

MIXED SIGNALS: ARTISTS CONSIDER MASCULINITY IN SPORTS

Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports, an exhibition about contemporary art that deals with the subject of the male athlete. This particular artistic theme has become increasingly prevalent during the past several years, building upon several decades of discourse about identity and gender. Despite the changes in attitudes about sexual and social identity over the past few decades, the time-honored image of the male athlete as an aggressive, overtly heterosexual, hypercompetitive, emotionally remote subject still remains entrenched in the public consciousness. *Mixed Signals* demonstrates that the male athlete is a far more ambiguous, polyvalent figure in our collective cultural imagination than ever before. Using elements of wit, sarcasm, and controversy, these artists challenge cultural assumptions that gender is ever natural or innate. Instead, they emphasize the many ways masculinity is always performed, coded, and socially constructed, perhaps even more so in the spectacular, media-saturated field of sports.

Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports is a traveling exhibition organized and circulated by Independent Curators International (ICI), New York. Guest curator for the exhibition is Christopher Bedford. The exhibition, tour, and catalogue are made possible, in part, by The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the ICI Advocates, the ICI Partners, Agnes Gund, Gerrit and Sydie Lansing, and Barbara and John Robinson. *Mixed Signals* is an expanded version of *Contemporary Projects 11: Hard Targets--Masculinity and Sports*, an exhibition curated by Bedford and organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Suggested Education Materials

Produced by Peggy Fogelman

Independent Curators International (ICI) proposes these recommendations for programming you may wish to offer during your presentation of *Mixed Signals*. All are intended as guidelines to supplement the exhibition that may be reworked to suit the particular interests of your audiences. Inside you will find suggestions for the following:

- 1) **Activities for Young Adults**
- 2) **Activities for Families**

Young Adults

Recommended for Young Adults Ages 11 – 18

As Christopher Bedford, the curator of the exhibition, *Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports*, notes, the culture of competitive athletics is perhaps the last bastion of seemingly unambiguous masculine identity in our increasingly complex and nuanced society. In advertising, sports casting, and news media, we unquestioningly attribute to male athletes characteristics such as strength, virility, and aggression, and assume their necessity for victory on the playing field.

The following gallery activities are intended to encourage your students! critical thinking and analysis of these issues through close visual observation of the works on view. They are specifically geared to enhance students! verbal and written expression. The gallery lessons make works by contemporary artists relevant and meaningful to students by connecting them with their own ideas and life experiences. You should feel free to use the activities separately or in combination, depending upon the amount of time available and the specific needs of your students.

Goals for student activities:

- Encourage critical thinking
- Enhance visual literacy and an understanding of contemporary art
- Provide opportunities for verbal and written expression
- Enable students to make connections between their own lives and the art on view
- Create situations for cooperative learning, teamwork, and the sharing of ideas and opinions

Pre-visit Activity:

1. “Just Do It”

Ask each of your students to bring in an image-based advertisement for a sporting event, athletic gear, or other consumer product related to professional sports. They can find ads in magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* or print out online ads from the Internet. Ask each student to explain her/his choice of ad and what is most appealing about it. Post the various advertising images around the classroom and begin a discussion with your students, using the following questions to guide them:

- In the images representing an athlete, what kinds of adjectives would you use to describe that person? Look at the athlete!s physical characteristics, pose, and facial expression, and connect your adjectives to the visual evidence. Consider the colors and background chosen for this ad. What has the designer of this advertisement done to make you draw certain conclusions about the athlete?
- If the students have brought images that relate to both male and female sports, ask them to compare and contrast the images. Do you note any differences in the visual choices made for male or female athletes? How do these visual choices influence the adjectives you used to describe each one?
- If this image wasn!t an advertisement, but instead accompanied a story in the newspaper, what might the story!s headline be?
- Would you want to be a professional athlete? Would you want to play for the team in the advertisement? Would you want to compete against the athlete pictured in the image? Why or why not?

In-gallery Student Activities

1. Words and Images

This activity is aimed at helping students access the complex and sometimes ambiguous meanings of works of art by linking words and images, and encouraging them to support their conclusions with visual evidence. The applicability of various descriptors leads to a broader discussion of our expectations of male sports. Your students will be investigating the works of art in the exhibition independently before participating in a group discussion to share and analyze their findings. Tell your students that they will be looking closely on their own at the works on display in order to match them up with descriptive words that you will distribute. Cut up small pieces or strips of paper. On each piece of paper, write one of the following words:

Aggressive	Loser	Scared	Tired
Vulnerable	Frustrated	Brave	Emotional
Masculine	Elated	Strong	Intellectual
Feminine	Victorious	Weak	Gentle
Winner	Dejected	Energetic	

If your class is large, you can use the same word for more than one piece of paper, and you can also add descriptors of your own. Fold each piece of paper in half so that the word cannot be seen, and place all of them in a bag or box. Have each student pick one and unfold it. Ask your students to look at the works of art in the exhibition and, working independently, to find the one that, in their opinion, best matches the word they picked. You can use all the rooms of the exhibition for this activity, but you can also limit the number of galleries if you have a small class. When your students have chosen their work, reconvene the group and together walk through the exhibition, stopping at each selected work. Have the student(s) who chose that work present their word(s) to the group, and explain what they saw in the image that related to the descriptor. Encourage them to point to specific visual evidence, such as composition, clothing, pose, facial expression, action or gesture, to support their choice.

When all the students have shared their choices with the class, begin a group discussion with the following questions:

- Which words best describe the way you thought about male athletes before you came to this exhibition?
- Did any of the words surprise you? Were there words you wouldn't typically associate with male athletes? Were there any words for which you couldn't find a match?
- What might that say about how we typically think about sports?
- What are some of the things that individual artists have done to make you think differently about an athlete or a sport?

2. **Headline News**

This activity helps students interpret works of art and exercise their imaginations through the medium of sports casting, a familiar and common means of news delivery that shapes our understanding of sports in popular culture. Divide your students into groups of four and assign a role to each student in the group: sports anchor, on-the-scene reporter, athlete, and fan. Distribute paper and pencils to each group. Ask each group to choose a work of art in the exhibition that represents an athlete or athletic event. Together, the students in the group will need to answer a series of questions based on the object they chose:

1. What sport does this work refer to?
2. What is happening in this image?
3. What do you think happened just before or just after the moment represented?
4. How do you think the athlete(s) involved in the scene might feel?
5. How do you think a fan watching the scene might feel?

The answers to these questions will form the basis of a sports news report with interviews of an athlete and fan. The students should develop and write a script for their live news broadcast based on the selected work of art. The script should include introductory narration by the sports anchor summarizing the story, an on-the-scene report by the reporter, the reporter's interviews with an athlete and a fan, and the concluding remarks by the sports anchor. When you have given the students sufficient time to write their scripts, ask each group to perform their news report for the class in front of the work of art they chose.

After all the groups have performed, begin a class discussion:

- How difficult or easy was it to develop a news story based on your work of art? How much information could you derive from the image, and how much did you have to imagine for yourself?
- Did the work of art offer several possible interpretations?
- What sort of person did you imagine the athlete to be? Why? What were some of the things you assumed about him? How did that influence the type of questions you asked him?
- What sort of person did you imagine the fan to be? What were some of the assumptions you made? How did that influence the type of questions the reporter asked?
- Do you think newscasters interpret the sports they cover? How might that shape your own understanding of athletes, teams, and athletic competition?

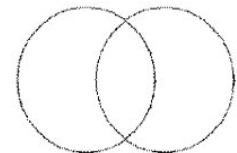
3. Identity and Sports

In this activity, students will be looking specifically at works that deal with ethnic and racial identity in relation to sports and consumer culture. These works include: Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding #12*, 2002; Brian Jungen, *Blanket no. 2*, 2008; Brian Jungen, *Blanket no. 3*, 2008; Kori Newkirk, *Closely Guarded*, 2000; Hank Willis Thomas, *Basketball and Chain*, 2003; Hank Willis Thomas, *Scarred Chest*, 2003.

Start with the works by Brian Jungen, a Canadian artist who is a member of the Dane-Zaa Nation of North British Columbia. Ask your students whether they can think of any professional sports teams with names that relate to Native Americans (the Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, Kansas City Chiefs, and the Atlanta Braves are a few; such names are even more common among college and high school teams). Ask them what these names conjure up in their minds, and with what kinds of traits they think these teams want to be associated. Have them look closely at Jungen's works and see if they can identify what they are made of (N.F.L. and N.B.A. jerseys, Nike sneakers). Explain that Jungen has used the raw materials of sports paraphernalia to construct sculptures that recall Native American artifacts (namely, Native American trade blankets and mask). Ask them what they think Jungen is trying to tell us with these sculptures. How has American consumer culture subsumed Native American identity? How have American sports used and changed elements of Native American culture? Consider the technique that Jungen has used for his *Blanket* series. Is weaving something that we associate with men or women in our culture?

Next consider the work by Kori Newkirk, *Closely Guarded*. Newkirk's sculpture is made from two nickel-plated basketball hoops connected by strings of pony beads and synthetic hair woven together to make a basketball net. Ask your students whether the type of hairstyles evoked by Newkirk's sculpture are ones we typically associate with black male athletes. Why or why not? Are there unspoken rules about how black athletes "should" look?

For the final component of this activity, your students will create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast two depictions of male athletes:



Catherine Opie
Devionne, 2007 (left)



Hank Willis Thomas
Scarred Chest, 2003
(right)

Their diagrams will chart the similarities and differences between these two representations, including subject, scale, medium, composition, clothing, and background. Because these are both photographs, encourage your students to speculate about where the artist was standing when s/he took the image, how close or far, and from what angle? What sort of choices did each artist make?

When your students have completed their diagrams, ask them to share their conclusions. Ask them specifically how team or brand logos appear in these images. What is the relationship between the consumer brand identity, and the identity of the person wearing it in each image? Which does the artist emphasize the most? How does the artist achieve that emphasis?

Thomas deals most explicitly with the ways in which commercial branding is tied to race in sports marketing. *Scarred Chest*, 2003, for example, is a starkly rendered photograph of a man's torso, his lines so taut and defined that his anatomy looks sculptural, recalling the exaggerated idealism of a Greek statue. The image dominates the frame so that we can't see the man's face, with the focus instead on his commercial identity, made explicit by the embossed Nike swooshes that are "branded" (using Photoshop) across his pectoral muscles. Although Opie's photograph is subtler and uses a typical "length portrait format, the high school athlete's team identity is nevertheless branded across his chest. Opie's inclusion of the athlete's face allows us to weigh team and individual identity in this portrait, and speculate as to which is more central to this high school student's self-image. After a full discussion of these photographs, ask your students to consider the consumer brands that they value, and whether brand identity and individual identity sometimes merge in their own lives.

4. Post-visit Activity: Image Review

Back in your classroom, have your students look again at the images they gathered for the pre-visit activity. Ask them if their impressions of those images changed as a result of their experience in the exhibition. Are they able to see things they didn't notice before? Are there new interpretations of the advertising images that they can think of in relation to the art they investigated?

Families and All-Ages

1. Family Tours

Tours for families should be participatory and encourage intergenerational collaborative learning. Activity 2: Headline News can be modified for families with children age 8 and up. Seek and find strategies also provide active, fun, learning experiences for families by encouraging close looking and creating opportunities for younger kids to take the lead. For instance, you could ask families to find the two works in the exhibition that include a bow as part of the athlete's clothing.

2. Story Time for Tots

Recommended in-gallery reading:

Parish, Peggy. *PLAY BALL, AMELIA BEDELIA*. (Harper Collins, 1972).

Misunderstandings about the rules of baseball result in some hilarious antics when Amelia Bedelia fills in for Danny on the Grizzlies baseball team.

3. Family Festival

If you have an atrium or outdoor space, you can develop a sports-themed family festival that incorporates athletic demonstrations such as weightlifting or wrestling, and explores cross-cultural connections by including martial arts. Add a participatory component to the demonstrations by

having the athletes work with families in smaller workshops. You can also set up a small area for playing indoor sports such as table tennis with members of a local team or sports club.

Art-making Activities

1. Design your own sports jersey

You will need colored pencils, paper, clipboards, plain white t-shirts, and fabric markers or fabric paint. Distribute colored pencils and clipboards with paper to each family group. Ask them to find works in the exhibition that depict a sports jersey or brand logo as part of the image. Have them sketch the representations they find, using the colored pencils to approximate the team colors. When they are done, gather them in the studio or other space where paint can be used to create their own sports jersey based on what they saw. First, ask the families to share some of their sketches with the group. What kinds of colors did they notice? What is the purpose of a logo or brand? Next, ask them to think about what they would choose as a symbol to represent a team they would like to be on. What sport would it be? What would their symbol or logo mean to them? Distribute one t-shirt for each family, and place the paints or markers on tables in such a way that they can be shared by family members. Each family will work collaboratively to create their own ideal sports jersey with a symbol that is meaningful to them.

You can also lead families in a workshop to create and decorate their own origami sports jersey. Supply paper of various colors in order to give participants a choice. Instructions can be found at <http://www.wonderhowto.com/how-to/video/how-to-origami-a-sports-jersey-254000/>. Once the participants have learned to fold their origami jersey, have them decorate it using markers or watercolor paints.

2. Create your own baseball trading card

You will need a digital camera, a color printer, small cardboard frames, color markers, a baseball bat, and a baseball cap or batter's helmet. Distribute the blank cardboard frames to each family or child. Explain that they will be creating a baseball trading card, and their picture will be inserted into the frame. Have them design and color their frame according to their preference. On the back, they should place the statistics for each player, which they can either make up or base on known features such as height and weight. They can also include stats such as the player's favorite color, ice cream flavor, and sports hero. Then have each child pose holding the bat and wearing the cap. Take a digital photograph and scale it to fit the frame; then print it out on the color printer. Once the photos and frame have been assembled, ask the children to look at their baseball portraits. How are they posing? Do they hold their bodies differently than they might if they weren't posing for a baseball picture? How does their position or facial expression embody their ideas about how athletes look or act?