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Paul PFEIFFER

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The artist's first United States retrospective demonstrates his skill at translating pop culture to high culture.

By Dan Duray • 12/26/23 9:00am

Welcome to One Fine Show, where Observer highlights a recently opened exhibition at a museum outside of New York City—a place we know and love that already receives plenty of attention.



Paul Pfeiffer, 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (30)', 2015, Fujiflex digital C-print, 48 x 70 in. (121.9 x 177.8 cm). © Paul Pfeiffer. Courtesy the artist; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid; Perrotin; and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

An underrated symptom of our collective insanity during the COVID-19 pandemic was the nationwide obsession with television. It was already pretty bad before the virus locked everyone in their homes, but it reached bizarre new heights when people lacked the ability to leave their homes instead of just the will. Do you remember that? How people thought Andrew Cuomo was a charismatic and soothing presence. How people were quick to point out that if the situation was strange, at least it was not *Tiger King*-level strange. The one that made the most sense was *The Last Dance* because at the time we were all Michael Jordan: effortful in our endeavors, whiskey-drunk and unable to take advice when it came to the flu.

But sports aren't only a good metaphor; they're often beautiful at face value. The artist Paul Pfeiffer (b.1966) has known this for some time, and his first United States retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles demonstrates his skill at translating pop culture to high culture across over thirty works, from his early videos through to recent works in photography, installation and sculpture. "Paul Pfeiffer: Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom" seeks to interrogate images, the introductory wall text says, with a quote from the artist: "The question always comes up: who's using who? Is the image making us, or do we make images?"

His *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* series (2004-2018) entails photos that he is said to have made, remixing photos from the NBA archives to remove all identifying marks. What remains are poses—semi-religious but also just strange. You wouldn't see saints, or even angels, doing a limbo-like backbend in a fresco. Jeff Koons has done great work with basketball, but these are much less playful. Excising the identifiers makes them more grand but also alien.

Vitruvian Figure (2008) is another that sounds like a joke until you see it. For this, Pfeiffer scaled up an architectural model for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Stadium, until it takes up an entire room. His intent was to draw attention to the laborers who built the real thing, but as a minimalist sculpture it speaks to deeper themes of organization. It was way ahead of its time. If the *Vitruvian Man* was about humanity as an apex of design, this work seems to herald an era where other forces take precedence.

It's not all sports—he also does good work here with a disassembled Justin Bieber— but on the subject of his prescience I'd be remiss not to talk about some of his boxing work. At MOCA, there is his trilogy *The Long Count* (2000-2001), which digitally excises the fighters from Muhammad Ali's matches against Sonny Liston in Miami (1964), George Foreman in Kinshasa (1974) and Joe Frazier in

Manila (1975). Pfeiffer's videos of these highly publicized events show the audience watching an empty ring.

"Paul Pfeiffer: Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom" is on view at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA through June 16, 2024.