

'ACE' exhibit at University at Albany art museum

Patrick Tine July 25, 2019



Hank Willis Thomas, Opportunity, 2015, Fiberglass, chameleon auto paint finish, Edition 3 of 3, 1 AP. (Photo: Gil Gentile; Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Most of the work on display in "ACE: art on sports, promise, and selfhood" at the University Art Museum at the University at Albany would be out of place in a sports bar, Nike store or any approximation of a "man cave." And thank God for that. Running through Dec. 7, "ACE" could not have come at a better time. There are encouraging signs that the American public might finally be willing to embrace a far broader definition of who our sports heroes can be. As of this writing, the most popular athlete in America right now is a voluble lesbian soccer player with purple hair and we are better for it. Likewise, perhaps the American public might be willing to expand its horizons on what art centered on sports can look like. The nation, I suspect, has reached its carrying capacity for maudlin oils of yesteryear's superstars. We can go further than LeRoy Nieman and his imitators. The paintings, sculptures and visual installations on offer here are not only proof that we can but that the results can be trenchant, spellbinding and occasionally spectacular.

After passing through the entrance and Juni Figueroa's installation "Tropical readymade landscape," a collection of soccer balls and cleats that have sprouted leaves and which reads as a tribute to the organic nature of the game at its most simple and spontaneous, we come to four pieces by Ecuadorian-American artist Ronny Quevedo in the the main gallery. The largest and most impressive is "La Gran Patria," an imposing 10-by-17-foot wall onto which the abstracted lines of a basketball court have been laid in in yellows, grays and blues. It's arresting on its own but with just a tiny bit of knowledge about Quevedo's recurring themes about the pre-Columbian Americas, you can be forgiven if you begin to see some rudimentary Nazca lines on the hardwood. His three other pieces stretch the purview of the show more than any other on display. They are baffling and they are wonderful. One piece, which appears to be a bird's-eye view of a track with indigenous motifs, is named in honor of Atahualpa. I won't insult you or the artist by claiming to understand it, but when we get to a place where a show ostensibly centered around sports has a piece affirming the slain last king of the Incas, we know we are somewhere bracing, new and cool.

Not far from Quevedo's pieces are two more contemplations of soccer from a fellow Latin American artist, the Guatemala-born Darío Escobar. There is not a trace of Figueroa's optimism to be found in these. By all accounts, Escobar sees the game as a blood-soaked warren of bigotry and international corruption. "Obverse & Reverse (Cloud XI)," a carbuncle of grayed-out soccer balls with trailing string like a weeping willow hangs from the ceiling. In front of it, a bloody Real Madrid jersey entitled "Ecce Homo" hangs on the wall behind Plexiglas. You could do worse for compelling visual metaphors of the violent machismo, racism and oceanic graft that makes the international game resemble a criminal syndicate at times.

It is in its video installations that "ACE" really shines. The pieces on display represent some of the best and most interesting video work at the University Art Museum in recent memory. The centerpiece is unquestionably Sondra Perry's "IT'S IN THE GAME '17," a 16-minute exploration of who owns black bodies and indigenous cultural patrimony. It is mesmerizing. The film centers on Perry's brother, a former Georgia Southern University basketball player who, like thousands of other collegiate basketball and football players, had his likeness used without permission or compensation in a series of highly popular and high grossing sports video games.

Perry tells this story with such aplomb. It's about the money, of course, but it's also about a greater theft. Her brother and his teammates – real men of flesh and blood – have been callously reduced to fungible, pixelated gaming units. From there it's off to the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, repositories of a different type of theft. The connection through the centuries becomes clear without being obvious. This is all done with a bold visual style, using the game itself as well as alienating superimpositions and distorted music. A feature-length version of this would be audacious and spellbinding cinema.

Paul Pfeiffer has some fun with "Caryatid," a three-monitor, primary color meditation on flopping that will, if time allows, eventually elicit peels of laughter if slapstick is even remotely your thing. On the back wall of the first-floor gallery is the show's most serene piece, Ari Marcopoulos's "The Park." It's 58 minutes of kids on a public basketball court; coming and going, shooting and missing. It's all set to an improvised jazz soundtrack by Jason Moran that has the syncopated rhythms of a shootaround. It's blissful.

Then there is the best sculpture in the show, Baseera Khan's "BRAIDRAGE." It looks like a health club rock-wall but the hand and footholds are made up of 99 resin casts of the corners of her body. It's not beautiful in any traditional aesthetic sense but "BRAIDRAGE" sits at the perfect meeting place of creativity, execution and vulnerability that signal truly daring and exceptional high art. And there's more. On Oct. 22, Khan will be in the gallery and will scale the wall. The World Series is supposed to start that night, too. Make it a doubleheader.