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Cultural Convergences

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CULTURAL CONVERGENCES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
David Armistead
December 2013

Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Dr. Andrea Feeser
Dr. Beth Lauritis

ABSTRACT

As far back as I can remember my family has had two primary outlets in regards to entertainment; going to museum exhibitions and attending or watching football games. My parents have been members of the High Museum in Atlanta for years while simultaneously having season tickets to Georgia Tech football.

My current series of paintings, drawings, prints and videos examine the cultural significance of sports in American society; specifically American football. As a “big guy” who was raised in the south, it is often assumed that I played football at some point in my life. Admittedly, I feed this stereotype with my interest in the sport, but the reality is I did not play the sport. I have always been interested in both the arts and sports and find that blending these two interests’ results in compelling art works. My research focuses on deeper investigation of American football; informed by both a deep investment in the culture of football in the south as well as the practice of art making.

My work generates a dialogue between American football and the aesthetic properties of high art. I locate parallels and contradictions in both of these worlds—in doing this I pin two seemingly disparate worlds together to generate both a visual and psychological tension.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this document to my parents Eileen and Joel Armistead. None of this would have been possible without their love and support throughout this process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Todd McDonald for his support, friendship and guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Beth Lauritis and Dr. Andrea Feeser for assisting me in developing this document and for their friendship throughout this program. I also want to recognize my fellow graduate students for the constant feedback and great dialogue over the past two years. I am forever grateful to you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

As far back as I can remember my family and I have had two primary outlets for entertainment; going to museum exhibitions and attending football games. For years, my parents have been members of the High Museum in Atlanta for years and have had season tickets to Georgia Tech football.

As a kid visiting the High, I could not have been less interested in traditional portraiture, landscape and the like. I was primarily interested in geometric abstraction the high modernist painting of figures such as Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Barnett Newman. I was able to come to terms with these paintings in a way that I couldn't express for many years. One of my favorite pieces in the High's permanent collection was a large Sol Lewitt sunburst that hung in the atrium of the former main entrance. I was intrigued by its mathematical accuracy and overall symmetry. The piece has since been painted over and the architectural panels it was painted on are now used for promotional displays for upcoming exhibitions, which I find to be a sacrilege.

One of the most significant experiences I had at the High was a 1996 group exhibition titled "Art at the Edge," which included Janine Antoni's installation *Lick and Lather*. *Lick and Lather* is comprised of seven chocolate busts and seven soap busts. Antoni altered the chocolate busts by licking them and bathed with the soap busts. Through these processes her features were reduced and in some cases removed, allowing the materials themselves to take visual and conceptual prominence. This exposure to

materials and their possibilities at a young age had a profound impact on how I have used materials in recent years.

Later when I started attending The Atlanta College of Art for my BFA I developed an affinity to the works of Agnes Martin. Through meticulous repetition of line and subtle application of paint, Martin is able to achieve a visual serenity. In addition, I am interested in many Martin's concepts on painting; she states that a painting begins when gesso is applied to the surface. Martin developed her compositions through moments of "inspiration." She also states that her "paintings are about light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form. It is to accept the necessity of the simple" (Rifkin, 14-15). While my appreciation for Martin's work grew, I became increasingly interested in the work of Richard Serra and how he achieves tension through the materials he employs. His early performance works with molten lead, as well as his current steel sculptures encapsulate an aggressive masculinity. In recent years I have become interested in his large scale monochromatic drawings produced with a black oil-stick. I am intrigued by the evidence of Serra's authoritative, even violent process of applying the material to paper.

Towards the end of my undergraduate experience I was exposed to the work of Matthew Barney. I find his ongoing *Drawing Restraint* series as well as his famed *Cremaster Cycle* project to be particularly intriguing. In the *Cremaster Cycle* Barney addresses a myriad of issues, including sexual development, gender dislocations and violence. But for me the main access point of this project was his incorporation of

athletics. Barney's incorporation of American football in his work is a source of inspiration in my studio practice.

Although I never played football for any length of time as a kid, I have always been engaged with football through spectatorship. As a "big guy" it is often assumed that I played football at some point in my life. Admittedly, I feed this gender stereotype with my interest in the sport, but the reality is I do not have the killer instinct necessary to excel in the sport. In high school the football coaches would always try to convince me to try out for the team, which I always resisted. Unlike much of my male friends, my father never forced me to play, I am sure he would have liked it if I had, but this was never a source of tension between us. Instead he was very supportive in my interests in the arts.

When I started my graduate work at Clemson University, I was fully aware of my family's association with the institution, which is primarily through football. I am the first male member of my family to attend Clemson who doesn't play the sport. Being conscious of this fact I wanted to develop a body of work that examines the cultural significance of football in America. My research focuses on an investigation of the sport itself; informed by both a deep investment in the culture of football as well as the practice of art making.

My work generates a dialogue between the cultural implications of football and the cultural implications of high art. I am interested in locating parallels and contradictions in both of these worlds—in doing this I pin seemingly disparate worlds together to generate both a visual and psychological tension.

CHAPTER TWO

DISCIPLINE

It is no secret that success in anything requires a great deal of discipline—athletics, art, business etc... I generate compositions that require a great deal of discipline and physical control, whether this is through meticulous application of paint on canvas or obsessive repetition of marks on paper.

Football functions within a strict set of rules and regulations. Deviating from said rules, results in penalties. I take a parallel stance in regards to my studio practice. I start with a series of “rules” or parameters, thus restricting myself to function within a self-imposed system. I generate compositions with Muller’s Non-Glare sticks, otherwise known as eye-black. This product is used by athletes to reduce glare from the sun or stadium lights by adorning their cheeks with horizontal marks. These works require a measure of discipline and physical control in order to achieve the accuracy or placement of each mark within a given system. I often incorporate grids as a means of maintaining this accuracy.

For years grids have been used as a means of maintaining proportions—for instance the works of Chuck Close. Others use grids as a means of maintaining a structure as seen in the works of Agnes Martin or Eva Hesse. I take a similar stance with Hesse, I capitalize rigid structure of the grid itself.

I assign each square of the grid with a controlled circular mark that I refer to as a cyclone. I refer to these as cyclones for two reasons: one being the actions of the players themselves. For instance the way a running back might use a “spin move” to avoid being

tackled, secondly it refers to the cyclical nature of the football while in flight when thrown. Each cyclone has its own individuality yet participates equally within a given composition—each cyclone is a contributor to the composition much like each athlete is a contributor to a team. *Preparation VIII* (fig. 1) incorporates centralized cyclones on a grid scaled to a football field. The organic quality of each mark fights against rigidity of the grid.

Football functions like a life form within itself—aesthetically the game breathes. There are a series of convergences (inhaling) followed by a successive separation (exhaling). In *Convergence I* (fig. 2), I provide evidence of this by pairing two grids on paper. One grid has an individual cyclone assigned to each square; the second has a series of aggressive overlaid marks representing the aforementioned convergence. This visual convergence relates to two opposing teams at the line of scrimmage, both fighting for position, both fighting for special dominance.

These works harken back to the work of Post-Minimalist artist Eva Hesse's grid drawings. Her grid drawings do not rely “on the grid's entirely neutral dispersal of pictorial incident,” instead she “found various ways to imbue it with pictorial stress” (Sussman, 199). I incorporate these aesthetics employed by Hesse in similar ways. I use the grid a means of creating order while allowing the organic quality of each mark to fight against the resistance of the grid itself. The resulting compositions function within a strict structure yet allow for mistakes, inaccuracies and the evidence of human flaws.

In *Preparation V* and *VI* (fig. 3 & 4), I generate controlled, aggressive horizontal marks as a means of disciplining myself by working within the aforementioned self-

imposed system of rules, to again parallel American football. The controlled aggressive marks harken back to the repetition seen in Agnes Martin's work while incorporating the aggressive nature of Richard Serra's drawings. The resulting black and white compositions have an apparent visual agitation.

CHAPTER THREE

GREENBERGIAN MODERNISM

Professional football is an economic powerhouse; the participants are compensated with multi-million dollar contracts and signing bonuses etc... As a result of this fact we see our athletic elite being drawn to the sport. High modernism, specifically Greenbergian modernism, offers me the opportunity to evaluate the parallels between two worlds that are seemingly culturally disparate. I draw comparisons with the elite status of high modernism within the art world, with the elite status football players have in contemporary American sports culture.

Greenberg set up a series of criteria in which paintings and sculptures should function. Greenberg believed that the core of modernism resided in “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself” (Greenberg). This self-criticism would result in each medium to be narrowed in “it’s area of competence, but at the same time it would make it’s possession of this area all the more secure” (Greenberg). He goes on to state that unlike the Old Masters, modernist painters should embrace the limitations of the medium such as “the flat surface, the shape of the support [and] the properties of pigment” (Greenberg). This meant the removal of illusionistic tactics seen throughout the history of art. Greenberg believed that this removal of illusion would result in artwork that could exist and be understood outside of the confines of western culture.

CHAPTER FOUR
GREENBERG AND CO.

Using famed Green Bay Packers Coach Vince Lombardi's famous quote: *Winning Isn't Everything; It's the Only Thing* (fig. 5), a statement I believe encapsulates both the attitudes of sport as well as the United States military. I generate paintings based on patterns found in military ribbons—I alter these patterns by incorporating the colors of the twenty top grossing NFL franchises on canvases scaled to the size of the ribbons they represent. It is important to have each team represented on individual canvases, while existing within a group. All of the represented franchises are members of the NFL; they exist within one organization although each franchise has its own location (city), history, and a fan base all of its own. The paintings are hung in the hieratical order of each franchise's placement on the Forbes 500 list, as opposed to the hieratical placement of the military ribbons from which I get their patterns. In doing this I maintain the aesthetics of high modernism, specifically hard edge geometric abstraction. I provide specificity to American football as well as the United States military, which allows me to deconstruct the goals of Greenbergian modernism. In doing this I generate a comparison with three predominately male dominated worlds: high modernism, the American military and the NFL.

I find it interesting and heartbreaking that as a culture we place athletes and other entertainers on pedestals. We provide them with excessive financial compensation and fame, while in terms of the military, the people who keep us safe, we offer meager financial compensation and minimal recognition. Often they simply turn into numbers.

The highest achievement in American football is winning the Super Bowl. The franchise is awarded with the Vince Lombardi Trophy, which is manufactured by Tiffany & Co... I deploy the iconic “Tiffany Blue” as a signifier to point at the elite status of the company itself, as well as the elite status a team gains when winning a Lombardi Trophy. Tiffany & Co. has carved out a niche for itself as being arguably the most highly regarded jewelry manufacturer in America and defining their brand with their trademarked blue. Through various compositions, I draw attention to the intersection of Tiffany & Co. and the NFL—resulting in a psychological tension that is generated when blending the femininity we stereotypically associate with Tiffany’s with the brute “masculinity” we often associate with football.

The four “Tiffany Blue” canvases used in *Titletown U.S.A* (fig. 6) include a singular controlled aggressive mark, again generated from athletic eye-black. The aggressive mark serves as a replacement for the Tiffany and Company logo. These compositions reference the aesthetics of the Tiffany shopping bags themselves. The reality is that the Tiffany shopping bag itself encapsulates a level of status due to the association it has with the financial elite. In *Untitled (Gridiron)* (fig. 7) I again deploy the aesthetics of the Tiffany shopping bags by placing a centrally located, scaled-down gridiron as a means of reemphasizing the tension created when combining these two worlds.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPECTACLE

In the painting *Jerry World (The Ego Has Landed)* (fig. 8), I address the spectacle of American football using Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas as a point of reference. Since its completion in 2009, the 1.2 billion dollar stadium has been touted as the new standard for NFL stadiums of the future—which speaks volumes about the desires of sports fans and the fiscal potential a stadium of this magnitude has on local municipalities. Cowboys Stadium, otherwise known as “Jerry World,” is a monument to excess, the spectacle of sport and the ego of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones. The stadium houses the largest mega-tron in the northern hemisphere and even includes an extensive collection of art including works by Jenny Holzer, Franz Ackermann and Anish Kapoor to name a few.

In my painting the fifty yard mega-tron takes precedent over all other aspects of the composition as a means of referencing the accounts made by fans stating that they simply can’t look away from the mammoth screen. I remove the rigging that holds the massive four-screen “block” above the field from the composition to allow the mega-tron to hover above the turf, thus transforming the screen into an authoritative, even spiritual icon.

I then incorporate conventions of painting generally associated with hard edge geometric abstraction, combined with illusionistic tactics to create a sense of deep space

within the composition. I again undermine Greenberg's rules for painting by combining the aesthetics of hard-edge geometric abstraction with illusionistic tactics.

CHAPTER SIX

VIOLATION

To say I was raised in a fanatical household is an understatement—we have a room devoted to Georgia Tech memorabilia and a multitude of Georgia Tech tchotchkes throughout the house; we also have old wooden bleachers and an enormous amount of old astro-turf from Bobby Dodd Stadium in a crawl space under my parents' house. It must seem insane to many people, but to me it's home.

In *Obstacle* (fig. 9.1 & 9.2) I incorporate the aforementioned astro-turf obtained from my parents' crawl space. I built a curved sub-straight that bulges out into space and adhered astro-turf onto its surface. The turf is worn down showing the years of abuse the material took under the weight of the athletes that played ball on it. Using Dura-Stripe line marking paint I generate a scaled hash-mark on the turf. The hash-mark reemphasizes the slope or obstacle I created.

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CONCLUSION

Through various materials and conventions, my current body of work addresses the attitude encapsulated by the worlds of the American military, high modernism, Tiffany and Company and the national Football League. I am interested in drawing comparisons in these seemingly disparate locations in contemporary American culture. In doing this I am able to generate a psychological tension that elevates my work while simultaneously being critical of the cultural locations I am addressing.

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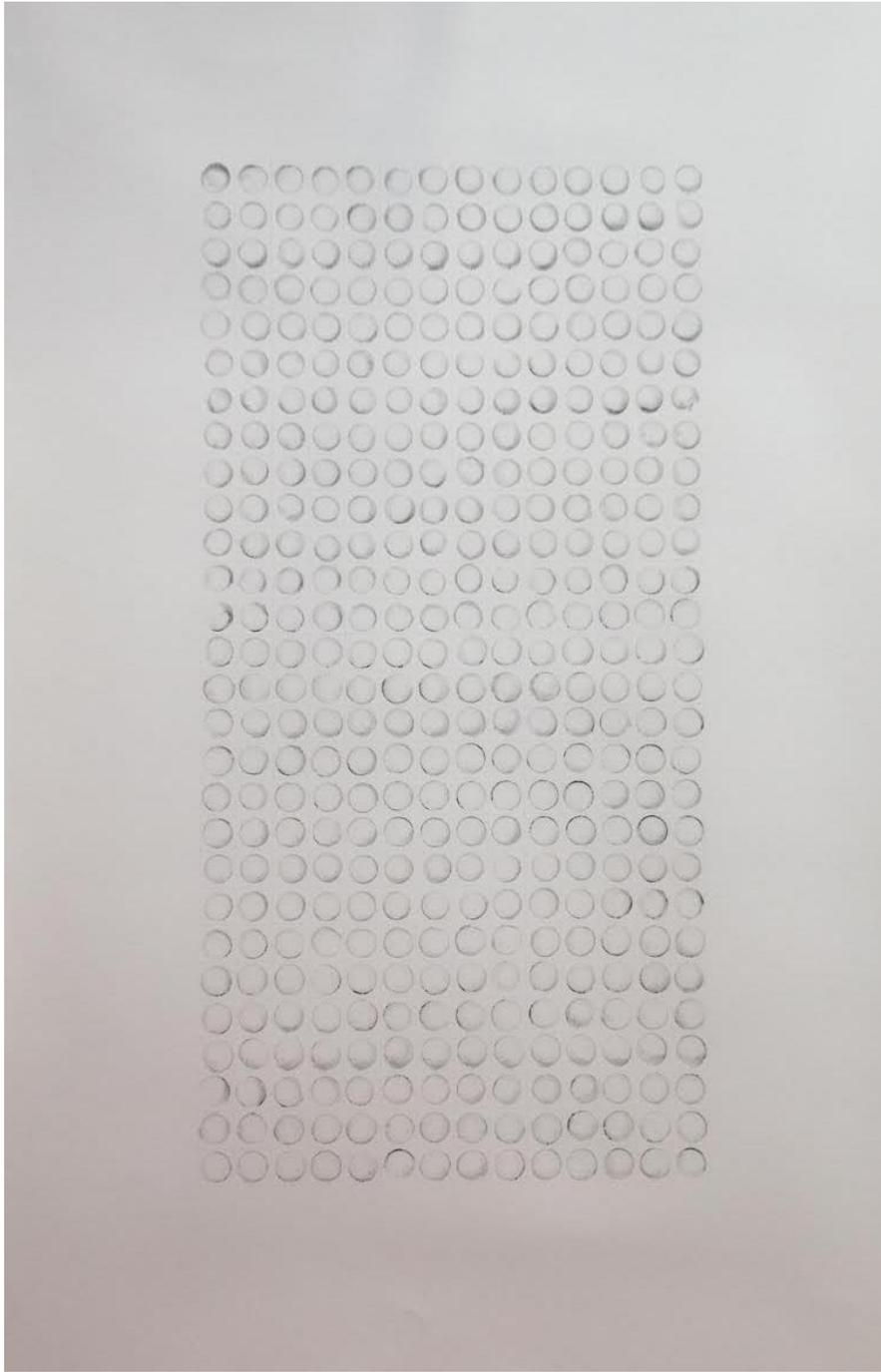


Figure 1: *Preparation VIII*

Mueller No-Glare on paper.

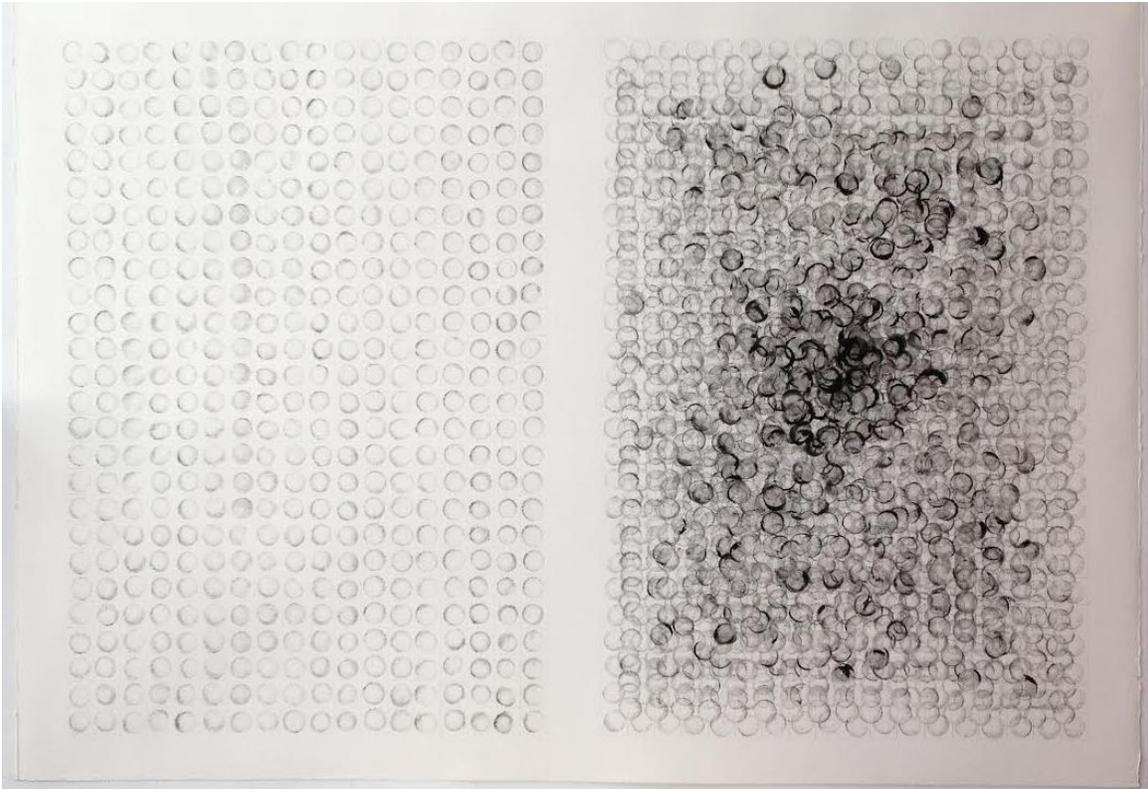


Figure 2: *Convergence I*

Muller No-Glare on Paper

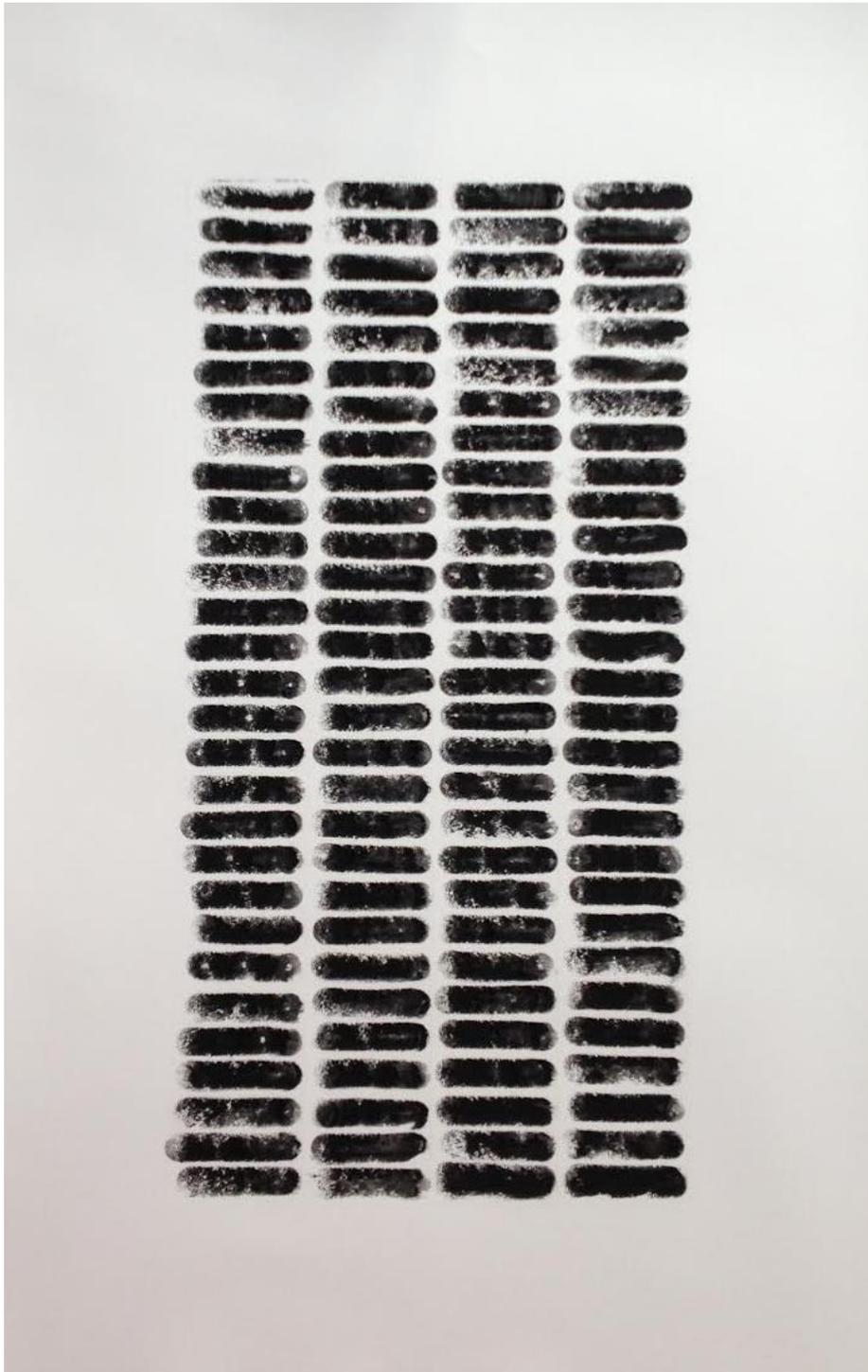


Figure 3: *Preparation V*

Muller No-Glare on Paper



Figure 4: *Preparation VI*

Muller No-Glare on Paper



Figure 5: *Winning Isn't Everything; It's The Only Thing*

Acrylic on Canvas

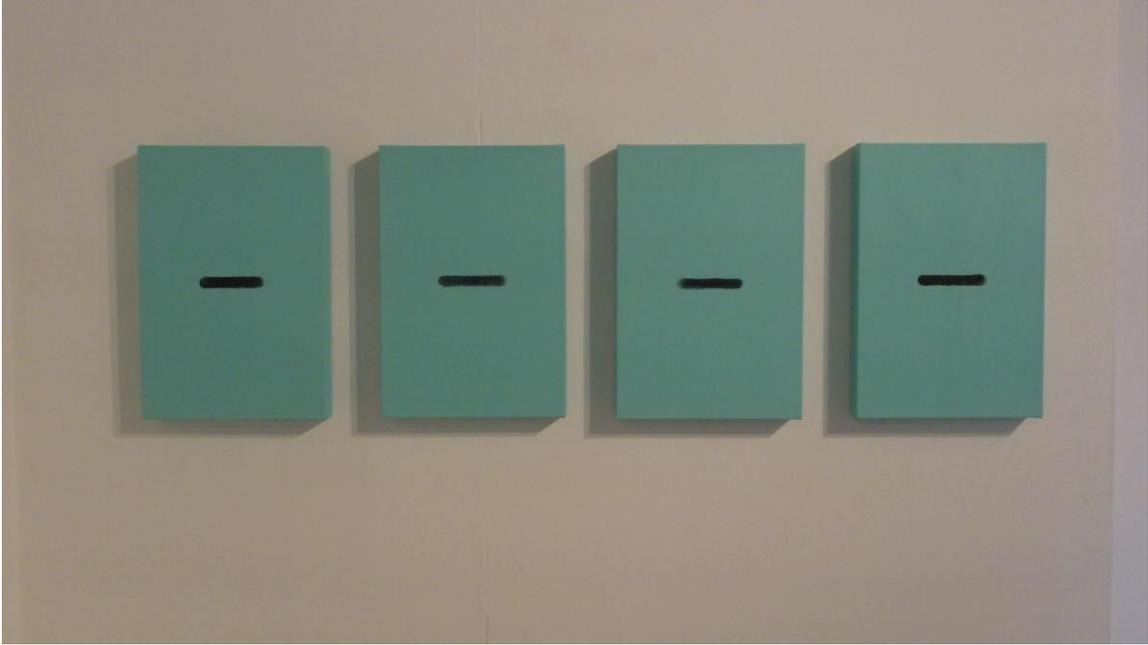


Figure 6: *Titletown U.S.A*

Muller No-Glare and Acrylic on Canvas

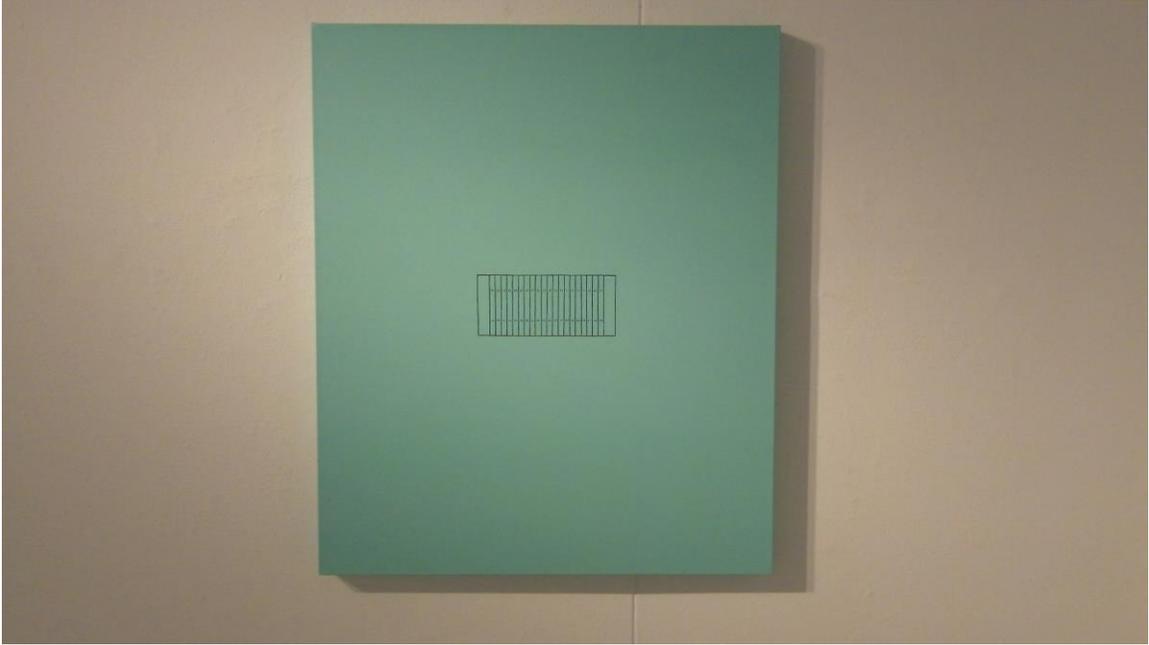


Figure 7: *Untitled (Gridiron)*

Acrylic on Canvas



Figure 8: *Jerry World (The Ego Has Landed)*

Acrylic on Canvas

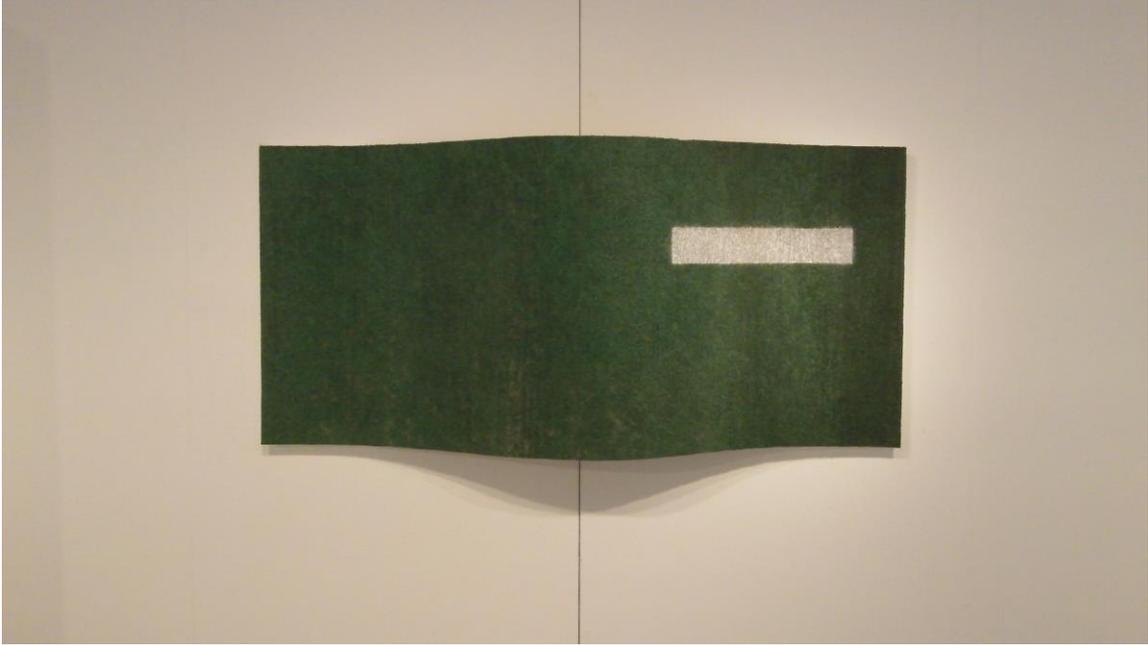


Figure 9.1: *Obstacle*

Dura Stripe Line Marking Paint and Vintage Astro-Turf

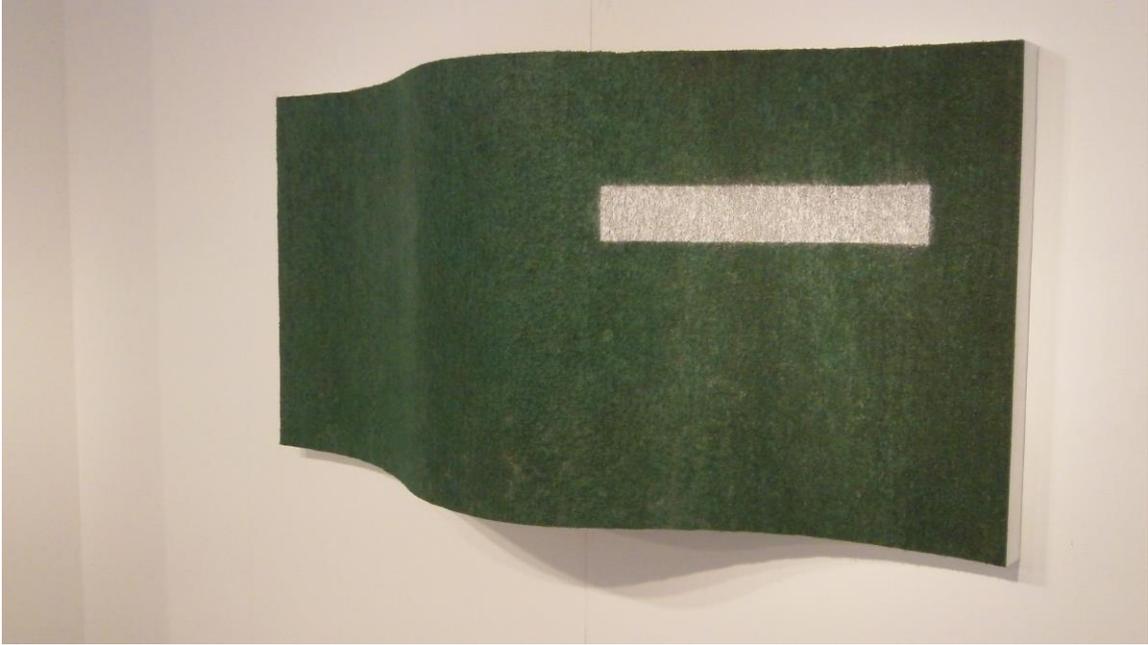


Figure 9.2: *Obstacle*

Dura Stripe Line Marking Paint and Vintage Astro-Turf