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What Does It Mean to Be a Woman in Sports?

By **Dayna Evans**
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Ashley Teamer, *Star Time*. Photo: Ashley Teamer

Council reflects on Florence Joyner's dominance and style, Renee Cox's racism-fighting superhero alter ego, Raje, stares steely-eyed back at the viewer, Alison Saar's faceless women spar with each other while connected by their hair. Several of the pieces engage with both racial oppression and gender inequality simultaneously, and the entire show confronts both the power

Outside [Fort Gansevoort](#), an inconspicuous Greek Revival townhouse in Greenwich Village, a sign advertises "March Madness" in a familiar marquee style — but through the gallery doors, you won't find a TV with any NCAA games on. Instead, you'll be treated to something a touch more interesting — and you won't risk losing any cash from that overzealous bet you manage to make every year.

The gallery, which opened almost two years ago, is exhibiting the second edition of its "March Madness" showcase, a multi-artist exhibit that pays tribute to the culture of sport, with a different theme every year. Last year's was [political protest](#), featuring work by Robert Longo, Cheryl Pope, and other pieces that addressed racism in sports. This time around, in an equally deliberate and timely show, March Madness is comprised of works by 31 female artists, all who capture thoughts on female athleticism, fandom, or the often undocumented and undervalued contributions women have made to America's biggest pastime.

The exhibit is a joy — and not just for sports fans (though it occasionally helps in some cases to have context). Mixed-media artist Pamela

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representation can have, and the damage it can do when it's lacking. As Deborah Roberts told me about her work, *Fight the Power*, "History is the present. We're still fighting the same battles that we thought were in the past."

This is never more obvious than in the confrontational works of Gina Adams, whose grandfather attended the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, one of the first Native American–assimilation boarding schools in the country. In two pieces that hang over the gallery's front desk, women basketball players who attended assimilation schools in Oklahoma pose in defiant team portraits. By decorating vibrantly around the historical photographs, Adams pays tribute to both these women's legacies and their strength.

"They had teams that would travel to play other boarding schools, and when they played the white teams, the women couldn't use the bathrooms or stay in the motels," she told me. "They would sleep on their bus, but their bus driver would be allowed to get dinner in town."

Ashley Teamer, who makes energetic collages from WNBA trading cards, works with the same goal in mind. "I wanted to bring these women to the level of [superhero-ness that they are](#), the way we do with male athletes."



Pamela Council, *Flo Jo World Record Nails*. Photo: Thelma Garcia/©ThelmaGarcia2017

The centerpiece of the show is Pamela Council's *Flo Jo World Record Nails*, a sculpture Council constructed in 2012 from more than 2,000 hand-painted acrylic nails, just like the ones FloJo herself

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wore to the Seoul Olympics, where she subsequently became the fastest woman in history. (Joyner died in 1998, but her record is still unbeaten.)

“FloJo was one of the women in my childhood who I remember being super powerful, really beautiful, and who had this sense of self-efficacy. She could keep improving herself, in every way,” Council told me. “She was an artist. She did her own nails. She designed her own uniforms.” Much of the show’s works embody this impossible strength and power: strength in the face of denial, power in spite of resistance.

We’ll likely never see another Florence Joyner in our lifetime, but with female artists like Council paying tribute to her and her contemporaries, she’s sure going to be hard to forget.