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## ANIMAL PERSONA

Contemporary artist Nayland Blake works across media, often using toys and stuffed animals to explore gender and sexual identity through childhood memories and play. One example is *Gnomes*, their life-sized, bison-bear suit, which represents their animal persona, and has changing gender identities. In 2017-18, Blake performed as *Gnomes* in the New Museum exhibition “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon.” Carrying a basket of ribbons, they invited visitors to take a ribbon, tell it a secret, and attach it to them.

“Each of the works in the show uses toys and stuffed animals to talk about the ways that we construct images and identities for ourselves through play and through inhabiting objects... The performance and piece, “Crossing Object” is me performing almost as a literal stuffed animal... by the end of the show *Gnomes*, the character that I will be portraying will be the bearer of multiple secrets from the people who visited over the course of the show.”

**– Nayland Blake, Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon**

To learn more about Blake’s examination of identity through play, you can **listen** to them speak or **watch them** in a New Museum performance (which starts at 18:46).

### KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- **identity:** the way we define and think about ourselves, including characteristics, beliefs, personality, and physical traits
- **persona:** a character or role one creates or adopts
- **performance:** the act of presenting a speech, play, concert, or other form of entertainment or public engagement
- **gender identity:** One's own sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither – how individuals perceive their gender. While gender has often been thought of as binary (only two categories, either male or female, boy or girl, decided at birth by others), many people experience a range of gender identities and expressions beyond physical categories and expectations of others. Some people, including artist Nayland Blake, use they/them pronouns to express their non-binary gender identity, while others use she/her or he/him, amongst other pronouns, or multiple pronouns.





### START WITH ART: NAYLAND BLAKE

- How does *Gnomen* compare to stuffed animals, toys, or costumed characters you've seen?
- The artist says *Gnomen* is a bison-bear. Do you see the traits of a bison and a bear?
- What personality traits do you think *Gnomen* has?
- How do you think it would feel to wear the *Gnomen* costume and perform?

How can Blake's exploration of **gender** through **performance** and play inspire us to experiment with our **identity**?

## LOOK AROUND

- Do you have dolls and stuffed animals, and if so, do you think they have a gender? If so, why do you think so? Did you decide, or did someone tell you? Is it possible that our ideas of gender can change, or be uncertain?
- Do you feel free to play, dress, and experiment with gender? Or are there things people say either boys do, or girls do, or that explain why you do certain activities? If so, do you agree, or disagree? Are there animals you identify with, either pets, stuffed animals, or animals you've learned about?
- What traits do you share with these animals? Are there traits from more than one animal that you identify with?

## MAKE ART

Let's create an animal persona through a mask or costume we can play in.

### Materials

- Drawing or plain paper
- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- Stapler
- Pencils and drawing media (markers, crayons, colored pencils)
- Yarn, thread or string
- Optional: beads, buttons, ribbons and other decorations

### Making

1. Start by identifying one or several animals to represent you, and make a sketch of yourself as the animal(s). Is there a new creature, like Gnomes, you might imagine?
2. Once you have a sketch you're happy with, redraw the animal's face large enough to cover your face. Then, cut out the drawing and attach yarn on the left and right sides to tie it behind your head and wear as a mask.
3. Draw and cut out hands and feet, and use yarn to tie these to your wrists and ankles.
4. Think about how you can add details and textures to the face, feet and hands. For instance, if your animal has hair or fur, consider attaching short pieces of yarn to look like fur. If you have beads, buttons, or other decorations, you can add these, giving clues to your animal's personality traits.
5. Experiment with how it feels to play in your costume.

## REFLECTION

- How did it feel playing in your costume?

- Did your voice change? Did your movements change?
- Did you imagine your character as having a gender? If so did it change, or stay the same?
- How might you perform in your costume for friends or family? You might consider adding an interactive component. Nayland Blake invited museum-goers to tell ribbons secrets to attach to *Gnomes*. How can your costume interact with your audience?

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**NEW**  
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**MUSEUM**

**IMAGES:** Performance: "Nayland Blake: Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)," New Museum, New York, September 26, 2017.  
"Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon." Photos: Scott Rudd.

**Our mailing address is:**  
New Museum  
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