



**content note: this piece contains references to penetration, slavery, rape, racism, seamen and patriotism*

Well Hung: reflections on Gray Wielebinski's *Shaved in Opposite Directions*

By: Ama Josephine Budge

I walk into b.Dewitt's pop-up gallery at 59 Hackney Road and am immediately engulfed by colours and textures: faux fur and leather, denim, defiant monochrome, and platinum blonde shaved afros. Enjoying the mix of confident art-students and curators and somewhat less at ease, but just as numerous tag-alongs, local walk-ins and friends of the artist that billow out through the cramped doorway and into the rapidly cooling air with the marinating waft of white wine, recently installed astroturf and heated conversation. Gray Wielebinski's first UK solo show fills the narrow gallery with a village of mixed-media installation works; leather and patchwork mannequins/mascots, printed towels, baseball bats, inscripted marble bases and a mysterious 'back-room' behind a makeshift curtain of stained sports socks.

I drifted through the show backwards, immediately drawn away from the crowds and into the intimate and implicatory black box behind the curtain. I try to shake off the inescapable feeling of re-entering the closet, the at times familiar essence of shame/ secrecy surrounds me at once rancid and exciting. For some time I'm not sure what I'm watching, gender, sexuality and race glitch and overlap, touching each other "inappropriately" on repeat as the camera zooms in for the money shot: a creampie all over one players face. Overtly machismo bodies are piled and flung about like a romantic painting of young poets in a field of cherubs, except in this modern day milieu an audience (both virtual and fleshed) watches the presentation of bodies breaking; breaking gender, breaking sexuality, breaking colour lines, breaking the very physicality of the highly- trained human body in motion. A lilting, haunting, film-noir-esque score by Nick Otter accompanies the found/fucked-with footage of Gray's film, mockingly entitled *Honey Doesn't Go Bad on it's Own*. The sarcastic sliding narrators I hear in my head (cobbled together as much from watching American movies about sport as from watching American sport itself), silenced unexpectedly. As though someone just

forgot to switch on the broadcast and they were still mouthing masculinity soundlessly, through the thick protective glass that keeps their bodies cut off from their voices; commentary appearing in the ears of the spectators as though the words of God “him”self had stopped wreaking havoc on the world to watch the game too. There is an elevation in the spectator from man, to god, from individual to universal, a feeling that the whole world stops - and with it all violence and cruelty and racism/homophobia/sexism/transphobia - united in suspense and attention. This is the great potential of sport, it’s great euphoria, and it’s great lie. For as countless articles, papers and waves of public outcry have shown, mass sports breeds capitalism, patriarchy, oppression and racial inequality (unnamed woman raped on a train by football fans in Munich April 2018, the estimated £7bn spent on the FIFA World Cup in Brazil whilst hospitals, schools and transport remain in considerable deficit, countless unactioned reports of sexual violence by US college football and frat teams, the continued double standards of care, pay and attention Black and POC athletes in the US are afforded, despite often bringing in the most money, and the list goes on).

I spoke with Gray at length about the work, their intentions, their material, emotional and historical relationship to sport and baseball in particular. The lie in the footage, in the patriotism, in the homosociality in particular plagues our conversation as the work attempts to expose, queer and reclaim the cohabiting cyclical comfort and violence of sport in America. Gray commented:

“For Shaved in Opposite Directions I wanted to think of a phrase that related to baseball more or less specifically but also evoke a visceral and vivid imagery that was still ambiguous enough to let the audience draw some of their own conclusions. [...] I was thinking of the imagery of the baseball field just before a game starts—the field is

perfectly coiffed with stripes that are made by literally shaving the field in opposite directions and how this inevitably gets messed up in new ways every time, and inevitably returns back to this state and the cycle continues.”

I reflected on the glimpses of it that were far from familiar for me - a British Ghanaian living fifteen minutes from Arsenal Stadium who can’t stand European football, let alone North American sport. I thought about the echoes of colonial exportation of the American dream in Britain’s cricket and contemporarily tennis. The white world captivated by the phenomenally fit and well-honed bodies of the ultimately surveilled

exotics: the Williams sisters, desperate for them to win, desperate for them to break. Unpacking the many gazes at play, Gray commented:

“In regards to the heavily documented (in all aspects of life) Williams sisters, this proliferation of constant surveillance also becomes a meta conversation about what it can mean when these players

“know” they are being watched, recorded, gazed at—in what ways do *they* have power, or are able to manipulate us, or is it even more subversive knowing they are being watched and being themselves anyway?” This notion of reclaiming/subverting power as it is played out globally, multidisciplinarily and without respite is reflected in the space all around me: the crowded occupation of painfully stark white walls hung about with towels and baseball bats, mannequins and patchwork jock-straps, all sucking into the vortex of judgement day; the hypnotic film they play before attempting to ‘pray the gay away’. Yet unbeknownst to “them” (them/us/them?), a bug has infiltrated the system, a glitch has stolen the score, stolen a camera and points it merrily/mercilessly back at us.

“One big thing I’m interested in bringing into conversation is dispelling the notion that “sports has nothing to do with me” or with “the art world” or with any of our daily lives (and wondering why we are so keen to do so)? Don’t get me wrong I do understand a repulsion towards it, and in some ways this show is also about me reconnecting with and reclaiming my personal history and relationship with sports- that can be healing and lovely and empowering - with realizations of its relationship to and in many ways proliferation of machismo or misogyny or racism or homo/transphobia. So to be clear I’m not really interested in espousing any “truths” about how one should feel about sports but the importance of recognizing how much it plays a large part in our lives whether we like it or not - particularly as an American where it is such a huge part of our current, future, and past culture that seeps into so much of our daily lives.”

This point in particular has stayed with me like a worn-down pebble in the sole of my shoe who’s pointed edge jabs the most sensitive part of my heel at unexpected moments, for I am certainly one of those somewhat superior folks who considered myself in some way “above”, or at least unaffected by commercial sport. But of course this is as much a lie as the American Dream that all genders, colours and creeds are one under God, in uniform and in baseball. Particularly when I consider the highly

influential work of other artists of colour working critically with American sports culture such as Paul Pfeiffer or Hank Willis Thomas. The presence of this historical, political and artistic legacy comes into painfully high-definition in Gray's installation of two large towels, for me the epitome of this haunting aftertaste I haven't been able to get out of my shoes.

“We could also look at the towel imagery as a means of interrogating the power dynamics and consequences of ignoring identity politics in US sports- alluded to by the "race reversal" of these facial foodstuffs - in an arena where identity is hierarchical and false senses of mutability or interchangeability exist as a sort of gaslighting into submission or assimilation in the name of "the team." The relationships are not equal.” (My emphasis).

Two larger than life faces take up the whole of two sports towels (which are about the size of beach towels) and between them two bats. It takes me a second visit to the exhibition, under much less crowded circumstances to really comprehend what is going on in this particularly “well hung” segment of the installation, and upon questioning Gray later, discovered that they had not initially seen/intended what I had, although as with all well-considered art, who can tell what is intended subconsciously. On the left I make out a Black face, given away by the peeking out of his afro-beard and the small section of laugh-line flesh at the corner of his eye. The rest of his, possibly protesting, possibly laughing face is completely covered in thick, white, whipped cream. It hangs off of his eyebrow in a precariously swaying globule and webs the space between his teeth like the remnants of an unexpected blow-job load that was spat out rather than swallowed. Even his eyelashes are dotted with drops of white, as though he had been afflicted with sudden frostbite.

To his left the second face, a man I perceive as racially white (or white-passing), looks far less humorous as he gasps for air, slimy lines of what I later discover to be melted chocolate leave him looking like an escaped extra from some cult 1950's horror movie called “The Goop”. Or a poorly made-up minstrel in a modern day parody of race relations in America, where only the white folx are laughing, because only they believe things have actually changed. And between these two masked players, are two cast baseball bats, one black pyrex; translucent and modern, the other white cement, flawed and opaque. I stare and stare and stare at this formation of reversed racialisation, at these phallic objects that point one between the other, and with a dawning horror and fascination I watch in

slow motion as the black-faced white baseball player fucks the white-faced Black baseball player in an erotic ejaculatory exchange of power, culture, patriotism and the exotic. Well hung indeed.

In the ironic/accidental curation of these works by Gray and b.Dewitt curators Ashleigh Barice and Teresa Ciséros; delicately posturing masculinity, desire and both the attempt and impossibility of assimilation; I recognise the constant tensions of Black life in post- transatlantic-slave culture. My own story is a part of this culture, my own gender informed by it on a daily basis. I think of the elliptical analysis of “unwomaning” under chattel slavery chillingly laid out by Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley in her rich compendium *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010):

‘Slave ships and cane fields, Spillers and Reddock document, constituted critical sites in which colonial machinery systematised African’ violent ungendering in the eyes of their captors. Plans for slave galleys calculated the difference between kidnapped females and males *only* as one of the volume occupied onboard: five females were allotted the same cargo area as four males. From this chilling detail, Spillers underscores how the passage’s radical “unmaking” of identities – names, nationalities, religions, languages – also included forced gender undifferentiation, so that “the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’/‘accounted’ or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*.” [Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, 1987]” Yet Tinsley continues, upon arrival, those that survived the horrors of the transatlantic passage stepped into their ungendered, unhumaned objecthood with yet more inconsistencies of violence, for in order to rape enslaved Africans, in particular but certainly not exclusively those assigned female gender at birth, the “white slave master” Tinsley’s writing haunts, must in his own understanding of power, elevate his property from object or animal to human, in order not to degrade or despoil himself.

Here, in the mocking penetration of masquerade the white baseball player puts on the face of the Black man – the ultimata machismo specimen, upon the backs of which which colonial-settler America was quite literally built - and gives the Black man a white face to wear too, a ridiculous crumbling face soon to sour like strange fruit under the sun;

and the raping of Blackness is played out once again only now under the guise of progress. **“The relationships are not equal.”**

“Baseball in particular for this show has a specific culture and history, and is seen not only as the “traditional” “American” sport, but with that comes notions of respectability as well as “The American Dream” as it is seen as arguably a more “egalitarian” sport in so far as different skill sets and types of bodies that are able to excel. Furthermore, it also has a strong colonial aspect to it as it’s been “exported” to many other countries, and particularly Latin America has a very big role in US baseball and many players are recruited from countries like the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Cuba. Furthermore, within the states baseball has a particular relationship with race relations with its Color Line that separated the MLB from the ‘Negro Leagues’ until 1947 when it was broken by Jackie Robinson. But like so many other “breaking” of racial “barriers” and desegregation efforts in the states it’s never truly marked by a single event but there are always reverberations and consequences and legacies, and from the perspective of Whiteness there is always a need for assimilation or adaption (not on our part, heaven forbid) in order to maintain control in the name of “tradition,” and in a lot of ways this reverberates throughout baseball (and most sports) in terms of respectability politics and the policing of certain bodies and their actions (Collin Kaepernick in relation to the national anthem comes vividly to mind or Tommie Smith and John Carlos displaying the “black power salute” at the 1968 Olympics) and this false notion of creating a “unified” identity-through either a team or the nation itself, that often times presents itself as being “post race” in the name of this other identity through sports, but its a type of forced assimilation on a larger level.”

I am moved by my complicity, by my shame, by my fascination and the inescapability of hyper-gendered racialisation, of the spectres and fleshily pulsating life of slavery all around and inside of me, moved to inarticulation, to silence. So that I can only sit and stare and think. Even now months later, this image paralyses me, as I wonder where and what I might be outside of the gendered colour-lines of a culture made wide-screen; high-definition identity performed and violated and offered and taken away upon the white gallery wall.

“So while I think growth and change is continuous and strange and non linear and constant, in some ways there can be a narrative pressure of queerness and transness (that can be enforced by

others but in some ways can be useful for understanding!) to “go back” in time and “queer” your childhood or your memories or what you were trying to say or what you were thinking—which is also a big thing about what this show is about, about childhood and identity making and our desire to narrativize and how this is genuinely comforting and powerful but also wondering how we can be more than this too, and be aware of how we are always narrating ourselves and changing, but that doesn’t mean we used to “not know” ourselves and now we do, we always think *now* we are in control, or *now* we totally get it. But in some ways we always did and in some ways we never will.”

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