

Frieze



Suzanne McClelland, *Well Hung*, 2004. Courtesy: the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

How Artists Are Re-Imagining Basketball

By: Emily Stamey
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Kevin Beasley, Suzanne McClelland and Hank Willis Thomas use sports jerseys to consider the game's politics of gender, race and class.

Although invented in 1891, basketball only became a widespread cultural obsession in the US in the 1980s and '90s with the rise of cable television. The game's fast pace and visual dynamism appealed to fans watching from home, while its accessibility meant they could easily play scrimmage at the park or in their driveways. In turn, multi-billion-dollar team franchises leveraged the star power of their players for elaborate promotions and branded apparel: this was the era of Nike's Air Jordan sneakers and films such as *He Got Game* (1998). As a phenomenon that transcends sport and touches pop culture from film to fashion, basketball appears in the work of a number of contemporary artists, who treat it as emblematic of American society and, in particular, its dynamics of race and gender. Kevin Beasley, Suzanne McClelland and Hank Willis Thomas all incorporate basketball jerseys into their work as signifiers of the game and the individuals – especially women and people of colour – who might find their own stories reflected in it.

Comprising more than a dozen women's jerseys, McClelland's slyly titled *Well Hung* (2004) pays tribute to the early accomplishments of the US Women's National Basketball Association. When she completed the piece, the organization was less than a decade old but had already expanded to 13 teams and attracted more than 50 million fans. Yet, as McClelland told me when I spoke to her about the work, on visiting the NBA flagship store in New York, she found that 'women's jerseys were relegated to one messy circular display rack near the

bathrooms in the basement'. *Well Hung*, in contrast, is triumphant: embellished with pearls, sequins and feathers, the jerseys form a raucous celebration banner.

Rather than sewing her jerseys together, McClelland fastened them with safety pins and bows. Those fragile ties refer to the work's political context: in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, McClelland considered both the military and sporting connotations of the term 'draft'. Drafted soldiers' service is compulsory, but all they know is that they will be fighting for their country. Drafted sports players' participation is voluntary, but they do not know for which team they will ultimately play. Team cohesion in both circumstances can be mentally and emotionally tenuous; bonds can be severed as soldiers are sent to new assignments or players traded elsewhere. Of course, both soldiers and players also wear uniforms to reinforce their collective identity. In her pinned and tied-together assemblage of jerseys from different teams, McClelland underscores both the power and fragility of such unions.



Hank Willis Thomas, *South Bend*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Although likewise constructed of jerseys, Thomas's *South Bend* (2012) represents Division 1 schools: the powerhouses of intercollegiate athletics in the US. While McClelland's jerseys extend horizontally, like so many players lined up for a team photo, Thomas's composition is decidedly singular, its vertical span of 1.9 metres akin to the height of a player. Geometric segments cut from jerseys are sewn together, leaving a fractured central motif of half-square triangles, known among quilters as the 'broken dishes' pattern. According to some historical accounts, this design was hung from windows as a signal to guide escaped slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Throughout his practice, Thomas draws parallels between the commodification of Black bodies in slavery and in professional sports. In his 2016 essay, 'What Goes without Saying', he notes with unease: 'For so many African American men [...] the idea of ascending is chained to ascending through sports and entertainment.' With that in mind, *South Bend* reads as a warning to Black men not to see their path to success as limited to sports. Thomas's poignant use of college jerseys evokes the unpaid labour of student athletes, the majority of them Black, in those programmes that generate millions of dollars for their universities. Notably, in Thomas's assemblage of jersey fragments, the players' names are absent, giving the impression of so many interchangeable bodies as mere cogs in a money-making machine.



Kevin Beasley, *Harden*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York; photograph: Jason Wyche

Repetition likewise plays an essential role in Beasley's *Harden* (2017), albeit to different formal effect. The imposing artwork comprises a panel of burgundy acoustic foam covered in multiple jerseys with the name and number of star player James Harden, then with the Houston Rockets. Split along their sides and stretched out so that both front and back are simultaneously visible, the jerseys can be read as a makeshift bandage or a joint effort to protect the form beneath. This distention, coupled with the jerseys' bloody hue, could also be interpreted as the aftermath of a physical conflict. As with the work's shapes and colours, Beasley's title invites multiple interpretations. 'Harden', when taken as a word rather than a proper name, underscores the literal rigidity of the jerseys, which are sealed in polyurethane resin. It also has an emotional tenor, evoking the hardening of one's resolve in a fight or, even, of the heart against pain. In the wake of the 2020 protests for racial justice, *Harden* retrospectively might be seen as a call for collective resolve.

That tension of unity in the face of division defines basketball itself, a game played by opposing teams. Deploying the sport's broad cultural appeal, Beasley, McClelland and Thomas create works at once familiar and unsettling, asking us to consider the ways we must come together despite the fractures that keep us apart.