall a 2005 project in which the artist set up a glittery jukebox in a McDonald's in downtown Manhattan, inviting patrons to choose from one hundred tracks by musicians ranging from Grace Jones to Yoko Ono--thereby infiltrating one of America's iconic capitalist enterprises with his self-portrait in music. But it is in Holstad's 2002-2003 series of collages that sex becomes a signature site of rupture and reclamation. After first arranging found photographs of young men engaging in oral or anal sex, the artist covers these images of male bodies with bright decorative patterns taken from decor publications. Thus the gross particulars of a pornographic activity are incorporated into wondrous, dazzling

designs: On the one hand, Holstad aestheticizes the homosexual act, making its image one of rarefied and universal beauty; on the other hand, such a romantic covering-up is like polybagging a porn magazine, stimulating the imagination by frustrating it.

Similarly, in the installation at Leather Beach, rough-sex signifiers were reworked--somehow drawn close even as they were held at an aesthetic distance--by the artist's own hand in canvas, yarn, and thread. Indeed, with each object, the artist seemed to reassess the legacy of these past movements not by looking at their power in the '70s but by assessing their value today, considering in particular their historical evolution from loaded icons of subcultural dissonance to contemporary commodities. They are things that can be bought, but not necessarily believed in. For this reason, Holstad never evacuated the site's commercial detritus--display counters, register, and his own addition of two buzzing fluorescent lights--from his visual vocabulary. Part theater, part clothing outlet, the installation featured works, hanging like so many wares on industrial chains, that would have seemed right at home in a West Village sex shop were it not for their neutralizing sea-foam blue color. These suspended articles were in turn not so much shocking in their sexual possibility as in how they floated like empty human forms--suggesting deviance minus the physical reality of a body.