

THE GOAL STANDARD

ART, FASHION AND SPORTS
ALL SCORE IN THE END ZONE

By Michael Kimmelman



ot long ago, Nike, having repeatedly failed to crack the rebellious skateboard market, had its ad agency hire a bunch of Ph.D. students in anthropology to produce ethnographic studies of skateboarders' tastes. Eventually this led the company to hire the graffiti

artist Futura, who designed a limited edition of the Dunk basketball sneaker that Nike made in the 1980s. The sneaker was sold through skateboard stores, and sneakerheads snapped it up. Like art museums, sports companies have found that the best way to tap into the coveted youth market is to bring outsider artists in.

America has become like a giant playing field. We dress in neoprene and Lycra, tattoo our bodies in ways that mimic the logos on athletes' uniforms, and collect sneakers as if they're Ryan McGinley photographs. They're sometimes worth nearly as much.

We consume reality shows rooted in the old Roman gladiatorial games, and our political leaders hawk war to us on television the way Vince Lombardi psyched up his Green Bay Packers, saying that winning isn't everything, it's the only thing (except, as true athletes know, for losing).

Meanwhile, late modernism's cult of the gym-toned body has elevated narcissism to the level of religion, extreme sports being our equivalent of what flagellants did in the Middle Ages. Skiers schussing down Everest or climbers clawing up K2 seek what Kant called "the terrifying sublime" by filtering natural beauty through death-defying stunts. When a society like ours, inured to traditional forms of beauty, comes to equate shock with awe, the true sublime gives way to its glitzier simulacra. Which is pretty much what the photographer Andreas Gursky provided us not long ago when he shot a soccer match in Amsterdam from an improbable eagle's-eye perch above the stadium. The glamour of his panoramic picture is derived from the prowess in accomplishing it.

For contemporary artists, and for fashion designers, too, sports have become a metaphorical gold mine. As a meditation on disenfranchisement and loss, the Australian artist Tracey Moffat shot a memorable series of pictures at the 2000 Olympics of fourth-place Olympians, the ones who just missed getting a medal. Collier Schorr photographed high school wrestlers as a measure of masculine identity and a window onto teenage subcultures.

Wrestling is brutal and also touching, Schorr said, so she suspected that "a lot of people see their own struggles as teenagers in the pictures."

Art has always trafficked in sporting symbols, of course, beginning with the art of the ancient Assyrians, who carved hunting scenes into stone as emblems of their imperial ferocity. A long history of art in China and India includes countless scenes of Mughal emperors hunting animals like antelopes and tigers. In Western art, the virgin huntress Diana, when spied in the nude by Actaeon, turned him into a stag, after which his own hounds devoured him. (No wonder Freud loved ancient myths.) In Titian's hands, Diana, protectress of pubescent girls, became a sporty archer in tie-up sandals and bracelets, hair gathered in a loose bun, a silky tunic gaping to reveal one breast, shooting an arrow at her hunky voyeur, who has newly furry ears and a shiny nose, dogs nipping at his crotch.

The connection between art and sport has depended on a mutual infatuation with physical perfection, which translates easily into sex and power. In Leni Riefenstahl's orgiastic paean to Hitler's 1936 Olympics, the camera ogles naked, beaming, German swimmers giving each other rubdowns in the sauna, then leaping off the high board, doing pirouettes and swan dives (it's raining men!), more and more of them presented in erotically slow motion from above, below and underwater, plunging into the pool, then leaping back out of it, in and out. (Riefenstahl included backward shots to heighten the cinematography's kinetic abstraction.) It's so seductive that you might almost overlook the inconvenience of the fact that these beautiful people were Nazi ideals, as Dolce & Gabbana perhaps unconsciously did in last year's bizarre replay of Riefenstahl's Aryan

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