



The term 'Furry' describes an anthropomorphic animal; a fictional character rendered in pencil, paint, ink or pixels by an amateur (unlike the professionally executed anthropomorphic animal characters that might populate a Walt Disney film, for instance). The term 'Furry' or 'Fur' also describes the amateur, and assumes their participation in a large network of amateurs, all of whom primarily interact with one another using their anthropomorphic avatars.

The 'Furry Fandom' is a multi-faceted and ill-defined online community. Though the fandom collectively utilizes every interactive tool at its disposal, from serial comics to MMRPGs like Second Life, its main output takes the form of fan-art - an endless swamp of paintings, drawings and computer-generated imagery. Furry fan-art is often overtly sexual, and it's this aspect that outside parties have historically focused on. What might well have been the Fandom's most public exposure in popular culture came with a CSI episode named *Fur and Loathing*. A pack of depraved fur-suiters suffocate under multiple layers of synthetic fibres, literally rutting one other to death. In reality many Furies logically, obviously, carry the avatar's adoption of animal characteristics through to their cyber-sex lives.

*Ultimately the reputation is not entirely un-deserved. There is a large amount of erotic furry artwork and fiction. But if you look into other sub-cultures it exists there as well. It just so happens that our brand of sexuality is easier to poke fun and prompt the feeling of self-satisfaction and superiority that will make the reader feel good about themselves for a day or two.*

Self-satisfaction and superiority aside, the proclivities depicted characters through these avatars (including anthropomorphic orgies, incest and hermaphrodites) more often than not appears startling and bizarre to the casual observer. In December 2006 Xymphora held an exhibition in Leeds that used a furry image on its poster; Xymphora's Paul Smith presented furry-related work, a giant fox's tail swinging back and forth across a queasy patchwork quilt of low resolution fox characters. The poster drew the attention of a local fur contingent. Avon the Deer:

*It was a weird feeling to see that poster in Headingley [Leeds]. It certainly prompted a double-take. I suppose I have always viewed "the real world", and the fantasy of on-line roleplay, art and fiction to be separate entities, to be kept in separate boxes. When those two entities DO meet it usually only in the guise of a convention and or social gathering of other furs. To your fantasy world leak into the real world becomes something of a surreal shock. It also prompts the worry that your "little sub-culture" [Avon's quotation marks] has suddenly been noticed. I felt excited at the possibility of an exhibition of furry art in my hometown of all places, and yet at the same time exposed.*

The furry fandom's status as a fetish, or fetishistic, can seem difficult to comprehend beyond "a thinly veiled excuse for an on-line brothel". The casual observer looks for a physical gratification to which they assume the fandom's minutiae serves as a precursor - foreplay. Hence CSI's revellers and their gruesome demise. Why do we so enjoy seeing those with unsavoury desires caught or killed with their pants down? Paul Smith states that his work "seeks to evoke the blocks and divergent pathways of desire occupied by the fetish: not utilizing such energy but delineating its restrictions". And, besides:

*We are generally an unconstrained lot sexually. But this is the not our entire reason for being. It is part of who we are, but not the only part. As a result I worry that it might attract the wrong sort of person. The social aspect of the fandom is about forming friendships based on common interest.*

Xymphora's relationship with this source material is fraught. Whilst I believe there are parallels to be revealed between our methods of production and those of Furies art, we are nonetheless prone to accusations of patronizing the Furies community, or even mocking it. In this climate we are called upon to justify the very act of making art about a subculture like the Furies, not only the relative values of specific works.

We don't inform, despite the obscurity of our topic. Perhaps because "an interview and scientific analysis of a weird grouping of individuals with a bad case of species dysmorphia will not interest many of the short attention spanned Big Brother generation... there has to be some form of red hot story in there somewhere". We assume, on the part of the viewer, an interest in, a repulsion from, or at the very least a basic understanding of, the Furies phenomenon. Likewise, Furies fan-art assumes a receptive audience. These amateurish, cloying portraits and tableaux of anthropomorphic characters are produced by and for the Furies community at the exclusion of anyone else. The two distinct roles of the producer and the consumer are collapsed into that of the participant. The Furies are fans of themselves and each other.

Any artist making work about a subculture faces a double bind, especially when the artist's efforts are realized in a similar medium. It would be assumed that Paul Smith or Xymphora were trying to say something about the subculture through the work, even if our ethics or integrity in doing so were questioned or criticized. Our respective roles - Xymphora as artist, furies as subject matter - would be not only accepted but encouraged, a sacred birth-rite. Despite this, both the artist and his peers seek a degree of authenticity from the work, an authenticity as defined on his subject's terms. Those who genuinely belong to the subculture, those whose integrity and motivation is beyond reproach, begin to appear to the artist as phantoms both seductive and frightful. In his nightmares there is something awkward and hopeless about his presence amongst them - their naturalness haunts him, their comrades a persistent and malicious taunt.

*...we all have one thing in common and this common bond unites us with a real feeling of belonging. Its a wonderful and comforting feeling. I think the world would be a better place if more people felt it.*

The artist needs some form of acceptance from his subject. This doesn't have to be a general acceptance, in fact he probably doesn't want an acceptance that's too general. He would rather be held aloft, or hold aloft a refracting lens through which others who do not belong can see. His acceptance can be take the form of mere recognition - recognition of the purity of his intent, from those whose own will not be questioned.

I see my on line character as a digital projection of myself. I behave the same whether on-line or off-line. Except on line I have fur, hooves and antlers. :) I feel that the red deer, which I have always loved for its handsome grace and noble presence, represents how I see myself. Gentle, and yet strong when needed. Noble and yet in touch with the needs of others. Courageous, and yet not foolhardy. I like to think I live up to those qualities. Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. I don't beat myself up over that, though. It does [well] to remember that no matter how deeply you get involved in the fantasy, the reality is that we're all human. With all the faults that come with that.