

My Barbarian: Camp Cats and Go-go Dancing

Louis Bury | Reviews | 27 January 2026



Three of Cats (Standelabra) (detail), 2025, steel structure, silk robes, papier-mâché masks and breastplate. Photo: David McGraw Jr. Courtesy the artists

At New York's Lubov, the quirky performance trio draw on Cartomantic tarot to respond to an ambient sense of polycrisis

My Barbarian's first New York solo exhibition since their 2021/22 Whitney Museum survey serves as a fitting follow-up to that midcareer milestone. The zany performance trio (Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade), known for class-conscious musical theatricalisations of sociopolitical concerns, here find themselves in a pensive mood. To help make sense of what the exhibition materials call 'a changing world shaped by unfettered mediation, environmental degradation and economic precarity', they've designed a suit of cat-themed tarot cards, with plans to complete three more in the future. Like all of My Barbarian's pastiches, their take on tarot – using stylised prints, a campy performance video and a minimalist costume stand – exaggerates the tendencies of a preexisting cultural form.

Cartomantic tarot, in which fate remains at the mercy of chance, constitutes a passive form for a group whose performances celebrate queer, leftist agency. Whereas much of My Barbarian's earlier work forthrightly address a particular historical crisis or figure – *Counterpublicity* (2014), for example, reenacts scenes from MTV's *The Real World* involving the late aids activist Pedro Zamora – *Cat Suit* gingerly responds to an ambient sense of polycrisis. Early in their characteristically seductive performance video *Nine of Cats* (all works but one 2025), projected in the gallery's back room, a brief tarot reading occurs. The narrator interprets the 'Three of Cats' card as registering "a feral sense of danger" caused by our

“violent time”. She then wonders, given the “endless open question of I don’t know what the hell is going to happen”, how might it remain possible to “play” and to “have fun”.

The second half proposes some answers. In one scene, six men and women wearing masks and silk robes pantomime a daisy chain of sex acts, as startling tambura music twangs. In another, a toned man, wearing only mask and thong, go-go dances to upbeat techno music as My Barbarian sings that the future has become the “invention” of profiteering corporations that “imagin[e] the worst possible outcome”. Both scenes affirm that bodily pleasures persist – with feline stealth, if necessary – despite bleak conditions; historically, this has often been the case for queer-coded pleasures.



My Barbarian at Lubov. Installation. Photo: David McGraw Jr. Courtesy the artists



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The 14 oversize tarot-card prints hanging in the main gallery propose their own answer to what the future might hold. The insouciant images—in one, wild cats nonchalantly feed on zebra carcasses beneath a bloodred sun (*Cat Suit 5: New Ideal*)—form a suit of Minor Arcana cards, which prophesy quotidian happenings. (Major Arcana cards, by contrast, prophesy dramatic changes.) *Cat Suit 11: Youth* likewise portrays what My Barbarian calls cats’ ‘independent, unbothered’ nature: a lone cat stands unharmed on a city street whose buildings are all on fire. Other cards depict nonhuman beings engaged in sensual pleasures, such as a daisy chain of fornicating cats (*Cat Suit 6: Emotional Life*), or two humanoid robots lounging on a spaceship, one giving the other a foot rub as an impassive cat observes them (*Cat Suit 12: Adult*). These characters appear alien not because of their bodies but on account of their dispassionate reactions to fate’s ups and downs.

My Barbarian’s art has long been partisan, dramatic and deeply felt—the opposite of dispassionate. Yet *Cat Suit* and its tarot conceit elicit a surprising connection between aloofness and theatricality: in their own ways, both betray feelings of psychological and physical vulnerability. Camp can serve as an affirmation of queer culture, a playful way to thumb one’s nose at hidebound attitudes towards things like furry cosplay, but it also, in its archness, can serve as a defence mechanism. Nobody knows what the future holds, but *Cat Suit* suggests that right now so much seems so uncertain that even pleasure feels more fraught than it should.

My Barbarian: *Cat Suit*, at Lubov, New York, through 31 January.

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