

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Sharon Hayes

KRISTINA KITE GALLERY

“What do you sacrifice to play?” “Do you feel connected to a feminist movement?” “Does football make you a better lover?” The questions are direct and grow increasingly personal as members of the group being queried warm up to the interviewer. The subjects—members of two Texas-based women’s tackle-football teams, the Arlington Impact and the Dallas Elite Mustangs—stand in a field under cool daylight. A few of the players are shifting their weight from foot to foot, while others grasp the fronts of their protective padding—we come to learn that some of the women wear kids’ pads because they better fit the female frame. Their unfiltered answers comprise *Ricerche: two*, 2020, part of Sharon Hayes’s ongoing video series examining gender, sexuality, collectivity, equity, and family, among other topics. As the focus of this exhibition, the two-channel work was smartly projected on a curved surface suspended from an armature at roughly human height. The viewer was thus forced to huddle up with these athletes, to meet them on their level and get familiar with their stories, their presence. In this respect, the nearly forty-minute piece presented an intimate and affirmative document about women’s participation in male-dominated rituals of physicality, their victories and challenges, and their navigation of a culture that so easily labels their participation in the sport an act of transgression.

While Hayes borrowed the basic structure of the video from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Comizi d’amore* (Love Encounters), a 1964 film that examines sex and sexuality in postwar Italy, her work owes less to Pasolini than to the present moment’s institutional fervor for policing gender. With tact and efficiency, Hayes’s line of questioning addresses the realities of these women, gleaned stories about race, motherhood, homosexuality, trans rights, community, economic hardship, passion, empowerment, and the struggle against gender norms. Hayes even teases out unspoken emotional truths: Her camera, with a scopophilic drift, focuses on the more silent subjects as they listen patiently and respectfully to their teammates—but not without the occasional flash of anger or wistfulness. Around minute seven of the video, one player accidentally bumps into another, who glares back at her, poised for confrontation. After an exchange of apologetic if forced smiles, both players relax their bodies and keep listening (was this some unspoken rivalry politely kept in check?). In another instance, Hayes asks a subject, “Are women more free now than they were in your mother’s or grandmother’s generation?” A player answers on one channel of the video—describing how her grandmother in fact played football, too—as the other channel surveys the reactions of those on the opposing team. One nods in agreement, while two others stare downward, almost solemnly. In moments like this, the work casually takes into account instances of inequality and double standards. Ultimately, however, Hayes locates joy in the feminist model of team dynamics.

Hayes’s art proves again and again that the collective is a constantly evolving and powerful force; this underlying theme resonates in an era of social distancing and isolation. The works displayed in the gallery’s back space drove this point home. The exhibition included *Ricerche: one*, 2019, a two-channel video that on one monitor showed interviews with the small children of LGBTQ+ couples, while on a reverse monitor discussions with teens and young adults of parents from that same community unspooled. In each part, questions such as “How are babies born?” elicit alternately fantastic or politically complex answers: A small child describes how “your moms make you,” explaining that first you’re “in heaven, then you come down into a tummy that rips open. . . .” On the other channel, an eloquent teenager describes being “born through



a culture of homophobia” when her mother was still in the closet. Another young adult explains how she is “D.I., which is when you’re created through donor insemination,” and how the AIDS crisis further informs her birth story. Drawing connections between these age groups, the work bookends poignant and touching narratives of communities formed through alternative structures. But Hayes also gestures toward the darker side of collective behavior—especially when it becomes brutal or fascistic—in *When Will This End?* 2021. The title of this wall-based textile, gummed up with torn bits of newspaper, was written on the work’s verso, causing the phrase to appear backwards on its recto. The headlines of these papers clearly report on the insurgence at the Capitol that took place January 6, 2021. As the artist reminds us, a violent mob is another form of so-called collectivity.

—Catherine Taft

Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: two*, 2020, two-channel video projection, color, sound, 38 minutes 47 seconds. Installation view.

Mark McKnight

PARK VIEW / PAUL SOTO

Sun pounds thirsty ground. Two guys—bearish, without inhibitions, brown—fuck across several photographs in “Hunger for the Absolute,” Mark McKnight’s solo show here. Surveying these and the equal number of uninhabited “straight” landscapes (turned pery through sheer adjacency), a discerning ‘mo might have paused to reflect upon a pair of visionary American photographers, certainly McKnight’s forebears: Laura Aguilar (who is no longer alive) and Jack Fritscher (who is still up and kicking). Both contributed to the cultural and communal sensibilities underlying the unrepentantly queer expressions that McKnight, and those similarly attuned, makes prodigious use of today. So let’s pause for a brief invocation and sing our praises to Aguilar for her technical precision and for the discerning placement of her own queer, fat, and brown body in the dramatic desert landscapes of California’s Coachella Valley and offer a hosanna—or three—to the polymathic Fritscher, the gonzo writer, sometime photographer, and former editor of *Drummer* (the watershed leather publication that did much to deliver BDSM into the hands, hearts, and dungeons of many a fledgling kinkster).

Like Fritscher, McKnight serves us editorial sex. His photographs depict, in high-contrast black-and-white, moments of beatific calm



Mark McKnight,
Voidpull, 2021, gelatin
silver print, 16 × 20".

in the midst of carnal frenzy. *Voidpull* (all works 2021), for example, tightly frames the sweet tugging one man is giving to another man's foreskin, while *Tear* foregrounds the same pair locked in an amorous grip: The right hand of one guy presses deeply into his partner's flesh. *Untitled* is the only picture that captures anal penetration outright; it is framed by a thick white mat, which highlights the work's exceptional status. This piece was paired with a view of a dreamy, dark, and cloud-laden sky that inevitably called to mind Alfred Stieglitz's sublime photographs of clouds (the "Equivalents" series, 1922–34), which the artist believed "put down my philosophy of life—to show that [the success of] my photographs [was] not due to subject matter—not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone—no tax as yet on them—free." Of course, McKnight eschews such an objective approach: When an upturned hollow of a fallen tree is given the title *Untitled (Tree Void)*, a viewer is meant to make the morphological connection between a log, a dick, and an asshole; the deadwood becomes remarkable through its purposeful concatenation with images of bodies and their orifices.

One of the things most difficult to convey when addressing practices that traffic in overtly sexual imagery is the cheesiness this kind of work can occasionally fall into. The ur-example would be the artfully posed beefcake photographs of the late Bob Mizer (who sometimes shot his models in the Mojave Desert), but a more recent case would be the sun-drenched Polaroids of Tom Bianchi, who since the '70s has portrayed the palpable joy and sexual energy of normatively attractive gay men on New York's Fire Island and later in Palm Springs, California (where Bianchi now lives). Take *Worship*, in which one of McKnight's models lies prostrate, framed by the crotch of another man standing over him. Industrial metal chains form catenary shadows crisscrossing the prone man's body. It's a visual cliché (whips and chains = BDSM), and in the end not much separates this photograph from something that might be found in the recent rebrand/relaunch of *Drummer* (or the no-longer-in-print Dutch hipster-homo magazine *Butt*). This is perhaps the point. The broader art world has yet to give more than a glance at erotic work of the kind McKnight produces. But that these photographs function reasonably well as porn *and* art suggests their placement within a broader lineage of homosexuality work, because to understand some of the visual language and queer symbolism McKnight employs requires a concomitant knowledge not only of Aguilar's and Fritscher's output, but also of the works of Alvin Baltrop, Lanece Bird, Rick Castro,

John Preston, Efen Ramirez, Rink, Jim Stewart, and Lou Thomas's Target Studios, to name only a few. McKnight belongs to this motley storied history of picturing queer sex.

—Andy Campbell

Stephen Neidich

WILDING CRAN GALLERY

Some say that Duchamp's 1913 sculpture *Bicycle Wheel* inaugurated the category of kinetic art. Yet the form's coming-out party was sparsely attended and brief. If we can call it a movement, it is one that went dormant almost upon inception, thereafter subject to sporadic periods of resurgence. When Peggy Guggenheim granted kinetic art a room of its own for five years, between 1942 and 1947, in *The Art of This Century*, her New York gallery, she effectively placed it on the front lines of aesthetic advancement. Enthusiasm for mechanically mobilized works held firm for roughly the next two decades, until the new paradigm of entropy stole its thunder (and everything became a "ruin in reverse," as per Robert Smithson). In 1968, art historian Jack Burnham could write of "the relative aesthetic failure of Kinetic Art," despite the occasional artist continuing to this day to make it. Certainly its novelty value has considerably depreciated, so what might it still have to say about the future?

This question was compellingly raised in Stephen Neidich's "five minutes more please," his tellingly titled second show for Wilding Cran Gallery. Neidich, who has for some time committed his practice to the automation of inert objects, here indulged in a pointedly reflexive meditation on the psychophysiological stakes inherent in such operations. On the walls were hung a series of motorized structures resembling venetian blinds, both horizontal and vertical, wholly assembled by the artist from steel and conjoined with an equally fabricated-looking (and no less visible) machinery of cogs and pulleys that periodically drew them open and closed. The whole system was programmed—or one might say choreographed—to point viewers in multiple directions, thus keeping them in a state of tensed vigilance as one unit was activated and another came to rest. Since Neidich's blinds were not affixed to windows, what they disclosed was, of course, nothing but the supporting wall. Moreover, their movements—as they rose lopsidedly,

Stephen Neidich,
*I can tie a trucker
hitch in my sleep*,
2021, steel blinds,
motor box, idlers,
roller chain, light,
86 × 116 × 10".

