

The Tragedies and Triumphs of American Athletes of Color

by Tara Sheena on April 21, 2016



Robert Longo, "Full-scale Study for Five Rams (Ferguson: Hands Up: November 30, 2014)" (2015), charcoal on archival pigment print (all images courtesy Fort Gansevoort Gallery unless otherwise noted)

At Fort Gansevoort Gallery, there is a new art exhibition with titular claim to the annual Division 1 men's college basketball tournament. As someone who grew up in a household of sports fanatics, later attended a Big 10 school, and whose experience of the early spring months have forever been marked by the combination of "March" and "Madness," I found *March Madness* equal parts intriguing and vexing. Curated by artist and activist Hank Willis Thomas and gallerist and art adviser Adam Shopkorn, the show uses sports as a quietly looming reference — more a small floating constellation than the exhibition's North Star — to brazenly reveal the intersections of art, sports, money, and race in the US.

On a recent weekday afternoon, I had all three floors containing 44 works by 28 artists to myself. One of the first works to greet me at the top of the stairs was Willis Thomas's "And One," a striking print depicting two faceless African American males frozen in a jump shot toward a "hoop," which is, in this case, a noose. The black male body is portrayed in a way that is familiar to most Americans who are flooded with the constant consumption of professional sports, the commodification of athletes, Nike ads, Gatorade commercials, and the tremendous sight of an athletic, toned body. Closer to a sports apparel advertisement than a printed artwork, "And One" sets up many of the driving questions provoked by the exhibition. Namely, in light of the current platforms for trans-generational dialogue on racial injustice and the national conversation they have sparked, how do we address the commodification of black and brown bodies that are an ever-present part of our country's history?

March Madness portrays the many facets of sports, from the quiet preparation of an athlete (Gordon Parks's "Untitled, London, England") to scenes from the locker room (Raymond Pettibon's "No Title (Visitors locker room...") to the actual production of filming a professional game (Paul Pfeiffer's "Four

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Horsemen of the Apocalypse”), but the surrounding celebrity and sensationalism cannot be ignored. Pamela Council’s “Ray Lewis Needs Love” offers the starkest example, a clear depiction on how the farce of celebrity can frame, literally and figuratively, the public actions and opinions of professional athletes. This print, showing a discouraged visage of the famed Baltimore Ravens linebacker being grabbed at by dirty, glittery, purple-painted fingers, was created by the artist more than a decade after the player’s questionable involvement with a double murder. Council’s work sheds light on the tragedy of the black male athlete while also displaying public admiration and questioning the ownership of an athlete, celebrity, or public figure. Everyone seems to want a piece of Lewis; he is seized without any agency to act out.

Other works carve out a space for activism and defiance, as in works by Robert Longo and Emory Douglas. Longo’s “Full-scale Study for Five Rams (Ferguson, Hands Up: November 30, 2014)” shows the football players in the all-too-familiar “hands up” stance, used largely by the Black Lives Matter movement and spurred by the 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The image is striking; the charcoal-on-digital-pigment print enhances the haunting cinema of this real-life moment. A symbol of a growing activist movement, the players’ stance and Longo’s rendering of it offer a heartening display of how the power afforded to these athletes has the potential to carry inspiration and promise to the many who seek spectatorship as a form of edification, not just entertainment. It immediately struck me to think of how many young black and brown boys may have tuned into a Monday night football game to see this moment splashed across their screens.

Douglas’s 1972 work “Olympics” finds the “hands up” gesture in a different context: triumph. A thickly outlined, cartoonish comic strip shows the image of a dark-skinned athlete holding his arms up while on top of the winner’s podium, in front of two white police officers who appear in the next frame. The chilling display uses wit and bite to show the fine line between overcoming obstacles and achieving success. Douglas’s work, like many in the exhibition, is not concerned with a highly detailed portrayal of the human form; no facial details are outlined and the bodies are left within this featureless void which makes the work all the more disconcerting. This black everyman carries the weight of his accomplishments for an entire generation of black athletes, as Douglas’s graphic print also sheds light on a potent historical moment from which the work sprung: It was created a few years after the contentious display by American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who raised their fists in the manner of the Black Power salute during a medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games. Douglas, as with many of the artists in this exhibition, continues these past conversations and makes known their historical resonance.

A number of artists also grapple with the impact of sports on cultural identity by re-appropriating game equipment. Cheryl Pope’s banners, reminiscent of those that would hang in your high school gymnasium, are strewn throughout the three floors and labeled with all-caps statements like, “WHY DID HE DO IT” and “KNOW WHAT NOT TO SAY KNOW WHAT NOT TO DO.” These are the kinds of banners that traditionally commemorate a championship team or display the emblems of school spirit. Pope adopts these same tools of nostalgia and fandom to effectively showcase an interesting duality of the exhibition: the tension between sports’ distinct ability to distract from prejudice and inequity while simultaneously being the very motor for their enactment. Similarly, Charles McGill’s “Trophy” is a golf bag pasted with a slew of connotative iconography: everything from images of 1940s pin-up girls to actors in blackface to scenes from porn films. It makes for a disorienting take on how race, sex, and class intersect on the golf bag, both itself a tool for carrying these histories and a symbol that can point more explicitly to the inequalities of labor and slavery (golf caddies). Jeffrey Gibson brings in a parallel history of marginalized people, acknowledging his Cherokee Indian background by delicately lining a punching bag with bright streamers whose beading and studding are inspired by Native American craft motifs. What results is a beautifully

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abstracted art object, one that uses the forms of a conventional punching bag while not necessarily being representative of one.



Cheryl Pope, "WHY DID HE DO IT" (2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The last works I saw on my way out were Sadie Barnette's "Untitled (Brother Soldier)" and "Untitled (Flower Lady)," which employ a newsprint form used to place bets and commonly found at horse-racing competitions. The works brought to mind how gallery rosters are sometimes referred to as stables, and how the treatment of artists, like race horses, often removes them (or, at least, their well-being) from the equation altogether. Value rests on what they can produce and how fast, rather than what they are saying and why. It's a different kind of competition, a different type of race, but madness all the same.

There is a certain disquieting synergy between the world of art and that of sports. The commodification of bodies, personalities, labor, and all of the imbalanced power dynamics reside in both worlds. Money is available to the few in power at the top, but labor falls on athletes (and artists) to give the sport its resonance, cache, and a pretty (or, at least, distinct) face. And, the work that results is seen only as valuable as the awards, trophies, or money it's able to garner.

March Madness goes far past the world of professional athletes to tug and pull at the corners of our respective markets, all the while revealing how these athletes — individuals in possession of great talent and discipline — claim their platforms to both sharpen and subvert our collective knowledge on race and class struggles.

March Madness continues at Fort Gansevoort Gallery (5 Ninth Ave, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through May 1.

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