

HYPERALLERGIC

The Political Truths That Ground Our Athletic Heroes

by Seph Rodney on February 8, 2018



Melvin Edwards, "Goal Line Stance 2017" (2017) welded steel (all images courtesy Galerie Lelong)

Let's begin with a few anecdotes: Martellus Bennett, a National Football League player on the New England Patriots, claims that the NFL stands for "niggers for lease," arguing that management and league policies take advantage of players. During the past season's on-field protests (initiated by Colin Kaepernick) of the consistent and concerted violence leveled on black men by the state, the President of the United States parenthetically called the (mostly black) men who engaged in these demonstrations "sons of bitches."

During a meeting convened to develop a league-wide policy to deal with these on-field demonstrations, the owner of the Houston Texans, Robert McNair, warned his fellow owners, "We can't have the inmates running the prison."

These characterizations of the players stand in baffling contrast to the stories and images I've encountered most of life in the US, which always described these men as titans, as physical geniuses. Think of the footage of Odell Beckham Jr. flinging himself up toward a hurled football, curving backward like Orion's bow with one hand outstretched to pluck the ball out of the transfixed sky before returning to the earth. The black men who perform in the competitive spectacles of organized sports can be heroes or villains, lowlifes or celebrities — depending on their behavior, their political context, and the nature of their portrayal. Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist and sociologist, analyzed race as what he termed a "floating signifier" (a term that originated with the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss). Hall meant that a non-linguistic sign can mean a variety of things to different people. A nation's flag, for example, might read as imperialism, colonialism, unity, or security. Likewise, great athletes sometimes float unmoored to any particular signified meaning, until the political circumstances of their livelihoods bring them to the ground.

The exhibition *Sidelined*, curated by Samuel Levi Jones (who himself played football in college) at Galerie Lelong, makes us look at how these black men's bodies take on weight and are grounded in meaning through a range of significations. In the brightly colored acrylic, charcoal, and oil pastel image "Numbers" (2017) by Derek Fordjour, an athlete weighs himself in a room in which men in suits peruse information on sheets of paper. The celebratory palette of the work belies the stark distinctions levied by numerical values: weight, height, age, how fast one runs the 40-yard dash. Athletes' bodies are unceasingly measured and judged. Their statistics are cumulatively valued to help determine how much they are paid — typically by a class of men and women who wear suits.



Derek Fordjour, "Numbers" (2017) acrylic, charcoal, and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas

The show is replete with references to American football, demonstrating how rich an area of inquiry it can be (though there are also allusions to other sports). In David Huffman's "MERCY, MERCY ME" (2017) the tiny image of kneeling Colin Kaepernick, which is reduced to essentially a large, spherical black afro above a white jersey, is stamped all over the image's surface. Multiples of Kaepernick fill the frame to suggest that though he is still unemployed by an NFL team, he has, in a cleverly suggested play on words, "taken the field." Melvin Edwards, in his "Goal Line Stance" (2017) melds several meanings in his welded steel sculpture, which combines a football, a headless railroad spike, and a heavy, broken chain anchored to a steel plate. It proposes that football is indeed another form of labor that black bodies have long been bound to.

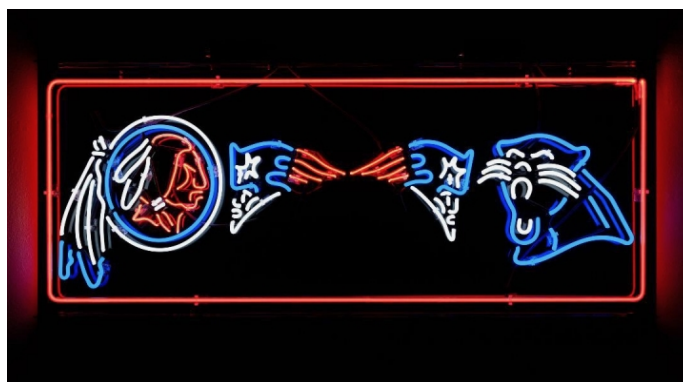


Installation view of *Sideline* at Galerie Lelong



Installation view of *Sideline* at Galerie Lelong

Patrick Martinez's "Multicultural vs. Western (CTE)" (2017) neon sign piece illuminates social hierarchies that are mirrored by hierarchies within the NFL. The New England Patriots team insignia occupies the center, while the logos for the Carolina Panthers (a black panther) and the Washington Redskins (a native American with feathers) are placed on the periphery — a very unsubtle indication of how whiteness occupies the center of the US American narrative of country and destiny, in which conquered peoples and fetishized people are made to seem exotic. (It is a kind of poetic rebuke that the Patriots, who have won five titles and played in more Super Bowls than any NFL franchise, and whose star quarterback and head coach are friends and supporters of the current president, lost to the underdog team a few days ago.)



Patrick Martinez, "Multicultural vs. Western (CTE)" (2017) neon on plexiglass

This is a significant, timely, and insightful show, and it demonstrates that Levi Jones and all the artists included recognize that the position of black athleticism to US culture is both fundamental and precarious. Organized sports may be one of the great achievements of the modern state: they provide a means of public release of frustration, and they model the achievements of a supposedly meritocratic society.

They also locate and inscribe a tribal identity that at times appears to transcend race and social class. But the awful truth is that it doesn't. And now I understand why audiences are so enraged by athletes taking a knee: because these men and women are our dreams, manifesting a grace that the rest of us lack, a grace we expect to stay aloft, in the air. The poet Richard Wilbur describes the phenomenon of defying our earthly gravity and the grateful applause it elicits from the audience: "For him we batter our hands / Who has won for once over the world's weight." Still, we have to find a way to live with integrity after the game has ended and we all have left the field of play.

Sidelined continues at Galerie Lelong (528 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 17.

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