

Alpha, Beta, Omega
Zak Krevitt

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RAY GALLERY

<Raw Conversation with Zak Krevitt>

by Philip Karjeker

Philip Karjeker:

I'm sitting here with Zak Krevitt and we are going to be chatting about his upcoming exhibition with Ray Gallery. It's featuring some lovely new works, tell us about that and how it all came to fruition.

Zak Krevitt:

Well, about a year ago, I was living with my partner Thomas and I think I had heard about role playing as animals. But I didn't know that was a thing. I didn't know there was a community built around it. One day I had a panic attack because of a crazy roommate, then something in my head reverted, and for the next hour I was stuck in this dog mode. It was very relaxing and freeing. I had my eye closed most of the time, I was trying to open my body; to envision myself as this creature. As a dog. When I came out of it, I was like, "woah, what was that? That felt really powerful."

Another thing that had led to that was my dog had passed away in California. I didn't really know about it till after it had happened. He was put down by my father, who didn't really tell anyone until after the fact. That really kind of shook me. He was my childhood dog. I had had him for forever. When we were younger we were more like brothers, not like master and beast. We were vying for the same spot.

That conflation of things happening; the extreme stress and the longing to connect with this thing that was happening across the country led me down to this path of animal role play.

It remained a private thing for a few months. Once in awhile, I would pup out and Thomas would give me belly rubs and toss around a tennis ball that I would chase. He encouraged me to seek out other people who were doing this.

I found out there was a night at The Eagle, so we went. We arrived late and missed the crowd, but they had flyers for their website. So I logged on and saw they were doing a camping trip that next weekend.

I love camping. It was at an LGBT nudist camp ground. I thought, "perfect, I'm gonna go. This is what

I was looking for." It was a deep dive into this world. So a week later, I was in a car with these strangers and we went to Pennsylvania.

We spent this really intimate weekend playing, learning, and having fun. Frolicking and having lots of kink scenes. Really, this was an uninhibited break from reality.

It was so interesting to me because I was into the kink community or world before that. But all of a sudden, I had these new friends in the different community. It was so refreshing to not be the only one in the room who wants to make a sex joke at every sentence. Who wants to talk about sex, think about it, dissect it, and have it. I wasn't the freaky one in the room. I was kind of the least freakish one in the room, and that was really refreshing.

That was how the work started. Because when I'm going through something, experiencing something, I photograph it. I bring my camera, make work about it, and think about it. It's a tool for me to dissect and look into my own brain.

So, I brought a camera on that trip and made a bunch of portraits and some reportage - photojournalism kind of shots. From there, I've stayed with the community. The NYC PAH (Pups and Handlers) community is fairly active. We have two meet-up nights a month, and in between there's lots of other things going on.

It wasn't till six months in did I decided that it was time to dive into the more critical side of it. I wanted to give it some more time to process. At that point, I started thinking more about why now. Why now? This has been going on for a long time, but there's been a very visible uptick in participants in the animal role-play communities, particularly amongst young gay men.

Whenever you see a change in one aspect of culture, it's in reflection of another. I began to think about this primal state.

The pup headspace is sort of the culmination of puppy play in the pup space. You're down, on all fours, barking and wagging, not really speaking. It's a very transformative state. Your mind's image of yourself

shifts and you start inhabiting the mind of this other creature. It's a really simple creature. I think that's where the draw is.

You know, young people, early 20s, are experiencing a whole new set of responsibilities. They're getting out of school, there are student loans, they're getting a job, paying taxes. The idea of forgetting all that for twenty minutes, an hour, a weekend, is very appealing. In the same way that getting drunk at the bar is appealing, but this is a constructive, fun, active, playful thing.

Another thing is our society's turn towards technology. More and more, we're inundated with screens, new technology, and there's an app for everything. All these things that are very technological have to become new parts of our brain, our being. Whenever there's a paradigm shift, there's going to be a knee jerk reaction against it. A pendulum. I think this sort of primal state is the reaction against this overly technical state we're getting in.

So this started from the desire in myself and finding a community. Then focusing on embracing the community, documenting them, playing with them, and becoming part of them.

PK:
You mentioned intimacy. First, the practice of you having pup-out sessions started with Thomas as a private thing, and then he encouraged you to go out and seek others. What was that experience like in changing this mode of interaction from just you and Thomas to a group with strangers?

ZK:
It is nice, especially when you're entering into this partnership, you're living and working with them. Particularly in New York City, everyone has their packs. Those two things combined leads you to wanting to have an activity for yourself. It is a great thing that I can have this thing to my own where I can meet new people. It's different from the day to day routine.

I could go somewhere and meet people with no preconceived notions, without a professional demeanour. You know, when you meet people that you're trying to work with you have to have a sort of...

PK:

Aloofness.

ZK:
Aloofness, and this overly charming thing.

PK:
Just enough mystery to keep people interested, but not so mysterious to where people think, "I... I just don't want to have anything to do with you."

ZK:
Yeah. But going to Astoria and seeing these people a few times a month and knowing each other through kink, it was very freeing. It was the no rules play ground. Everything is fair game, nothing was taboo. That transition was really seamless. At home, I'll wag my tail sometimes, and he'll give me scratches, but it's something I kind of do on my own. It's important to keep an individual activity when you're in this full-time partnership.

PK:
We've also spoken about the dynamic when it comes to pup play. You've talked to me about pups and their handlers. Do you have a handler? What goes into that?

ZK:
A little background, an interesting thing about pup play and its position in the BDSM community is very unique. Normally, in BDSM, you have a master and a submissive; a dom and a sub. So those lines get blurred in pup play because there are different kinds of relationships. There's the pup and the handler, I don't have a specific handler. I also switch, so I like being a handler sometimes, I like being a puppy sometimes, I just like playing with others.

A lot of pups have handlers. A lot of pups want a handler. You see on the internet, less so these New York pups who have a community, but I've seen pups from smaller towns that seem to really want a handler. Someone to guide them, tell them what to do, how to be. It gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of worth. There's a lot of discussion in the community because people will post, "oh, I don't have a handler, I feel worthless," and everyone will say, "don't say that, you're not worthless, it's not about that."

The interesting part is that you can also have a pack.

You can have a pack of puppies. There might be an alpha, betas, omegas - you'll have a service pup.

If the pup is the sub in the classic Dom/Sub relationship, then you have a group of "subs" playing together in this community, which is just not a thing that happens in other regions of the BDSM community. But you can also have dominant pups. Pups who only want to play with other pups, without a handler. And that's where I sit most days. I'm more interested in playing with other puppies and having a good time.

But in general, I'm not really one to love being told what to do by anyone. I also don't consider myself as a part of a specific pack, per se. NYC PAH, I would say, is a kind of a pack of mine, but it's not as tightly knit as others I've seen.

PK:

It sort of brings to mind this tumblr I've seen, it's called *Noodles and Beef*. Their body aesthetic is big and muscle. From the posts that I've read, they address each other as beta and alpha. They go through some sort of daily regiment - it seems very structured.

ZK:

Yeah, it is.

PK:

I have to say, it does seem really appealing to engage in that kind of interaction with other people, specifically other gay men. I myself recently engaged in what I would describe as "light" puppy play.

I met a guy, we had been talking on Scruff for a long time. We finally met up, we had lunch, and it was talking, talking, talking. We immediately clicked. And then we went to his place, we basically just took a nap together with occasional nuzzling and pawing.

It was a form of intimacy that doesn't feel specifically sexual. No, I didn't get any sexual gratification from it. It felt safe. It felt very relaxing. Peaceful. Admittedly, the days leading up to it were very hectic, but I feel that's also just New York in general.

Which is interesting that you've brought up how small town pups vocalize the idea or need to have a handler. That brings to question, what does a handler do? Why have a handler? Like you've described, you don't really

have a handler, you don't particularly care to have one. You operate as a handler-type person, not quite explicitly a handler as such. How is this necessarily different from a normal Dom?

ZK:

It's not just the small town pups. I can't say exactly, because I haven't had much experience with handlers. But from what I've gathered, it's the same allure, the same freedom, offered in submission. You don't have to worry about what to do, what to say, and some people crave that. Some people really enjoy being free from the burden of decision-making. Some people just really enjoy being dominated. It runs into any other BDSM thing where they enjoy this strong, dominant force bearing down on them. It's hot.

I will also say I recently interviewed this pack in Coney Island, where there's one master and has three puppies. It was interesting to see. I was there before he came home. They were cleaning and cooking, making sure the place looked how he wanted it, to make sure he'd be happy when he got home. While he is very domineering in a way, he's also extremely loving. It's a relationship that if you serve your master well, they return the favor in unconditional love. They give back. For however sort of aggressively dominant you want to be, you need to be equally giving and loving.

Some people really like that kind of relationship. The lines are a lot clearer. The simplicity of the interaction and the nature of it all are really appealing. It feeds the puppy fantasy. You have someone telling you to sit and stay, pat you on the back, and reaffirm you with unconditional praise, which feels really good!

I've definitely been in a place where your value system changes in a sudden. I'm always interested in where value systems are altered. What normally makes you happy; getting payed or getting an award gets translated into treats, behind-the-ears-scratches, and being told, "you're a good boy." And that's all you need at that time. You then accept those things as a new form of positive reinforcement.

PK:

Validation is incredibly important. I also wanted to talk to you about bringing in the camera to these spaces. What were reactions when you were on that

camping trip when you said, “Hey, I have a camera, I am a photographer, I am an artist.”

ZK:

It’s funny, puppies are kind of the perfect subject to interact with behind a camera. Puppies notoriously love attentions. It’s part of the whole fantasy. Part of being told you’re a good boy. I’ve talked to puppies before, and cautiously asked, “Can I take your picture?” They’re like, “duh, have you ever met a puppy who doesn’t like getting their pictures taken?” So that changed the way I approached that interaction.

It also helps that a lot of times people are sensitive having their identity being publicly associated with anything relating to BDSM because of work, school, or whatever. So many of the puppies have masks on. So they don’t care. They loosen up for the camera. It allows me to operate in a much freer space. I’m not worried about them worrying about their identity being revealed.

As far as that specific trip, I told them I had a camera. I didn’t announce, “hey guys, I’m going to take a picture.” I was photographing this cock-and-ball-torture scene on a bench, as someone’s getting flogged at this campsite. I kind of just went for it hoping that no one would care, which isn’t really the right way to do things. But it worked.

I spent the first day without the camera to get to know everyone. So that when I did have the camera, they were all very trusting. I try to keep everything very much above board. Afterwards, I went around asking permission if I could post these pics publicly. Some people did asked to be blurred out. I’m not here to fuck anyone over.

But the general reaction to the camera has been quite welcoming, which has been really amazing. If you meet a dog who doesn’t like getting praise and scratches, that’s a rarity. It was a kind of unexpected turn for me.

PK:

So tell us about the series. I know some of them are coming from Mid Atlantic Leather, MAL. What else is in there? I also remember seeing some people in furry suits, as their fursonas.

ZK:

About ten photographs right now. There will probably be a few more editions after this.

It’s the initial camping trip, when I started exploring things. Another part is coming from MAL(Mid Atlantic Leather) which is a yearly convention in Washington DC. It has a large pup community that attends. Eight years running, there’s been a puppy mosh, which is sort of dog park for human-puppies. There were a lot of puppies there that I met.

I went there to photograph the convention, thinking that VICE would be interested in the project, and they were. They funded the project, getting there, supplies, etc, which really helped. But I really tried to approach the project from an art mentality than a photojournalism mentality, which I think are interchangeable.

It’s funny that you bring up furies. Whenever you describe puppy play to someone who doesn’t know anything about it, they’ve probably heard of furies before. And they usually jump that. The answer is kind of but not exactly. Furies are a different community but there is a crossover in the mindset. It’s another animal roleplay community. There’s all different kinds of animals but it’s less removed from BDSM. They typically don’t have a master or handler. It’s outwardly less kink oriented. So there is crossover.

Sometimes there are these two furies that come to these nights at The Eagle who also came to MAL. I contacted one of them and we did a private portrait session with them here in the studio.

PK:

That’s the really beautiful portrait with the blue wolf.

ZK:

Martin Freehugs. He’s really open and intelligent in talking about. That community has its own set of regulations, systems, and etiquettes.

PK:

You’ve talked about approaching these projects with the art mentality than the photojournalism mentality. Keeping that in mind, what are some of the goals for this series? I know you’ve said that using the camera is a way of exploring and dissecting what’s going on in your own mind.

ZK:

Whenever I'm making work that is addressing my own ideas and immediate interests, I want it to also expand to a more global audience. It's really important to have work that can benefit not just about you, but other people. In this case, I'm hoping this work brings puppy play into the public eye and destigmatizes it. As with most things, stigma comes from a lack of knowledge and understanding.

It's also a place for me to honor these people and hold them up on a pedestal. They're beautiful and amazing. They're very brave. It's a place for me to show their beauty and their personal strengths. Ultimately, I want the work to talk about this community and to start a conversation. To speak to this hidden thing.

I'm still thinking about it.

