Basil Sellers Art Prize 2012

To be a lover of a particular sport is to appreciate both its direct associations with the everyday experience and, for some artists, its rich scope for allegory. For instance, in sport, as in life, nicknames bring fans and players closer together. Jon Campbell has selected twenty-two AFL players—across generations and teams—and rendered their nicknames on boards with the skill of a master signwriter. The overall soft, pastel palette dilutes the masculinity of his subject matter. Campbell reflects on the agency of language to define the fetishized threshold that distinguishes a true fan from a mere spectator.

Brook Andrew explores sport as an avenue for promoting cultural pride and aspiration. The successes of high-profile Aboriginal Australians across a breadth of sporting codes have contributed inestimably to the sense of empowerment and positive esteem within some Aboriginal communities. The bond-forming capacity of sport is a universal, cross-cultural one. Australia 1, a grand and romanticised rendering of an ethnographic sketch from an archive of nineteenth-century ethnographic material, captures the social bonding and camaraderie of a particular traditional game. Other works that take as their subject the sport of Aboriginal hunting reference notions of stereotype and the commodification of culture.

Pat Macan, a self-described cricket tragic, looks to his sport for its existential complexity. In a series of related works, Macan explores an extraordinary moment in the history of cricket: the near-death experience of New Zealand batsman Ewen Chatfield in a 1975 test match. A video replays archival footage showing Chatfield being struck in the temple with the ball before falling unconscious. The film and the minimalist works that accompany it recreate the force of the incident as a reductive meditation on moments between life and death and the relationship between cause and effect.

Eugene Carchesio's reflections on sport derive from his contemplation upon their intangible aspects, the layers beneath what is manifest. On the surface, his series of delicate drawings captures the sport of boxing in all its brutality, elegance, and clumsiness. Moreover, each reveals Carchesio's sensitivity to pugilist psychology: the boxer's emotional control and presentation, maturity, perceptiveness and analytic aptitude, capacity for tactical thought and ability to balance discipline and instinct. The small orange paper cones of Olympic circle on the opposite wall act as metaphors for the concentration and expansion of energy which occurs when individuals and countries unite in the idealism of the Olympic Games.
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Himself a creative provocateur, Richard Bell depicts an act of rebellion by those who have protested for civil rights in the fervent atmosphere of a major sporting event. In his painting of an iconic moment in both Olympic history and civil rights history, Bell pays homage to Australian athlete Peter Norman, who stood on the dais beside African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos as they raised their fists in the ‘black power salute’ at the 1968 Olympic Games.

Louise Hearman’s paintings reveal her fascination with the physical and psychological ‘landscape’ of the Australian rules football field. The viewer is invited to reflect on the spectacle of the sport itself. Hearman’s forensic eye for raw detail and classical use of light captures the theatricality of the game, suggesting a deeper, more compelling drama than is conveyed in contemporary sports broadcasting.

For Sangeeta Sandrasegar, the goals of the athlete and the artist are linked. Both exist at the metaphorical boundaries of society, and each seeks a ‘divine’ aspect within the fullest possible human experience. Like the Greek god Dionysus, who existed on the borderline between the human and the divine, the athlete and the artist harness a restless to and fro movement at the very edges of human achievement. Sandrasegar’s video, Bold Lover never canst thou kiss, Though winning near the goal depicts a lone figure running through an Australian bush landscape, as though being pursued or in search of escape. In enthusiasm, a runner looks backwards upon their path through the lush Keralan countryside in South India.

Christian Thompson reflects on an inherent aspect of almost all sporting codes—that of loss. His approach is highly personal, inspired by his disqualification at eleven years of age from a breaststroke heat at his primary school swimming carnival. Fragments of the event—Thompson’s sheer physical depletion, the intensity of his brother’s poolside cheering, the elation of finishing first and the bitterness that accompanies a victory ‘robbed’—come to him with unmitigated clarity even now. The statuesque swimmer is symbolic of the power of myth and memory, and the stubborn wound that loss can inflict.
Earlier in 2012, Lauren Brincat was based in Mexico City producing the film *10 metre platform*. Brincat intended to lower herself over the ledge of the high diving board at the Alberca Olimpica Francisco Márquez indoor swimming pool and hang there until, unable to hold on any longer, she let go and fell into the pool. However, on the day of the performance, watched by her film crew, she felt unable to undertake the task. She states, ‘The one performance that depicted competitiveness and required success, resulted in failure. It truly tested my limits. My necessity to be in control. The scale and duration of Brincat’s own body and temperament—a fraught and vulnerable individual out of step—are cut against the imposing modernist architecture of the diving board and pool. Brincat’s *Good table*, a dressed-up table-tennis table, is modelled on the makeshift dinner table that was used by her family on special occasions.

Greg Creek uses sport to highlight the fluidity of social structures and notions of leadership and ambition. He comments that the four works presented ‘collectively examine the sense of desire, idealism and aspiration that is both fulfilled and at times let down by the reality of sports figures within the competitive structures of sports and society.’ Creek’s works do not suggest literal relationships between the politicians and athletes represented in each. Rather, the coupling of these figures is part of Creek’s ongoing exploration of moral, religious and social allegory.

Simon Perry’s sculptures take as their subject the well-known photograph of pioneer Australian streaker Michael O’Brien being escorted from the ground during a 1974 rugby union match between France and England at Twickenham Stadium. O’Brien, shepherded by a group of policemen, is pursued by a man carrying an overcoat, hurrying to restore decorum to the scene. Perry is interested not only in O’Brien’s subversion of the uptight British establishment but in sculptural representation of the temporal. Perry has applied the idea that through expressive and direct handling of figurative sculpture a fleeting moment becomes fixed in material form and a life force is transferred from the artist to the work.
Here Richard Bell looks again to an occasion outside the sporting contest itself, commemorating a significant moment in Australia’s history of social justice and Aboriginal activism. In 1971, the Springboks, an all-white South African rugby team, undertook a six-week tour of Australia, igniting protest from activists who had developed strong connections with the leaders of the anti-apartheid movement. *Foley vs the Springboks (lone protestor)* is a tribute to the leadership and courage of Gary Foley, a key organiser of the protests.

In their video work *Rewind*, Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano remove the hyper-visual conventions of contemporary sports broadcasting, capturing a private athletic performance within their studio. The performance is set to the sound of the beat of an analogue flip clock, its tempo manipulated in accordance with the theoretically ideal number of beats per minute for warm-up, stretching, strength training, endurance and warm-down. Gabriella and Silvana convey equivalences between artist and sportsperson: the demands of disciplined, introspective practice, the coveted ‘zone’ of total mental focus, the psychological stamina required for success, and the aspiration, shared by the spectator, to excellence.

Patrick Pound engages with sport anthropologically and with affection. His collections of photographs are records of amateur athletes and amateur photographers, of suburban identity and ordinary, yet mysterious, lives. A collection of the once-cherished sporting memorabilia of washed-up legends and failed campaigns includes commemorative beer coasters, figurines, souvenirs, defunct equipment and signatures of former champions. Through his collections, Pound gently philosophises upon the significance of the valiant attempt and the residue of loss and success.

AFL umpires occupy a unique position in the actual football contest: they are observers of the game, but also engaged within it. As an artist who sometimes creates instruction-based work, Kerrie Poliness considers the role of the umpire as being in some ways similar to hers. Poliness presents single vantage-point footage of the construction of a ‘field-drawing’, a model of the line-marking machine used in the video, and a manual providing instructions for reproduction of the drawing. In referring to the instruction manual, she identifies with the umpire, saying, ‘My experience is both integral to, yet external to the artworks’. The video—a key component of which is the accompanying sound track of the crowd at an AFL final match at the MCG filled to capacity—further complicates her role, transforming her into a player, willed on by the excited fans.