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Soft Subjects: From Boys to Men, From Men to Women

Jennifer Doyle

The English artist Kieran Brown steps up to a pool's edge and stretches a Spiderman mask over his face. He dives in, and from an underwater viewpoint we watch him crouch and lightly cling to the pool walls, and then shoot across the frame in a very convincing imitation of the webbed superhero. Brown uses the gravitational lift of being underwater to animate a childhood fantasy. The artist seems to take a boyish pleasure from his zips across the screen, as if his body were pulled along the lines of an imaginary web. He positions us as collaborators, friends in the water with a camera filming the act as a gag. The title, *Insea Winsea* (2003), suggests, too, that Brown wants us to remember being little. Artistic practice slips here into a form of play. The artist slips out of his adult body to retrieve the boy inside.



Kieran Brown, *Insea Winsea*, 2003

Insea Winsea was the first work of contemporary art that I looked at with an athlete's eye and experienced through the body of someone who plays a sport. I started playing soccer in my mid-30s. My participation in a weekly kickabout with friends (men and women) mutated rapidly into a full-time obsession: midweek and midnight pickup games with men, a year playing with a lesbian feminist soccer club in London, weekends lost to tournaments. My social life is organized around my availability for league matches on Saturdays and Wednesday-night scrimmages with the guys. I write a blog and help run a men's soccer league. The time I spend on the field, chasing a ball, playing with men and women I know only through this sport, has made me look and experience art differently. Now I find myself looking for works like this, for works that tell us something about a sporting life. I can tell Brown spends a lot of time in the water. This is his environment, a place where the edges of his body disappear into fantasy. His field of play (the pool) lets him be a superhero and a boy at the same time. I don't think I could have seen that, if I didn't know that feeling myself. I am neither boy nor man. But I am learning to play boyishly.

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Carol Mavor observes that whereas “boyishly” has its place in the Oxford English Dictionary (meaning “boy-like” or “puerile”) there is no sister entry for “girlishly.”¹ “Girlish” is the closest we get, but that word modifies things, not actions. This point is made by Mark Bradford’s hoop skirt. Girlishness works in this action as a blowsy handicap to an attempt to play boyishly. I watch him flounce, trying to practice familiar moves in unfamiliar gear. I think of early women tennis players, trying to smash a serve across the court while wearing a corset. This work gets more complex as you think about what that skirt is doing. It stands in not for femininity, but for gender itself: what it means to experience gender as a problem, an obstacle to one’s movement through the world.



Mark Bradford, *Pride of Place*, 2009

Masculinity and the male athlete have a surprisingly difficult and contradictory relation. From one perspective, for example, football players seem larger than life, like impenetrable moving tanks. But when you look closely, football’s masculinity is a vulnerable thing: its body must be pumped up by hormones, its shell hardened by polymers. It isn’t just “there.” It is an elaborate production, signaled not by the flesh and bone of men but by equipment, rule, and ritual. By a game that is, actually, played at the expense of the body—the toll it takes is a grisly affair. All that grunting, all that gear masks something tender. Some of that softness registers in Catherine Opie’s photographs of high school players. Dark locks of hair cascade over one boy’s shoulder pads, another clasps his hands shyly behind his back, as if he doesn’t quite know what to do with them. But in other images, shoulders square to the camera, eyes fill with suspicion, and Opie’s boys look eerily like men. There is something melancholy to these portraits. They are boys, really, but there isn’t much that’s boyish about their world.

Jonas Woods’s portraits of adult male athletes, however, are deeply boyish—goofy, loose, and moody. Woods gets the uniform just right, and the athlete’s tattoos, his stance, the grip of his hands on the ball. This isn’t realism, it’s the fan’s affection for detail. He can’t help but



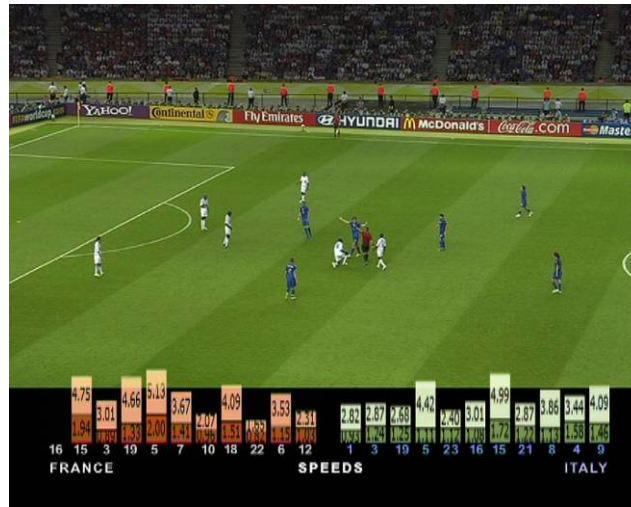
Catherine Opie, *Rusty*, 2008

register the pleasure of making these stars his own. The artist uses an old-fashioned medium to correct the distortion of mass media's camera: the visual culture of sports makes these men into glossy gods and monsters. It's a cliché, I suppose, to observe this, but Woods's brush recovers something more personal from its subject. His Kevin Garnett is not the same Kevin Garnett who thunders through the Minneapolis cityscape as a human Godzilla in a "Got Milk" campaign, or the immortal machine of a newspaper headline like "Kevin Garnett takes hit, keeps on ticking" (*Boston Herald*, October 15, 2009). This is Garnett waiting, and thinking. Chico is in the ring, but this portrait is not about the boxer's prowess so much as it is about the pleasure the painter takes from tracing out that panther on his chest, the texture of his left glove and the letters on his waistband.



Jonas Wood, *Chico*, 2008

Work like this pushes up against the technological mediation of our encounters with the athlete. The wizardry of sports broadcasting can make the visual experience of the game feel more intimate from your sofa than from the stands. But while the televisual media spectacle can invite us to feel at home on the pitch, it can also flatten sports out: every game looks like every other game, narrated by the same voices, edited with the same rhythm. The athlete becomes a brand, his body becomes the ghost in the machine. Individual players dissolve into visual data in Harun Faroki's *Deep Play*. The moving offside line, the compression of the game as players move back and forth, the speed and trajectory of their runs—all are rendered visible for fans with a bottomless appetite for data.



Harun Faroki, *Deep Play* (still), 2007

Douglas Gordon and Phillipe Parreno's cinematic portrait of the larger-than-life Zinedine Zidane exploits the intimacy of the camera so that we can keep company with the now-retired Real Madrid midfielder. We hear him breathe, we are with him as he stands vigilant, waiting for the game to come back to him, and we move with his sudden bursts of speed toward the ball. The camera catches a common soccer player's tic: players often walk backwards in a game, and when they have the ball, they scoop it with their feet as they run—for some reason this makes us paw and scratch at the grass with our feet, as if we could call the ball to us, through the ground. When I saw this, I couldn't help but say out loud, "I do that." Now, when I do, I think of Zidane. I think, "he does this." Sometimes I feel the ridiculousness of this identification (and not just because I am terrible in midfield). But, on a good night, I don't.



Douglas Gordon and Phillipe Parreno, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, 2006

Much of this work tracks the relationship between the boyish and the masculine, between the playful and the militarized, the open and the closed. I can be romantic about boyishness, playing boyishly, because I am not a boy. The boy I conjure within play is a fantasy—a body that has no self-consciousness, a body that is agile, a self that is confident, a boy among boys. Tony Duvert’s take on what happens to boys in childhood is most unromantic. For this radical writer (but surely not only for him), childhood is a period during “which [the boy’s] urges are carefully socialized...forced into a closed circuit of sexual economy that simultaneously harnesses his desire and prohibits it; his mind is made to retrain desire into aggression, the search for pleasure into the acquisition of power, and erotic pleasure into owning objects.”² That comment applies not only to the relationship of boys to each other (in which their affection for other boys becomes a source of shame and conflict) and to women (who become “objects” to be possessed); it is true, too, of what happens to boys in sports culture, which is defined by the tension between free and deep play (the ecstatic state of being “in the zone,” both in and out of your body, connecting in team sports with others with an intimacy that athletes themselves will describe as akin to making love) and the capitalization of the game (in which the pleasures of sport are converted into the commodity fetishism of new shoes, shirts, jackets, shorts, trinkets, and gadgets).

Many of us know sport as a highly policed space enforcing this transformation of boys as athletes into men as consumers, of the playful child into the anxious man. Cary Leibowitz’s *Misery Pennants* perfectly reproduce the look of “cheer,” but their slogans—“Life Sucks” and “Drop Dead”—speak from the location of Duvert’s boy, who is squeezed out of, or refuses to go along with, this game. “Go Fags,” “Homo State”—you might actually see pennants like this at the Gay Games. But only there. Homophobia, like sexism, is not just condoned in mainstream sports culture, it’s nurtured—by coaches, players, fans, family, schools, and the media. You can’t get ESPN or YouTube to take down videos that deploy homophobia to mock athletes—especially when those athletes are women (believe me, I’ve tried). YouTube and ESPN broadcast a video in which straight men dress themselves as mannish lesbian basketball players, for example, in order to mock the WNBA. Apparently, this form of drag is minstrelsy’s final frontier. That attitude about women is not bred through men’s contact with women athletes; it originates with their experiences of the hostility directed toward effeminacy within sports culture. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick referred to this as the “war on effeminate boys.”³



Cary Leibowitz, *Misery Pennants*, 1990

Sedgwick asks that we “drive a wedge in...between...masculinity and men, whose relation to one another it is so difficult not to presume.”⁴ I see just this cleaving of the two terms in Kori Newkirk’s hoop nets made from artificial hair and beads, and Mark Bradford’s sagging bag of soccer balls. They hang to the floor like the drooping sculptures of Eva Hesse or Senga Nengudi, feminists and artists who refused the phallic logic of the pedestal and the upright column in favor of soft objects that invoke skin stretched by the pull of flesh. Newkirk and Bradford play with the materials of sport to invoke the body suppressed in mainstream representations of the “hard” male athlete. Men’s bodies are not made of stone, or plastic.

The presumption that by “masculinity” we mean “men” is so hard to undo that in a survey of visual art about masculinity and sport, it seems unnatural to suggest that we look at women. But, of course, we should. Take Delilah Montoya’s photographic work on women’s boxing in the southwest. The documentary project gives us a look at not just the sporting event but the social world around it and the circles of people that form around these athletes. She gives us two women locked in a fighter’s embrace and an image of a woman concentrating her whole body into the perfect cross. Another fighter rests in her corner, framed by the ring girl’s legs, trotting across the canvas in high heels. A boxer’s strong shoulders and washboard stomach appear at odds with her plucked eyebrows and shy smile.



Delilah Montoya, *Jackie Chavez*, 2006

As interesting as this work is for how the artist treats the female body, I can’t help but notice the men in these pictures. For almost all of her photographs include the men who surround these women.⁵ Male trainers, referees, and fans encircle the fighters. They lean into her corner and yell ruthlessly. They attend to wounds. They referee. They hoist their fighter onto their shoulders, so she can wave and show her champion’s belt to the crowd. These images celebrate the rebellious power of women in the ring, and they suggest an interesting story about the men there with them. Here are images of men working with women, collaborating in the expression of that most masculine of sports. They are supportive, in the background—working towards helping the boxers realize their athletic power. These men collaborate in the disassociation of masculinity from men—in the circulation of masculine expression between women and between men and women. Their presence suggests that it isn’t just women who want to step into this expanded arena; there is a world of men out there who are eager to remake the image of masculinity. They, perhaps, have even more to gain from this than the boxers: for if masculinity can feel like a burden, perhaps that burden is better shared with the girls and the women in their lives.

Notes

1. Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust and D. W. Winnicott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 27. It is perhaps worth noting that “girlishly” does appear in the OED (at least in the second edition of 1989), but only as a subsidiary of the entry for “girlish”; “boyishly” is accorded a listing of its own.
2. Tony Duvert, *Good Sex Illustrated* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 38–9.
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 151–164.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995):11–20, p.12.
5. Most women fighters do not have experienced female role models with whom they can work. Maria Teresa Márquez explains, “Boxing in the barrios has a long male history with families that have generations of boxers: grandfathers, fathers, uncles, brothers, and cousins. But the current generation of women fighters has no family history of boxing mothers and grandmothers.” Maria Teresa Márquez, “No Longer Counted Out: Fighting Isn’t What It Used to Be” in Delilah Montoya, *Women Boxers: The New Warriors* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2006): 24–27, p. 11.



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List of illustrations:

Kieran Brown*

Insea Winsea (still), 2003
Digital video
Courtesy of the artist

Mark Bradford

Pride of Place, 2009
Chromogenic print, set of 20
31 1/8 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema
Jenkins & Co., New York

Catherine Opie

Rusty, 2008
Chromogenic print
30 x 22 1/4 in.
Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Jonas Wood

Chico, 2008
Gouache, ink, and colored pencil on paper
17 x 19 in.
Private collection

*Works marked with an * are not in the
Hard Targets exhibition.

Harun Farocki

Deep Play, 2007
12-channel video installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali,
New York

Douglas Gordon

Philippe Parreno

Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait, 2006
Two-video projections
Dimensions variable
Collection Fondazione Sandretto Re
Rebaudengo
Produced by Anna Lena Films and
Palomar Pictures

Cory Leibowitz

Misery Pennants, 1990
4 felt pennants
9 1/4 x 24 in.
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates,
New York

Delilah Montoya*

Jackie Chavez, 2006
Gelatin silver print
7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the artist