

Looking at Sports as Powerful Modes of Expression

Fifteen artists offer a range of ways into “sports” as a concept.

by Christopher Marcisz August 19, 2019



Foreground: Hank Willis Thomas, "Opportunity" (2015), fiberglass, chameleon auto paint finish (courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery). Background: Ronny Quevedo, "La Gran Patria (for Alberto Spencer)" (2019), vinyl, 2-panels, 10 x 15 feet each (courtesy the artist)

ALBANY, New York — More than a few associations come to mind with Kevin Beasley's "Rose" (2017). The installation includes several copies of NBA player Derrick Rose's New York Knicks jersey set in resin, appearing as if game-used and sweat-soaked, mounted on ridged foam board that creates a rippling effect. There is his name, which recalls the prized flower as well as the motion of rising above, as well as the specifics of Rose's story: a prodigiously talented young athlete, his promising career was hindered by unfortunate injuries and bad decisions. And, considering his single disappointing year with the Knicks, the artwork also calls to mind clearance racks at sports store, a reminder of how sports can commodify and dispose of so much youth and talent.

Sports" as a concept is an ethnographic wonderland, a nexus of commerce, spectacle, and relationships both personal and social. An exhibition at the University Art Museum at the University at Albany/SUNY offers a range of ways into it through the works of 15 artists. Each work in ACE: Art on Sports, Promise, and Selfhood considers the cultures of sport and physical fitness as not just games and entertainment, but modes of expression that encompass striving toward goals, hard work, and clear — if often unfair — terms of success and failure.

The representation of race and identity in sports is explored throughout the show. Sondra Perry's video "IT'S IN THE GAME '17 or Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projeccion" (2017) examines the experience of her brother, who played basketball for Georgia Southern University and had his name and likeness sold for use in a video game without his consent. At one point her brother scrolls through the video game roster and fleshes out details about his teammates, including the ones only listed by their number. In this way the video reflects on the incompleteness of the representation, and how Black bodies have been collected and catalogued by the business of American sports. At one point Perry and her brother visit both the African and Oceanic art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and she contrasts videos of him shooting hoops with the audio guide's details about works of art and their acquisitions.

The politics of representation and identity in the commercial sports industry are clear in Baseera Khan's "Nike ID #2" (2018), in which she presents some customized Nike sneakers embroidered with an assertion of her Muslim identity, arranged over several shoes because the online ordering system wouldn't allow her to insert the words on a single shoe. For "Braidrage" (2017-2019), the artist brings identity into conversation with struggle and overcoming; the work is a rock-climbing wall created with handholds molded in resin from her own body. (She will climb it as part of a performance on October 22.)

Struggle and overcoming are also themes in Hank Willis Thomas's "Overtime" (2011) and "Opportunity" (2011). The former is a high-contrast video of Black men playing basketball, intercut with images of a noose — it questions the relationship between images of Black men in triumph on the court and painful portrayals of lynching and violence. The latter, a sculpture installed nearby, captures the moment a hand reaches out for a football, when it is still unclear if the ball has been caught or dropped.

In the museum lobby is "Tropical readymade landscape" (2019) by Radamés "Juni" Figueroa, in which sport equipment like balls, sneakers, and bags are turned into plant pots to "tropicalize" the space, commenting in the capacity of sports to enter and reshape other spaces. Nearby, a set of site-specific wall drawings by Ronny Quevedo transposes playing field boundaries on part of the gallery, while soccer balls turned inside out by Darío Escobar hang from the ceiling.

Many of the works celebrate what sports can create. Ashley Teamer's irregularly sized, explosively colored and composed paintings, inspired by the college basketball team her grandmother coached for many years, focus on the energy of women athletes and the range of women involved in sports. Ari Marcopoulos's 58-minute *Im The Park* (2018), about two New York basketball courts where players come and go, and pedestrians rush past on their way to work or linger with their friends, presents the joy of motion itself. While it appears spontaneous, set to an improvised score by Jason Moran, in fact the *Im*'s hypnotic activity is largely choreographed. Similarly, Petra Cortright's "football/faerie" (2009), in which the former soccer player juggles a ball while a bright neon halo hovers over her body, highlights the challenge of these movements.

In an interview, Corinna Ripps Schaming, who curated the show with Olga Dekalo, described ACE as an effort to start a conversation around how sports and the arts fit together on a college campus, how each grapples with "reach, aspiration, and failure." A university campus like UAlbany, where high-level athletes and aspiring artists often share the same space, has a unique opportunity to explore what it means to say it's never only a game.