

Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports

Traveling Exhibition Project Description



Catherine Opie, *Football Landscape #5, (Juneau vs. Couglas, Juneau, AK), 2008*

Curated by Christopher Bedford

**Organized and circulated by iCI (Independent Curators International),
New York**

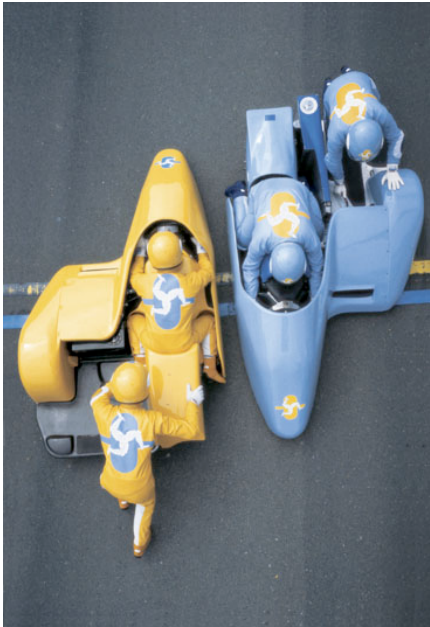
The exhibition is an expanded version of *Contemporary Projects 11: Hard Targets—Masculinity and American Sports*, an exhibition curated by Bedford and organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Tour Dates: February 2009 through January 2011

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Despite all that has changed since sexual and social identity became a hot-button topic in art production and discourse throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, one American stereotype still remains particularly entrenched: that of the straight male athlete, as someone who is typically aggressive, hyper-competitive, and emotionally undemonstrative. *Mixed Signals*



Matthew Barney, *CREMASTER 4*, 1994 (video still)

focuses on artists from the mid-1990s to the present who question the notion of the male athlete as the last bastion of uncomplicated, authentic identity in American culture during the preceding decades. The works presented here, made by artists who have appropriated, riffed on, complicated, and variously re-presented athletic imagery, demonstrate that the male athlete is a far more ambiguous, polyvalent figure in our collective cultural imagination than ever before.

The foundational figure for this exhibition is American multi-media artist, Matthew Barney, who, since his graduation from Yale in 1989, has been mining a range of materials—Vaseline, dumbbells, chalk, and wrestling mats, for example—and imagery—much of it related to football—to foreground the way young men are socio-culturally and psychosexually formed by the intimate experience of competitive sport. Accordingly, *Mixed Signals* will present an early film (*CREMASTER 4*, 1994) and a later film (*Drawing Restraint 10*, 2005) by Barney, which in combination emphasize the persistence of this theme within the artist's oeuvre.

Like Barney's inter-related films, sculptures, performances, videos, and drawings, the remaining works in *Mixed Signals* by artists such as Mark Bradford, Shaun Leonardo, Paul Pfeiffer, Catherine Opie, Collier Schorr, and Hank Willis Thomas approach sporting events as a form of gendered theater, male athletes as complex psycho-sexual subjects, and the accoutrements of sport as socially coded materials. Photographer Collier Schorr has said, "I want to show the whole temperature of masculinity because—and I can only approach it as a woman—from the outside, masculinity has been depicted in very black-and-white terms." Accordingly, the artists selected for this exhibition reject the normative concept of the competitive, detached, heterosexual male athlete in favor of a more provocative view of masculinity in a sporting context.



Collier Schorr, *Cowboys (The Best and the Brightest)*, 2008



Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest*,
2004

Four principal themes organize the work in this exhibition. (1) **The dynamics of nonsexual male bonding (known as “homosociality”) that structure the participation in and observation of male-dominated sporting events.** Here, Shaun Leonardo’s performance-based sculpture and video work is a salient point of reference, as are Hank Willis Thomas’s glossy photographs and mixed media sculptures, and Marcelino Gonçalves’ idealized paintings of young football stars. (2) **The materials and regalia of sport that signify the affiliation and prowess of the wearer, and are often construed as synonymous with the identity of the male athlete.** Brian Jungen’s mixed media works, for example, rework sports merchandise into suggestive phallic sculptures and apotropaic masks, while Mark Bradford paints and sculpts soccer balls into hanging sculptures that equate soccer balls with ‘having balls.’ (3) **Athletic events as gendered theatre.** Dramatic photographic panoramas by Paul Pfeiffer, images capturing high school football games by Catherine Opie, and performances for video by Mark Bradford all speak directly to this theme. (4) Finally, artists like Collier Schorr and Joe Sola search for **softness and complexity beneath the hard, impregnable veneer of the male athlete.**

Several artists and theorists have argued convincingly that social identities—including race, gender, and sexuality—are performed, coded, and contingent. Pioneering theorist Judith Butler has offered an elegant synopsis of this position: “Gender is always a doing, though not a doing that might be said to preexist the deed... There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender.” Though the concept of ‘gender as performance’ took hold in art theory and art practice as early as the 1970s, the male athlete has not until quite recently figured as a subject of analysis within this field, either for artists or for theorists. This exhibition represents an effort to further expand the commonly accorded identity of the male athlete through reference to the dynamic work of living artists actively engaged with questions of gender, sexuality and desire in sport.



Mark Bradford, *Practice*, 2003 (video still)

About the guest curator, Christopher Bedford:

Christopher Bedford is curator at the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts. Formerly assistant curator in the department of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he is now working on surveys of Silvia Kolbowski, Chris Burden, and David Smith. He is on the editorial board of the Los Angeles-based journal *X-TRA*, and is editing a volume of essays for Duke University Press. He has written extensively on art for publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *October*.

Artists in exhibition:

Matthew Barney
Mark Bradford
Marcelino Gonçalves
Lyle Ashton Harris
Brian Jungen
Kurt Kauper
Shaun El C. Leonardo
Kori Newkirk
Catherine Opie
Paul Pfeiffer
Marco Rios
Collier Schorr
Joe Sola
Sam Taylor-Wood
Hank Willis Thomas

Basic facts:

Participation fee: \$15,000 for 10 weeks, plus incoming shipping (Institutions outside the continental United States must also pay customs fees as well as outgoing shipping charges to the U.S. border.)

Number of artists or artist groups: 15

Number of works: 42

Space required: Approximately 5,000 square feet

Tour dates: February 2009 through January 2011

Wall texts, press, education materials, and a catalogue will be provided.

iCI is a dynamic non-profit organization committed to enhancing the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art through its innovative traveling exhibitions and publications. iCI brings challenging artworks to a wide range of museums, giving diverse audiences in the United States and abroad the opportunity to experience new art.