

SPECTATOR SPORTS

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Roderick Buchanan
Ewan Gibbs
Jack Goldstein
Michelle Grabner
Julie Henry
Brett Kashmere
Vesna Pavlović
Paul Pfeiffer
Susken Rosenthal
Katja Stuke
Charlie White



Julie Henry *You'll Never Walk Alone*, 1999
Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist.



Brett Kashmere *Anything But Us Is Who We Are*, 2012
Burned basketball jersey, video game console, video game, and video, courtesy of the artist

The experience of watching elite sports

is inherently sensuous. Spectators of athletes in action see more than movement; they witness the intensity and calculation of artful athletic maneuver. Sports fans become emotionally invested in the talent and mystique of their chosen sports stars and teams. As author David Foster Wallace observed, “Great athletes seem to catalyze our awareness of how glorious it is to touch and perceive, move through space, interact with matter.”¹ Millions of fans fill stadiums and gape at television screens to watch top athletes perform, seeking an experience that they find wholly moving. The calculated play of Roger Federer, the precision of Nastia Liukin, Michael Jordan’s hang time, Zinedine Zidane’s cool, calculated play, and Tom Brady’s spiral are legendary because they are nearly inconceivable. Athletic greatness often sounds hyperbolic

when described; you have to see it to understand it.

More than ever before, we view athletic competition through mass media, which means that much of what spectators know of sports is encountered through two-dimensional representations that are imagined as three-dimensional space. Whether using television, smart phones, technological devices, or print media, fans are now an omnivorous audience, often taking in competition, as well as highlights, stats, and follow-up stories from multiple formats that remain detached from firsthand experience. Through these mediated forms, the real bodies of athletes are turned into storylines and representations that fans simultaneously empathize with and consume.

Spectator Sports explores the relationship between athlete and

spectator with a particular focus on the spectator’s perspective. Each artist whose work is included in the exhibition demonstrates an interest in the unique and deeply engaging combination of drama, spontaneity, and spectacle that distinguishes sports from most other forms of popular entertainment. In diverse ways, the artists examine how spectators align their identity with a protagonist or team and take in the twists of fate, spikes of excitement, and human feats that unfold moment by moment in sport. Some artists also consider photography and video as mediums that abstract our sense of space, time, and the human body even as photographic imagery causes us to feel closer to the real. Ultimately, the exhibition pivots on the sensation that we are directly involved with the athletes and teams that we root for—and we are thus connected to their rise and fall. The works included investigate how and

why fans form rituals, allegiances, and communities centered on the performance of athletes that they do not personally know and sporting events that they cannot directly influence or control, and they enable us to probe the pleasures and disappointments associated with such affiliations.

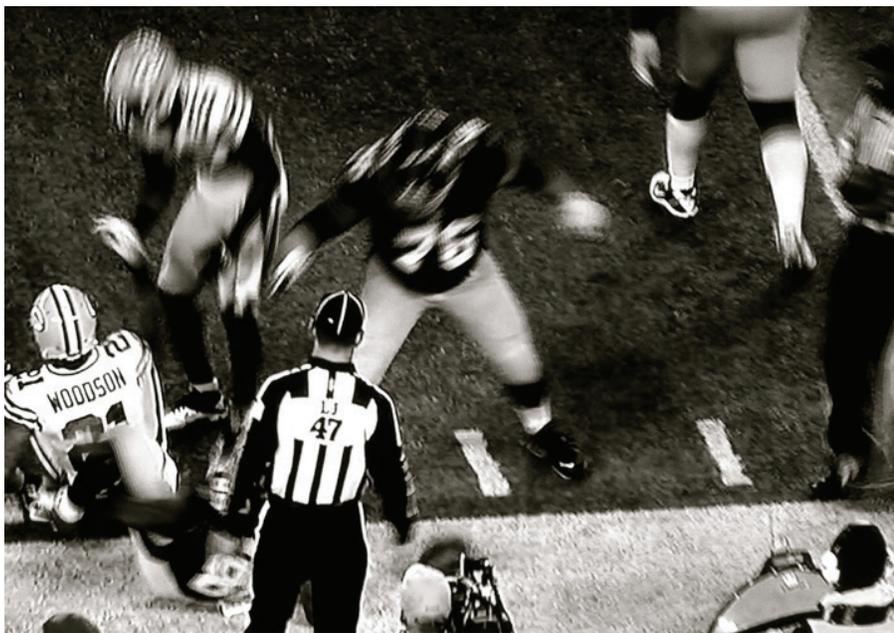
Using sports stars as symbols of personal and regional identity has perhaps never been a thornier endeavor for fans than it is now, in the age of the free agent. When homegrown megastar basketball player LeBron James left the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2010 to join the Miami Heat, jilted fans took to the streets, burning their

game is locked in perpetual practice mode, with James shuffling in place, clad in his Cavaliers jersey, awaiting commands from a game controller. Kashmere addresses the immersive environments that allow and encourage fans to feel that players are surrogates of themselves, while also addressing the speed with which virtual representations of players become outdated as they relocate to new teams based primarily on monetary and personal criteria, rather than loyalty to a given city or fan base.

Kashmere also contributes the film *Valery's Ankle* (2006), which examines sporting competition as an extension

East and West. Kashmere highlights the populace's approval of highly violent and at times unsportsmanlike behavior, particularly in games with as much perceived weight as the Summit Series matches, and considers what hockey, which is Canada's chief homegrown sport, might illuminate about the dreams and desires of the country's citizens.

Many of **Paul Pfeiffer's** (American, b. 1966) photographs and video works contemplate the spectacle of aggression in professional sports and its depiction through mass media. *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (After Francis Bacon) (2006) is a short, looped video clip showing basketball player Larry Johnson screaming in celebration after scoring. The condensed footage mutates the raw emotion of the athlete so he appears to be in agony rather than elation. Each frame has been digitally altered to remove background information and the player's team logo and jersey number, stripping away the markers that typically identify players. With this process, Pfeiffer considers the athlete less as an individual and more as an icon whose image symbolizes and reinforces existing paradigms of masculinity, race, and domination. Pfeiffer's process also reveals the extent to which the appearance of individuals can be manipulated on camera, and thereby alludes to the power of images to influence perception.



Michelle Grabner Untitled, 2012
Pigment print, courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

James jerseys and symbolically cutting ties with their former basketball darling. **Brett Kashmere** (Canadian, b. 1977) responds to the rejection and upheaval that many Ohioans felt in *Anything But Us Is Who We Are* (2012), an artwork that consists of a burned LeBron James Cavaliers jersey and a television screen displaying the video game NBA 2K10. The

of national identity and global politics. The film uses the 1972 Summit Series hockey matchup, which pitted Canada's ultra-aggressive team against the Soviets, known for their calculated, efficient playing style, as a departure point for considering the use of sporting matches during the Cold War as a proxy for indirect combat and ethnographic supremacy between

The notion that many popular American sports endorse hypercompetitive male aggression prompted the parents of artist Nancy Holt to forbid her from watching football when she was young because she was a girl. In the 1980s, Holt reflected on her childhood experiences by photographing her television during broadcast

football games in reaction to her parents' rule. The black-and-white pictures capture the raw physicality widely associated with football, but they also indicate the most frequent conveyor of these images—the TVs in our homes. *Spectator Sports* includes photographs by **Michelle Grabner** (American, b. 1962) that update and further consider Holt's project and the relationships among sports, aggression, gender, and technology. Grabner took these pictures with a cell phone in 2012. The device adds yet another layer of mediation through which we experience sports and nods to the increasing use of multiple technological devices as portals through which we can escape the mundane surroundings of our everyday lives. Grabner was born only a few years prior to the passage of the Title IX Equal Opportunity in Education Act, which ensures monetary balance across genders in collegiate athletics. In the artist's lifetime, gender issues have taken on many new dimensions, yet we see the extent to which gender continues to inform our approaches to watching professional sports—and the expectations we bring to the experience.

Katja Stuke (German, b. 1968) also confronts gender in televised athletics by photographing her television screen during broadcasts of the Olympic Games—with a focus on female gymnasts who are poised to execute routines on a world stage. By freezing the athletes at points of heightened anticipation and honing in on their facial expressions, the portraits capitalize on the charge of particular moments. At the same time, the pictures offer the opportunity for a studied examination of the athletes' faces, and bring attention to the hairstyles and makeup typically worn by female gymnasts. World-class women's gymnastics is notorious for

the extreme pressures it places on children and young women to reach exceptional levels of physical ability and mental toughness. Stuke's photographs equate those pressures with still another layer of expectation on the female gymnast—the existing ideals of youthful feminine grace and beauty that dominate image culture.

Still photography's ability to morph our understanding of live action is also at work in **Ewan Gibbs's** (British, b. 1973) drawings, which replicate photographs of pitchers frozen in elegant twists just seconds after they release the baseball. By interpreting a photographed instant through a labor-intensive drawing process, Gibbs crafts images that are at once contemplative and filled with anticipation. This dichotomy is echoed in his mark-making technique, which forms a pattern of dashes based on the markings found in crochet patterns. The suggestion of stitching relates the production of the drawings to a traditionally feminine craft that contrasts the all-male roster of professional baseball. **Jack Goldstein's** (Canadian, 1945–2003) 16mm projection *The Jump* (1978) reflects the impetus for its creation—the pleasure of watching perfected athletic performances on film. In the work, a female diver's body becomes shimmering points of light as her silhouette repeatedly tumbles into an invisible pool of water. The film accentuates the alluring grace of the woman's tightly controlled movements while also stressing the viewer's detachment from the original scene. **Roderick Buchanan's** (Scottish, b. 1965) *Peloton* (1999) similarly looks at the mediation of athletics that stream into our homes. In a video that runs over four hours he reduces television footage that aired during the Eurosport network's coverage of the 1999 Tour de France to include only

clips of the field of clustered cyclists know as the peloton. Aerial camera crews pan across the landscape, capturing a privileged view and turning the athletes' bodies into mesmerizing abstractions that mimic the contours of the French countryside.

Susken Rosenthal's (German, b.1956) drawings don't reflect anticipation so much as energy. She uses a pencil to map the movement of the soccer ball for the duration of a game. The suite of drawings included in *Spectator Sports* each represent a match from the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Together, the graphic illustrations reflect on ways records of sport can be analyzed through highly specific and reductive methods. Stripped of nearly all of the indicators that would allow fans to affiliate with one side or the other, she condenses and abstracts space and time while also highlighting recurring patterns within play. In contrast to Rosenthal, **Julie Henry** (British, b.1959) turns away from the action of a soccer field, focusing instead on a fan-filled stadium in her two-channel immersive video installation *Going Down* (1999). In footage that was captured at the conclusion of a match in England, one video presents the ecstatic fans of the winning team, while the other shows a deflated group who were rooting for the losing team. The installation taps the powerful emotions that vibrate through sporting arenas and other large-scale events, capturing the magnetic atmosphere that often arises in a crowd. **Vesna Pavlović** (Serbian, b. 1970) similarly turns her camera toward spectators, honing in on either one individual or a small group of basketball fans in moments of anticipation, boredom, disappointment, and elation. Pavlović took the pictures at both live events and in bars where people gather to watch sports on large



Charlie White *The Americans: US Gymnastics Team, 2005*
Chromogenic print, collection of Friedrich Loock Gallery, Berlin

television screens. The fans wear distinct expressions that hint at, but don't always outright disclose their surroundings.

Charlie White's (American, b. 1972) photograph *The Americans: US Gymnastics Team* (2005) also addresses our collective pride in exceptional

athletes. The work dramatizes the infamous image of gymnast Kerri Strug being carried to the medal podium by Coach Béla Károlyi after she executed a perfect vault with an injured ankle in the 1996 Olympic Games. Strug's triumph in the face of adversity engendered immense pride for Americans and has become an enduring symbol

of the nation's perceived virtues, which include perseverance and ascendancy. Károlyi's personal story—a former Romanian gymnastics coach touted as a symbol of the virtues of communism before he took political asylum in the United States—further amplified the compelling sense of American patriotism and its connection to human resolve. In White's photograph, the interplay of reality and fiction critically examines the shared hopes and imaginings of the American public that were projected onto these figures, and suggests ways citizens internalize and continuously revisit these stories through cultural narratives.

Important moments in the history of sport—Strug's inspiring achievement among them—take on mythic significance in the American psyche. Such displays of mental and physical prowess remain important in the narratives of our time because still and moving images captured them, allowing us to not only relive moments of greatness but also to extend them into experiences of our own.

Allison Grant, Assistant Curator

¹David Foster Wallace, "Federer As Religious Experience," *Play Magazine*, *The New York Times*, August 20, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com>