



## Queering Baseball: A review of Gray Wielebinki's *Shaved in Opposite Directions*

By: Khaleb Brooks

"Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball," - Jacques Barzun

Gray Wielebinski's most recent exhibition "Shaved in Opposite Directions", was presented by b. Dewitt Gallery this past October in Shoreditch, London. From the exhibition's window alien-like stuffed animals patchworked from jean, fur, leather and bandanas greeted visitors as they entered a queering of the "American Dream".

When it comes to sports, particularly baseball, there is little neutrality in the United States. Some deem it as the foundation of their childhood, reliving the care-free excitement every game. Others, who self-proclaim to detest sports will still manage to identify their favorite team if pushed a little. But why does baseball matter? And how does it reflect national value systems and amplify the unspoken "rules" of masculinity?

By the mid 19th century hundreds of teams had become a part of the National Association of Baseball Players. Soon baseball would become a "national pastime" that continued even during times of war and the great depression. It offered a social constant necessary for national morale. In the words of Bruce Catton, "baseball is a ... pageant and a ritualized drama... and although it is wholly urbanized it still speaks of the small town in the simple rural era that lived before the automobile came in to blight the landscape. One reason for this is that in a land of unending change, baseball changes very little."

Yet as Gray's work interrogates, baseball is also a reflection of society itself. Most obviously this can be seen in who had been historically excluded from the sport. The image of national identity propped on an idealised masculinity was not queer, black, brown or a womxn. From Jackie Robinson to the Boston Bloomer Girls, baseball itself has changed, often reluctantly with the social shifts of the United States.

Gray's work plays with the liminal space that is found at the intersection of sports and material objects. The exhibition is a space of destruction, where characters are pieced together offering a soft and cuddly weaving of sports,

fashion and queer identity. Memories of high school locker rooms are combined with the fabulous leathers encountered on a Saturday night at Superstore . Hanging from the walls are gym towels featuring high resolution faces of strong men covered in chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Baseball bats made of concrete and resin bring attention to

the phallic nature of a bat when it can't be used as intended. Tattered jock- straps and a hand engraved marble home plate compel visitors to "batter up". And if one continues, there is a dark room where the entrance is covered by meticulously sewn together gym socks. Upon entering, spacey club beats play in the background while repetitious videos of American baseball players hugging and being slapped on the ass are projected.

If you ask Gray Wielebinski what this is all about, they'd tell you, "this is what it's like to grow up in the United States". Mythmaking is something the U.S. has been exceptionally good at since it's beginning, and sports have become a conduit for the stories we continue to tell ourselves.

Affection between men is gay.

Men can only be affectionate during sports. Sports aren't gay.

Sports are REALLY gay.

Women can't play sports.

Women who play sports are masculine. Black people are good at sports.

Black women are masculine.

Men are masculine.

Men who play sports are masculine.

The images re-positioned by Gray are sourced from national league archives. Through repetition and zooming- in on these images, their work uncovers not only the perpetuation of hyper- masculinity in sports but the fears deeply rooted in patriarchy, sexism, racism and homophobia.

Touching, fluids and affection are everywhere, as is the "boys will be boys" attitude. In juxtaposing the sexual nature and ridiculousness of rituals in baseball to the solidarity (dare one say love) among teammates, an unraveling of the complexities of not just manhood is laid bare but also, the beloved "Americanah".

Overcoming traditional ways of defining masculinity is no easy feat. The locker room, gym class and sports in general have been a major source of pain as well as liberation. Gray's work shows how a cultural phenomenon can equate to everything from discomfort changing clothes to international multi- millionaire heroes. This discussion that queers our approach to understanding the impact of sports discourse is necessary to unpack our current social and political realities. Gray Wielebinski, through "fucking up the mainstream as visibly as possible"<sup>1</sup> ultimately forces us to examine assumptions around tradition, stereotyping and nationalism-

leading us to create our own myths that may allow for a queering of society as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> Quote from Cherry Smyth (1992) referring to LGBT rights group Outrage!  
Via “Sports Sexualities and Queer/ Theory” Edited by Jayne Caudwell.