



Detail of *Made Into Being*, 2022

Felipe Baeza by Tavia Nyong'o

... that when I waked
I cried to dream again.
- Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Act 3, Scene 2)

Tucked away in the flat files of Felipe Baeza is a cache of beefcake photography. Once deemed illegal, and still not quite safe for work, these images of naked men, usually erect, come from the pages of publication with titles like *Honcho* and *Latin Inches*. The pictorials in this genre of printed matter — now mostly obsolete thanks to internet porn — sometimes included brief profiles, interview, or erotic fiction to accompany the photo spread. While everything about these stories were fabricated, beginning with the names of the pseudonymous sitters, they nonetheless drew their force from proximity to a series of photos that bore, in a series of striptease revelations, and from multiple angles, the bareassed truth.

When I first visited Baeza's studio, he was collaging this erotica, further abstracting and anonymizing these already anonymous brown bodies, these hunks "of uncertain origin." Strapped for cash, these men entered a photographer's studio under duress, to be sure, but not without a certain agency, an elan vital even, whose afterburn was the very premise of recontextualizing such images. Taught the visual language of gay pornography, their profit, like Shakespeare's Caliban, was to learn to curse in it. I feel that curse, that sting of complicity, whenever I succumb to the frenzy of their visible, as if at any moment my body could be exchanged with theirs, as in fact it always already has.

Baeza's other primary source in those years — caches of printed matter related to the classical civilizations of mesoAmerica — alert the viewer of these works that they have entered a scene of brown study. Brown study is a now archaic term which means a "moody daydream," a seeming stillness within which vibrant interior action is suffused.

The works on view in his latest exhibition, *Made Into Being*, are the fruits of that activity of brown study: patiently scraping, adding, cutting, painting, subtracting, and scraping again. In the work that gives the exhibit its title, *Made into Being*, a centaur made of ink, glitter, twine, graphite, acrylic, and cut paper beckons you into the fiery furnace from which his shadow is cast. His face is a thing of beauty, a stained-glass saint for a future religion in which we are queer, post-human, and once again wild. Here we are made witness to the history of the body as a palimpsest, flesh as the sum of all the violence we call genocide, colonization, mestizaje, and magic. There is no *sangre pura* in the materials list of the piece titled *A shadow that won't materialize*. There is only a flayed man whose nervous system splays out as above, so below, like roots and branches of a burning tree. There are no bones in the arms of the figured vomiting forth an ocean in the work titled *The fragile sky has terrified you your whole life: only two hands snaking up from the slate cobalt beach up to hold a red-gold star*.

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
(From Shakespeare, *The Tempest*)*

Perhaps Felipe Baeza's four-handed beast is not a centaur, however, as an eye trained to see the world always through the bestiary of European myth would have it. Perhaps this creature curses me in a tongue I have never spoken, but might yet learn. Perhaps I might learn the contours of his body, if I am willing also to be remade into being in the fiery baptism from which his torso has emerged.

The word hunk is not so far in meaning, we learn from Felipe Baeza's creatures, from monster. If the dictionary is to be believed, our contemporary hunka hunka burning love made the historical record in the World War II era, from sailor's cant. A hunk, that is, comes from English as she is broken on the waves and beaches of Oceania, of the Bermuda, where a hurricane washes up Spanish coins forged from plundered Inca gold. Like that treasure, our strapping lad of uncertain origin is cut off from his flock, fled or flogged to sea, his humpy muscles built up from a long labor as one of the floating lumpenproletariat as Herman Melville, or CLR James, might have named him. He is unsovereign, of course. But, like Caliban, he dreams of a queer time and place in which this island was his. His pose, left arm raised, looking over his left shoulder to a viewer gazing from his back, reminds me of a fanciful beefcake posture in a physique pictorial. But is also suggests Charles Wilson Peale's 1822 self-portrait, "The Artist in his Museum," in which the father of American painting depicts himself raising a curtain entrance into his cabinet of curiosities.

A Prospero to Baeza's Caliban, Peale's gesture of patriarchal invitation casts a spell over the wonders of the New World. Baeza's fabulous creature, his para-centaur, offers us a different, even more wondrous invitation. He dispels Prospero-Peale's trickery in order to work another magic of their own.