

Sport and Beyond

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On the occasion of the Paris Olympic Games, Almine Rech is delighted to present *Sport and Beyond*, a group exhibition featuring works by Jeff Koons, Laurie Simmons and Hank Willis Thomas.

Sport and Beyond brings together three renowned American artists whose works have been influenced by sport – being a major social and cultural pillar of our society.

For this exhibition, Jeff Koons designed a new sculpture that forms an extension of his famous *Gazing Balls* series, inspired by the *Borghese Gladiator* in the Louvre (circa 110 BCE). The resulting artwork offers an anachronistic encounter between the ancient world and his ongoing series. The *Gazing Balls* glass spheres symbolise the cosmos from the 19th century, previously housed across palaces, (notably that of Ludwig II of Bavaria), and re-posed as decorative spheres in the 20th century in North-American gardens. The work in the exhibition sits at the intersection of decoration and the canons of the male nude from Greek antiquity. These two objects – the sphere and the male nude – embody perfection, using these respective iconographies and ties to art history to create a work that plays with kitsch references, as is often the case with Jeff Koons, the works of Duchamp and Warhol.

As the first work from the *Gazing Ball* series to feature several spheres – where earlier iterations had a single deep-blue sphere, Jeff Koons' *Borghese Gladiator* is made from a highly resistant synthetic plaster to which a whiter-than-marble resin, developed in-house, has been added. As always with Koons, reflections matter. The coloured spheres reflect the image of the ancient work, the viewer and the surrounding environment, recalling the Duchampian principle that it is also the viewer who makes the work.

By combining ancient sculpture masterpieces (the Farnese Hercules, the Sleeping Ariadne in the Vatican Museums, Diana) with the formal purity found in pop culture, and by echoing the 17th - and 18th - Century trend for plaster copies of ancient sculptures, Jeff Koons throws the viewer into a kind of kaleidoscopic space-time rift, intertwining history of art and emblems of manufactured artefacts, in an age-old vision of art where embellishment and soul elevation go hand in hand.

In the artist's newest works, Laurie Simmons begins with a series of text prompts, instructing artificial intelligence tools to compose new scenes that blend reality and fantasy. Her troupe of synchronised swimmers draw inspiration from an underwater archival scene from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Offering a snapshot into their choreographed routine, these swimmers embody the pinnacle of grace whose combined motion mirrors that of the Olympic rings. These works, created for the exhibition, were initially composed with the help of the generative platforms DALL-E and Stable Diffusion, which Laurie Simmons affectionately refers to as "her collaborators", before being digitally and physically altered: printed onto silk and linen, stretched and then transformed with hand-appliqué additions.

Her flower-capped adorned swimmers and whimsical ballet dancers reference her earlier photographic series *Water Ballet* and *Strip Ins*. Simmons' work continues to feature dualities: doll/human, reality/fantasy, interior/exterior and more. Embracing the possibilities and limitations of AI technology, Simmons 'corrects' the works using non-traditional photographic materials, becoming the seamstress/couturière/haberdasher of each canvas – using an application of swimming caps, bathing suits, and rhinestones. Drawing on from her earlier series showcasing figurines and miniature dolls, these elements are hand-applied, contradicting the work's AI origins, and welcoming viewers to discover each unique detail.

Identity, community, consumerism and mass media systems are at the heart of Hank Willis Thomas' practice. His recent retroreflective collage works, a medium the artist has been experimenting with and perfecting for the past decade, reveal two distinct scenes transfigured by both ambient and flash lighting. Laying with the surrounding light, the works are equipped with various modes and depths, where the viewer's proximity and the use of flash photography reveal the seemingly hidden layers of the image. In "The only bond worth anything between human beings is their humanness.", Thomas portrays Jesse Owens, the legendary American track and field athlete and four times gold medalist in the Berlin 1936 Olympic Games, defying Hitler's growing regime, this work illustrates how Thomas, a self-described photographic archaeologist, interests lie in what remains camouflaged or concealed or, conversely, deliberately visible in the writing of history.

With a background in photography, Thomas takes commercial advertising, and press clippings, reframing and refocusing their original contexts, Hank Willis Thomas has long been fascinated by Martin Luther King and the Harlem Renaissance cultural movement, whose philosophy, in the interwar years, championed nonviolent civil disobedience as a way of raising the moral and social status of African-Americans. These references to history and neo-colonialism as well as culture and the sports industry, in their two states, either conceal or shed light on new layers of images, ideas, and meanings that are hidden in plain sight to highlight the power dynamics that shape society.

The sculpture *Endless Column III* (2017), forms a statuesque trophy on a plinth built up on a stack of fiberglass footballs that pays tribute to Brancusi's eponymous work. Painted with a "chameleon" body paint, its hues change according to the viewer's position and perspective. The work, erect like a totem, highlights the collective and combative spirit of sport, athletic heroism and victory, as well as the aesthetic and social issues that pop culture brings with it.

— Charles Barachon, art critic and writer