

Soccer ball as globe in 'Fútbol: The Beautiful Game' at LACMA

Soccer, with its ability to unite vast numbers of people in love of a game, is the subject of 'Fútbol: The Beautiful Game' at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, capturing 'why we do things together.'

By Reed Johnson
January 30, 2014



"Verona #2," 2001 - 2004. Silver gelatin print, 16 by 20 inches. (Lyle Ashton Harris / LACMA / January 30, 2014)

The beautiful game first revealed itself to Franklin Sirmans in the lightning-bolt shots of Giorgio Chinaglia. In the gazelle-like strides of Franz Beckenbauer. And in the audacious inventiveness of the Brazilian forward Pelé.

It was the late 1970s, and Sirmans was a New York City high school soccer player who supported the Cosmos, the Gotham squad that was a melting pot of global talent. Its fan base, likewise, was a veritable United Nations of fútbol obsessives. Even during the few years he lived in Albany, Sirmans says, his love of soccer and the Cosmos bound him to a broader, more cosmopolitan concept of humanity.

"The idea that there was something else out there that connected us was really a huge part of that, and just being exposed to those different kinds of people," says Sirmans, 44, curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Not only is it reflected on the field of play that we're watching as spectators but as part of life."

Those utopian facets of soccer, as well as some ugly ones — hooliganism, extreme nationalism, racist incidents, commercial exploitation — form the subtext of LACMA's just-opened exhibition "Fútbol: The Beautiful Game." Curated by Sirmans and comprising some 50 works in painting, print-making, sculpture, photography and video by roughly 30 artists, it will run past the end of the 2014 World Cup, which takes place from mid-June to mid-July in Brazil.

The exhibition takes its title from the Portuguese phrase *joga bonito*, or beautiful game. According to legend, a commentator coined it to describe the graceful, freewheeling, exultant style of play that Brazilians virtually invented and that stars like Pelé, Garrincha and Jairzinho turned into a form of national identity.

Sirmans says he knows of only one other recent art exhibition, in Monterrey, Mexico, that has explored the culture of soccer. LACMA's puts forward a suitably international cross-section of artists. Andy Warhol is represented by his 1978 silk-screen of a jovial Pelé. Chris Beas, an L.A.-based artist, displays his lifelong worship of Manchester United with three photo-based acrylics of former Red Devils stars George Best, Brian Kidd and Bobby Charlton.

There are humorously stereotypical evocations of national character, such as a triptych of photos by the New Orleans duo Generic Art Solutions of agonized and ecstatic Italian players striking classical poses. There are playful fantasies of nationalistic pride, such as Miguel Calderon's 2004 video piece "Mexico v. Brasil," which depicts Mexico's chronically underachieving *El Tri* whipping the five-time World Cup champs 17-0.

And there are works that allude to the game's darker side, including George Afedzi Hughes' painting of a giant Adidas boot ominously paired with a silhouetted rifle and Lyle Ashton Harris' photos of riot police squaring off with Italian fans.

Among the five prints commissioned for the exhibition from L.A.'s Self Help Graphics & Art is Carolyn Castaño's serigraphic homage to Andrés Escobar, the Colombian defender assassinated in Medellín after he accidentally netted an own-goal in a 1994 World Cup loss to the United States in Pasadena. (Allegedly, a drug lord lost some big money because of Escobar's blunder.)

Even if you don't know a penalty kick from Robin Thicke, many of the exhibition's themes are readily graspable from the artworks and applicable to other major sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the 10-hour infomercial otherwise known as the Super Bowl.

In conceiving this exhibition, Sirmans says, he wanted to show how fútbol reverberates "in a wider popular culture sphere," an approach he took with his 2001 show at the Bronx Museum, "One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art."

He also decided that in a soccer-mad region like greater Los Angeles, the exhibition should use the name of the game that much of the world uses and that best invokes Southern California's polyglot spirit. "We can call it fútbol here," he says.

Housed on the third floor of LACMA's Broad Contemporary building, the exhibition is grouped around two walk-in video installations. "Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait" (2006), by the Algerian-born Frenchman Philippe Parreno and the Scottish Douglas Gordon, is a kinetic portrait of Zinedine Zidane, the great French attacking midfielder and hero of the 1998 World Cup.

Shot with 17 cameras, the vérité film captures Zidane's predatory athleticism and uncanny ability to see the entire field and anticipate developments over the course of a match. Sirmans describes the work as "an updated painting." "The thing that fans also will key onto is this idea of this sort of maestro, this idea of the No. 10, this person who is the conductor and sees everything that's happening before everybody else does," he says.

The other installation, "Volta" by French-born artist Stephen Dean, consists of crowd shots taken with a hand-held camera at various Brazilian stadiums. Some images show the fans up close, communing to samba music. Others pull back to create smoky abstractions.

Together, Sirmans says, "Zidane" and "Volta" depict the two sides of the game's essence: the poetry in motion of the individual artist and the joyful collective catharsis of the masses.

"It really, to me, captures why we do things together and why we are not solely individual people," Sirmans says. "We need each other to see each other."