

A PERFECT

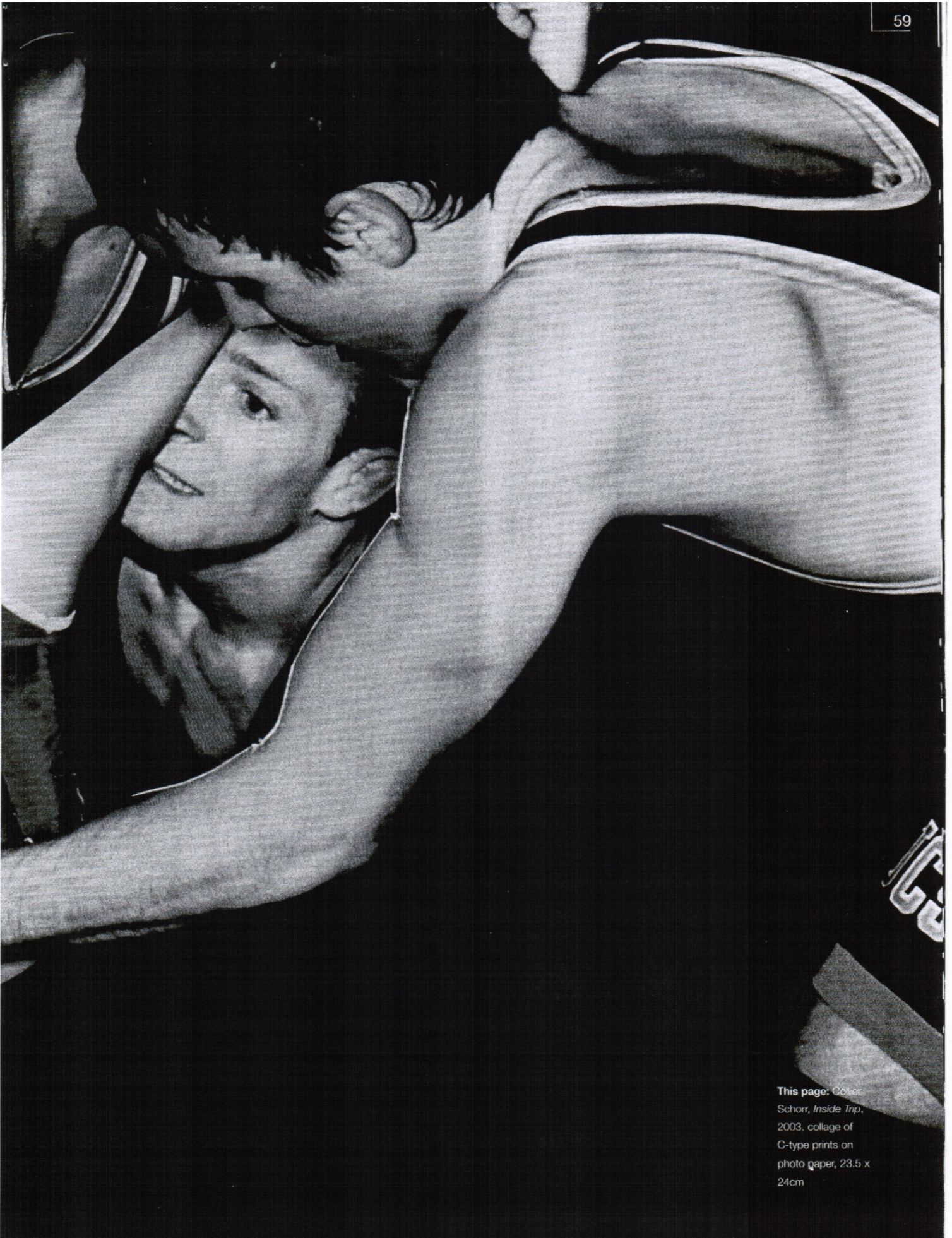


Artists are both fascinated and repelled by the gladiatorial contests that challenge physical prowess, often for social, political or commercial ends. Cedar Lewisohn joins the fray

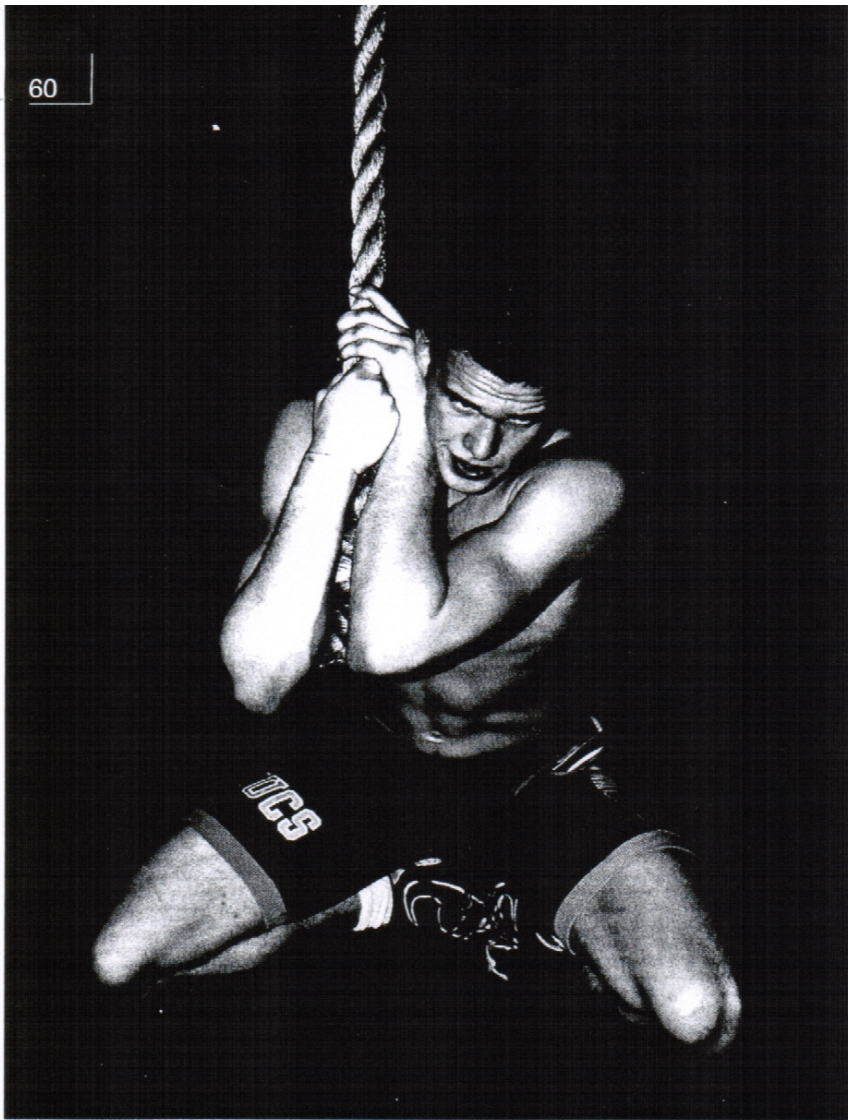
Think of a sports star from the 19th century. How many come to mind? Ten? Five? Not as many? Now think of an artist or writer from around the same time. How many do you have to trail through? A hundred? A thousand? The point is clear: sport has a broad popular appeal, but its stars are transitory; arts, for the most part, are the other way round. Sport is all about competition, winners, losers, mass markets and stupidity. So why do so many artists use sport as a subject in their work and do these artists actually admire the people they are looking at?

The person most associated with depicting physical perfection through sport is Leni Riefenstahl. Her most famous works are celebrations of the human form in its physical prime. Unfortunately, these classical studies were all commissioned by the Third Reich as images of propaganda. But does that make them any less beautiful? Can we look past the message and only see the image? That may not be wise. The trouble with propaganda is reality gets in its way. Jesse Owens winning four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympic was what we might today call a major PR balls-up as far as the Führer was concerned. Should the 1936 Olympic games have been boycotted? Probably. But is Jesse Owens a pre-Civil Rights Movement hero? Absolutely. So where does that leave Adolph Hitler's favourite film director, Riefenstahl? She was undoubtedly a genius of documentary film-making, and her influence can still be seen today, from Bruce Webber to Collier Schorr and further.

Schorr is an artist who has obviously considered the subject deeply. When asked about Riefenstahl's difficult legacy she says, 'I think Leni Riefenstahl's work always points you in a dangerous and tempting path. What's interesting is that people borrow ▶



This page: Collier Schorr, *Inside Trip*, 2003, collage of C-type prints on photo paper, 23.5 x 24cm



Schorr's wrestlers have the look of a Gap photo shoot art directed by Caravaggio

◀ the aesthetic and seem to have an easy time disconnecting it from the politics involved. I always see Leni Riefenstahl as someone with a giant warning sticker over her head. It's nauseating and beautiful. You see her influence more in fashion and how it continues the same kind of propaganda of a so-called elevated society.'

As a Jewish American who often works in Germany, Schorr's relationship with the work of Riefenstahl is a complex one. This dilemma was confronted head on with her series 'Forests and Fields', in which German teenagers were posed in replica military uniforms. Outside this body of work, Schorr is also well-known for her portraits of young wrestlers. The images are gritty and sexual, combining that awkward adolescent beauty of people who are not quite comfy in their own bodies. There is a rare intimacy in Schorr's photographs; she manages to show a humane side of young men whose favoured pastime is essentially beating each other up in the name of sport. There's a sinister air about Schorr's wrestlers: bleeding and sweating, they have the look of a Gap photo shoot art directed by Caravaggio.

Although Schorr has depicted sporting activities, it's difficult to say how interested the artist actually is in the subject for its own

sake. When asked, she is ambivalent. 'I would say I'm really interested in the interior space of sport, meaning, what happens to someone physiologically when they are in that realm. For me, the visual is a reflection of what's happening inside.'

Sport and art are both essentially visual experiences. And in both, audience expectations are paramount. We project ourselves onto our heroes. We are that guy taking the penalty kick or making the slam-dunk. Paul Pfeiffer makes this emotional displacement easier for us in many ways. In his work he meticulously scrolls through hour upon hour of sports footage, searching for those extraordinary occasions when the players transcend themselves and become for a split second deities of banal revelation. His *Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)* freeze-frames an instant of demented rapture on the basketball court. The star of the scene appears to be completely alone in the universe, his adoring audience willing him on in total adoration – the type of climactic moment athletes live for. There's something demonic about the image, something gladiatorial, as if Larry Johnson has just slain an innocent Christian. When Francis Bacon painted human beings, he painted them like meat, maybe alive, maybe soon to die; it was the terror, torment and brutality that interested him. Pfeiffer's works are subtler, but they capture the same psychotic energy that fascinated Bacon.

The idea of comparing basketball to the Crucifixion is a big leap of faith by most people's standards, but for Pfeiffer it is fertile ground. 'In all my photos and videos that feature athletes, what interests me is how these figures are over-determined with meaning already, before I re-edit them and present them in an art context,' he explains. 'Like the image of the crucified Christ, these athlete figures already serve as placeholders for bigger, more abstract ideas, and for the desires and aspirations of viewers. If you believe that there's a radicalised relationship between black athletes and white spectators to be mined here, then what interests me has less to do with the bodies of black athletes and more to do with the fantastic imagination of white viewers.'

If Paul Pfeiffer's images of basketball are all art historical allegory, Brian Jungen sculptures are a perfect fetishisation of political voodoo. Jungen turns Nike Air Jordan trainers into tribal masks. The objects are certainly effective; it's easy to imagine some half-naked witch doctor dancing about in one of these things. It is the bizarre clash of universes that provides the real intrigue in the objects, however. The name alone of Michael Jordan is enough for a PhD thesis. It means so many different things – one of the greatest NBA players of all time, the man who most popularised professional basketball in the Nineties with his plain-speaking, good-guy image and, let us not forget, the guy who helped reinvent Nike as the dominant force in the global sportswear market. It is this bizarre collision of corporate culture and ceremonial ritual that Jungen illustrates.

In reality, common ideas of a ceremonial mask have more to do with 'interesting' home décor than any kind of totemic rite of passage or ritual ceremony. For Jungen, however, the son of Canadian native Indian and Swiss parents, the relationship is more involved than your average cultural tourist. It is simple to understand the identity issues that someone in Jungen's ▶

Above: Collier Schorr, *Rope/Torso (A.M.)*, 2003. C-type print, 95.3 x 76cm
Opposite: Brian Jungen, *Variant I*, 2002. Nike athletic footwear, 132.1 x 114.3cm



Cedar Lewisohn, 'A Perfect Match', *ArtReview*, Vol. X, February 2006

Pfeiffer freeze-frames the type of climactic moments athletes live for

◀ position might have faced in his formative years: half of your family has this very traditional, seemingly antiquated heritage, the rest of your social peer group plays Nintendo and listens to NWA. Jungen's Air Jordan sculptures capture this dualism perfectly.

The other issue that can't be avoided when looking at a mask made out of Nike trainers is the context in which these shoes are made. When Michael Jordan signed his legendary contract with the Nike Corporation in the early Eighties most people were too busy trying to get a pair of those things on their feet to consider issues of globalisation and late capitalism.

No conversation on the subject of art and sport would be complete without mentioning Kraftwerk's 1983 single *Tour de France*. This song absolutely captures Kraftwerk's ethos of man and machine in complete harmony. It is also one of the greatest sporting anthems ever written. As fans will know, the band's interest in cycling has been far from academic. Ralf Hutter, co-founder of the reclusive musical pioneers, said that the band would regularly do 200km rides and practise on the same climbs as professional racers. Some fans believe that cycling became such an obsession that it actually caused the break-up of Kraftwerk's original line-up. Hutter has also said that he sees the bike as a musical instrument in itself: 'The noise of the bicycle chain, the pedal and gear mechanism, the breathing of the cyclist – we have incorporated all this into the Kraftwerk sound.' But despite Kraftwerk's enthusiasm for both, they end up reinforcing the fact that sport and art can never really mix. For them, cycling was an escape from the studio; for other artists, sport is a symbolic device.

The best thing about art is that you can be an artist, not sell a thing your entire life and still be a great artist, because no one can ever be 100 per cent sure. What kind of sport can you be great at that you never win? It is also curiously fitting that when we talk about sport and art, the subject of fascism keeps re-emerging. The spectacle of sport is somehow intrinsically linked to fascist showmanship. This phenomenon of course pre-dates the Second World War: from the amphitheatres of Rome to the football stadiums of the upcoming World Cup, sport cries out a simple message: to the victor the spoils. And we, the art world, we understand that and we love it.

Collier Schorr's work is included in 'Seeing Double: Encounters with Warhol', 20 Feb-1 May, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (+1 412 237 8300, warhol.org). Brian Jungen, to 30 April, Vancouver Art Gallery, BC, Canada (+1 604 662 4719, vanartgallery.bc.ca), 20 May-9 July at Tate Modern, London (+44 20 7887 8888, tate.org.uk). Paul Pfeiffer's work is in 'Superstars', to 22 Feb, Kunsballe Wien, Vienna (+43 1 52189 1201, kunstballewien.at)



This page: Paul
Plettler, *Four
Horsemen of the
Apocalypse (13)*,
2004, digital Fujiflex
print, 175.3 x
144.8 x 7.6cm

