Sporty Specters

Paul Pfeiffer shows how rituals and religion haunt sports and movies.

by Beatrice Loayza

portrait by Christopher Garcia Valle

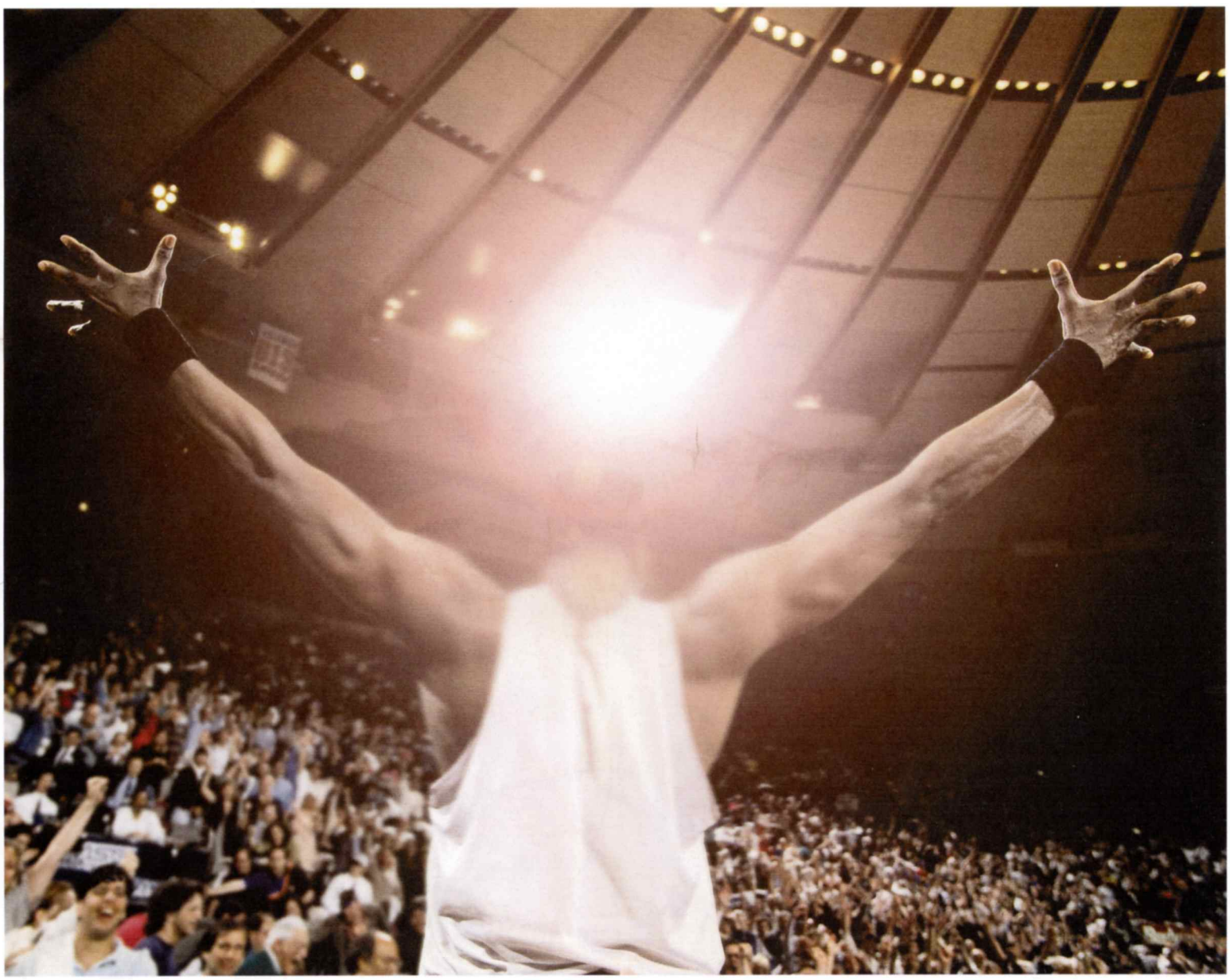

WILDER

When I visited Paul Pfeiffer's studio in East Harlem this summer, I couldn't help but remark upon a trio of basketballs he had on display. Lined up one beside the other, each bearing multiple signatures scrawled in silver, they instinctively struck me as the cherished possessions of a diehard fan. "They seem like straightforward collectibles," Pfeiffer said, explaining the basketballs' origin. "But they actually come from different avenues." Two are gifts from students, and the third is an artwork by the Bernadette Corporation. "You could say they represent my counterintuitive relationship to sports."

Which is exactly what Pfeiffer is best known for. He explores media spectacles – the kind set in athletic arenas and on stages, televised live to the masses – and how they live in our collective memory with a biblical heft. On the walls of the studio were large prints from his ongoing photography series, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (2001–), in which individual basketball players seem to strike glorious poses on the court. At first glance, these images, which Pfeiffer sourced from the NBA archives, appear to be ordinary, albeit stylish, action shots. But stay with them and you'll notice the names and numbers have been digitally erased from the jerseys, and all teammates and opponents have been edited out of the frame. The uncanny isolation of each figure – arms typically extended upward in an apparent state of rapture, or contorted as if in the throes of death – underscores both the devotional nature of sports fandom and the sacrificial impulses behind athletic performance.

Pfeiffer has a knack for teasing out the religious undertones of apparently secular activities, which stems partly from his intense Christian upbringing. The artist spent most of his childhood traveling back and forth between Hawaii (where he was born) and the Philippines, where his parents were church

Paul Pfeiffer: *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (07)*, 2002.



musicians for a Protestant congregation. (His dad was also an ethnomusicologist.) Theirs was a minority denomination in a heavily Catholic country. As an adolescent, Pfeiffer found himself drawn to the visual extravagance of Catholic churches in the Philippines and to folk traditions, from wooden carvings and ornate reliquaries to all-night chanting rituals and predawn processions. In the '70s, the country was also racked by political violence, with the martial rule of then-President Ferdinand Marcos characterized by extrajudicial killings and large-scale disappearances; Pfeiffer recalls locals rationalizing these occurrences in the form of ghost stories. This was around the time he became obsessed with William Freidkin's film *The Exorcist* (1973).

Pfeiffer invokes Hollywood horror films, like *The Amityville Horror* and *Psycho*, in several of his works that pick apart the cinematographic mechanics of voyeurism and its construction of suspense. But he singled out *The Exorcist* as a kind of artistic primal scene. Before young Pfeiffer had even seen the notorious film, images from its promotional campaign began haunting him at night, inducing sleep paralysis that at the time he interpreted as demonic possession. "It was a precise intersection of this sensory, bodily experience; and a Hollywood representation coming to me from the other side of the world, filtered through the colonial experience of being at a Protestant school in the Philippines."

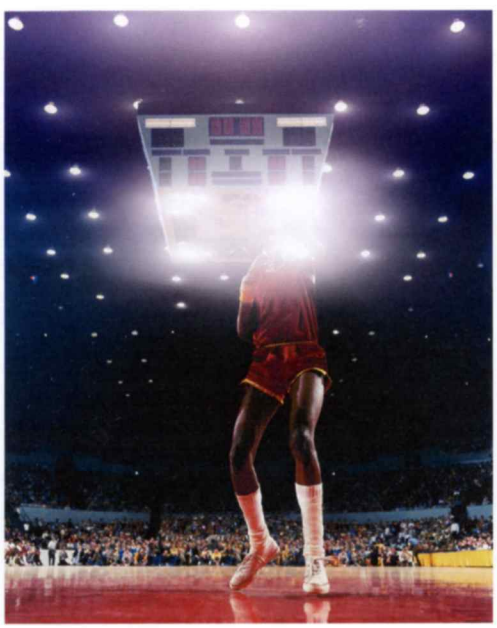
Years later, when Pfeiffer was in art school, he endeavored to exorcise *The Exorcist* from within himself, watching it repeatedly to study the way its post-production elements "produce sensory effects in the viewer." The film, Pfeiffer added, was an achievement in sound design, using tape loops of different human voices to create the devil's speech. Raised in a musical environment, Pfeiffer is uniquely attuned to the ways that sound generates feelings. His work underscores how contrived phenomena can trigger real emotional upheaval – a child quivering at the sound of Beelzebub's creepy whisperings, parishioners moved by hymns at mass.

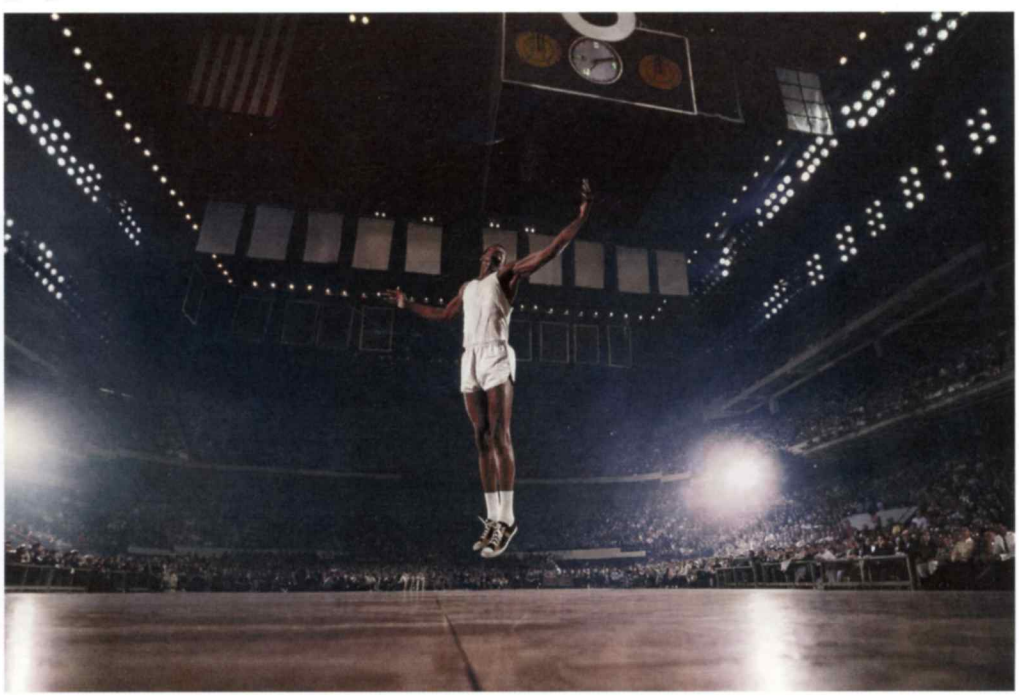
For the critic Hilton Als, who has followed Pfeiffer's work since the late '90s, the artist's most impressive pieces exalt the primacy of sound, showing us how audio not only stirs us but has a generative power all its own: "It creates images in the mind, which can be just as if not more debilitating than the image." When I spoke to Als over the phone, he had recently returned from a trip to Chicago, where he visited Pfeiffer's touring retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and been moved by an aurally immersive work he hadn't seen before: *The Saints* (2007). In this piece, footage from the 1966 World Cup match between England and East Germany plays on a tiny monitor while 17-channel audio of cheering fans inundates the room. You hear the cacophony of shouts and chants before seeing any images, but they're not the voices of the original spectators. To create the soundtrack, Pfeiffer held four recording sessions in which he gathered more than 1,000 Filipinos in a movie theater, directing their vocal performance. The result is an intersectional explosion of meaning, transposing the nationalistic euphoria of Europeans from decades past onto a postcolonial present in which Filipino actors, like wizards behind a curtain, transparently generate the spectacle's acoustics.

Pfeiffer, now 59, has been a pillar of the contemporary art world since the turn of the century, and his traveling retrospective, titled "Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom," is overdue. For decades, his work has presciently plumbed the relationship between pop culture and spectatorship, borrowing religious and/or art historical references, and scrambling eras and identities in a way that anticipated the evolution of our image economy – the fragmented, repetitive language of social media; the knowing artifice of online performance – through deceptively simple deconstructions. "Technology is so integrated into our every gesture and movement, we're less aware of it than ever," said Pfeiffer, stressing his commitment to upending this fantasy.

After studying printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, Pfeiffer moved to New York City in the '90s, and – with the help of friends who worked in advertising and had access to corporate desktop computers – taught himself how to use digital publishing and editing software like QuarkXPress and Photoshop. Later, while completing a master's at Hunter College, he had a gig at a post-production studio where he was tasked with digitizing photo archives. This immersion in the

Right, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (30)*, 2015.
Below, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (17)*, 2004–18.



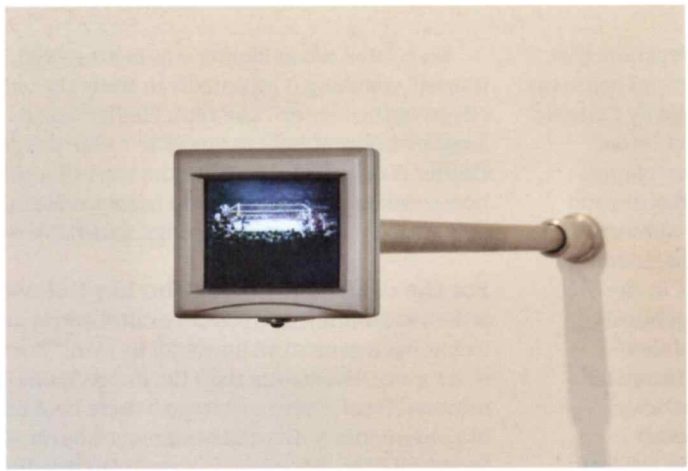


Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid; Perrotin, New York; Thomas Dane Gallery, London/© Paul Pfeiffer (2)

newly emerging world of digital technologies was, for Pfeiffer, a natural extension of his printmaking background, with a focus on the technical apparatuses of image making, its possible layers and repetitions expanded by computer innovations. Regarding the moving image especially, he would come to be considered a crucial bridge between the analog and digital ages.

Pfeiffer's breakthrough work was the video trilogy *The Long Count* (2000–01), for which he digitally edited videotapes from the '60s and '70s showing Muhammad Ali's famous televised fights with Sonny Liston, George Foreman, and Joe Frazier. Pfeiffer erased the boxers from the frame, leaving the audience visible through their spectral outlines – illusions achieved by relatively cursor-based tools on his desktop computer. In works like this one, it's easy to see why the artist describes himself as an editor at heart: "I had found myself in an environment where I became hyper-aware of the grammar of images and the way one could engineer attention through subtle changes." It's no wonder then that Pfeiffer's work might seem effortless to the unsuspecting eye, when in fact his cutting, erasing, and masking entails a slow process of frame-by-frame manipulation.

Artist Shaun Leonardo remembers encountering *The Long Count* in grad school and feeling connected to its "contradictory vision of manhood," which would ultimately inform Leonardo's own practice. He had played American football for a decade before becoming a full-time artist, so the duality of Pfeiffer's ghostly boxers – capable of beating and being battered for the audience's pleasure, yet stripped of individuality – resonated with his personal history. Leonardo described experiencing the "psychic demands of performing invincibility" for a crowd of thirsty voyeurs.



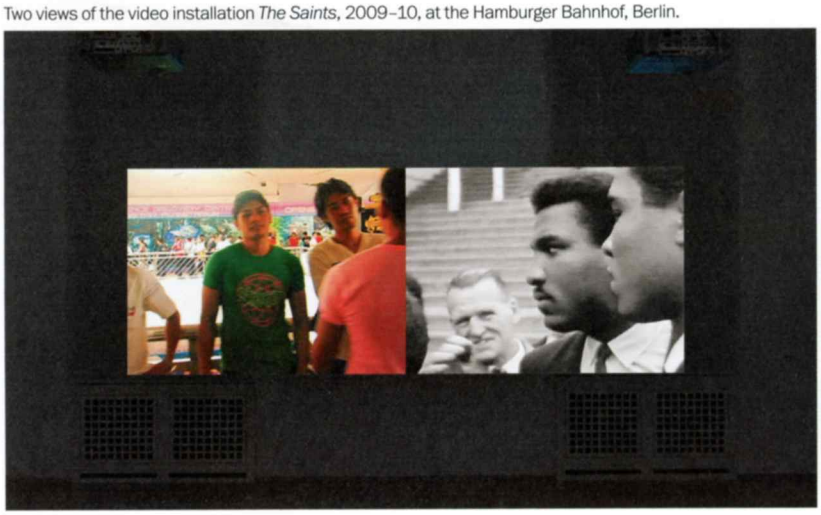
Two views of *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila)*, 2001. Opposite, a still from *The Long Count (Thrilla in Manila)*.

The Long Count helped set the stage for Pfeiffer's signature editing strategy – erasing information so as to refocus attention – which became a constant throughout his career. In his 2022 single-channel video *Red Green Blue*, the main event, a football game, remains offscreen; instead, Pfeiffer cuts together images from the sidelines – the cheerleaders, marching band, spectators, coaches, and technicians – that respond to the match and construct the pomp and ceremony around it. Here, Pfeiffer is less interested in the "stars" of the show, as it were, than in the totality of a show's shape and context, whose elements he picks apart and casts in unexpected proportions to reveal their latent dynamics of power and desire.

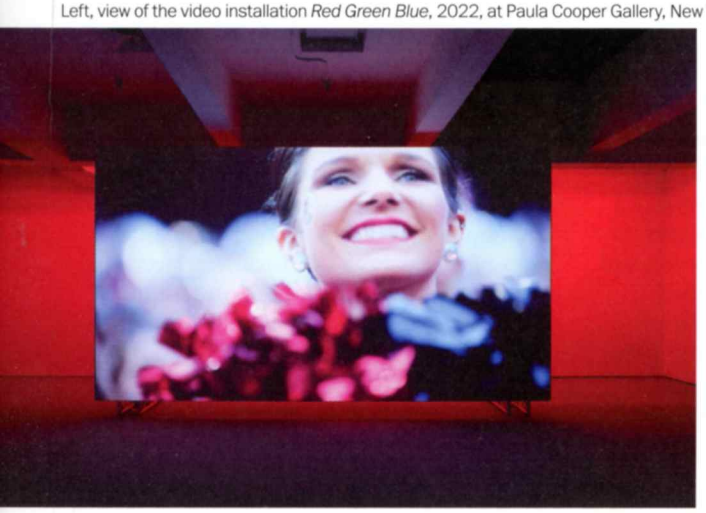
In the '90s, Pfeiffer was also actively involved in the Asian/Pacific Islander caucus of ACT UP New York, an AIDS activist group, and the Godzilla coalition, which advocated for increased institutional representation for Asian American artists and curators. He has continued to stay involved. In the 2010s, he met artist Josh Kline through a network of Filipino and Filipino-American artists living in New York. Kline, whose early experiments in Photoshop were influenced by his encounters with Pfeiffer's rotoscoping techniques (such as in *The Long Count*), remembers growing closer to the older artist through their conversations about postcolonial and diasporic identity. As with the other members of their "potluck dinner" group, they shared the belief that exerting their agency as artists meant exploiting and teasing out the facets of their hybrid experiences in abundant political and historical directions.

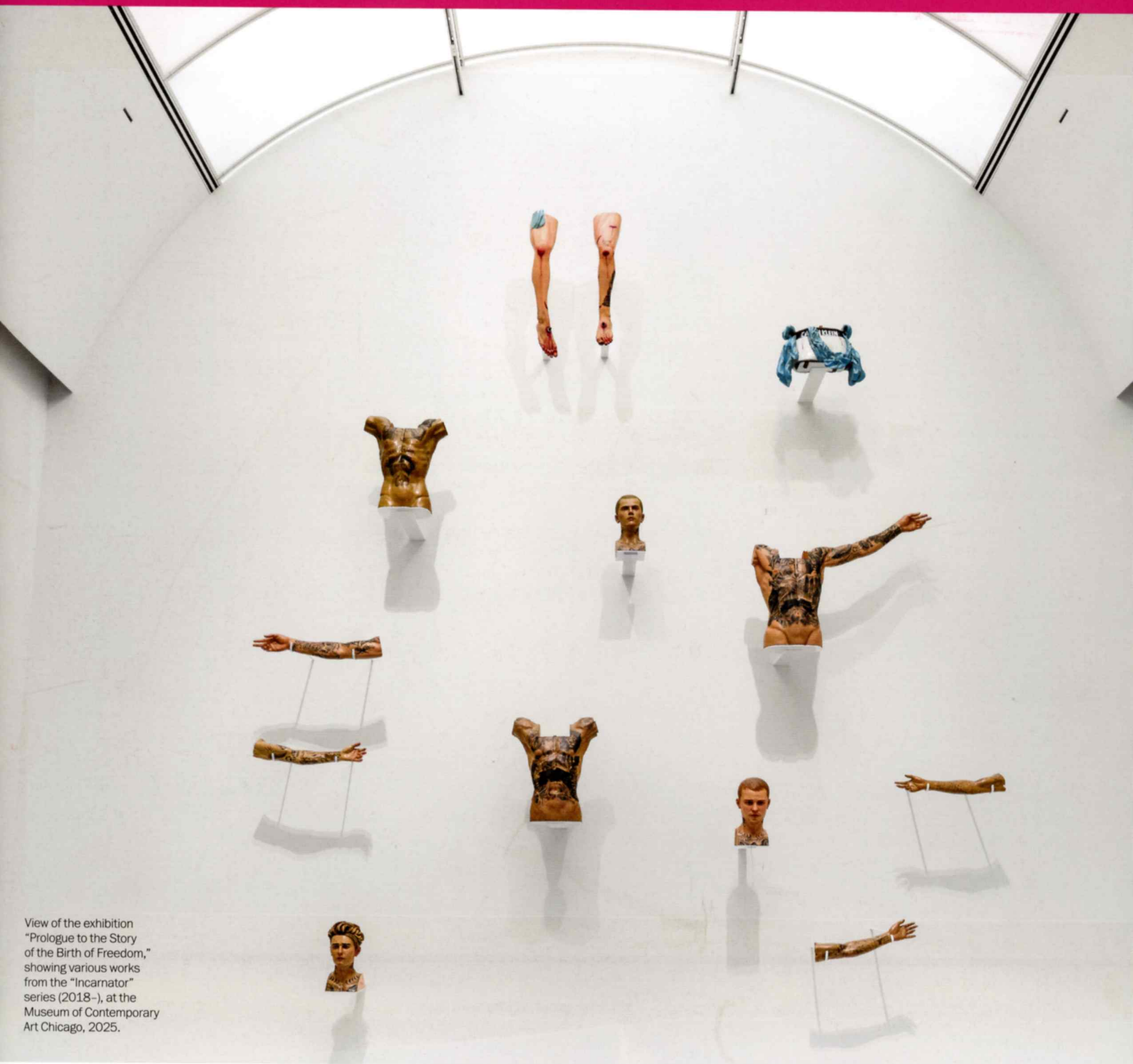
This hybrid approach – which was at odds with the '90s idea of multiculturalism and identity politics as popularized by the 1993 Whitney Biennial – can be seen in Pfeiffer's recent

Two views of the video installation *The Saints*, 2009–10, at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.



Left, view of the video installation *Red Green Blue*, 2022, at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and right, a still from *Red Green Blue*.





View of the exhibition "Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom," showing various works from the "Incarnator" series (2018–), at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2025.

Incarnator (2018–), a video piece that weaves together clips from a Justin Bieber concert and a Catholic procession in the Philippines. On display with the video is a sculptural representation of Bieber's tattooed body, the dismembered figure carved from wood resembling a devotional icon. The unsettling nature of the replica, which has been installed surrounded by small busts of Filipino woodcarvers' children, also underscores the sculpture's relationship to mass production and labor outsourcing in different parts of the world. "Despacito," the 2017 Spanish-language pop single featuring Bieber, plays throughout the video, connecting Spanish colonization in the Philippines to American cultural hegemony in a thrillingly mysterious manner. Yet for all their cultural links and resonances, the riches in Pfeiffer's works seem inexhaustible, spilled out into the blurry horizon of history. By extension, he makes a powerful statement on the irreducibility of identity itself.

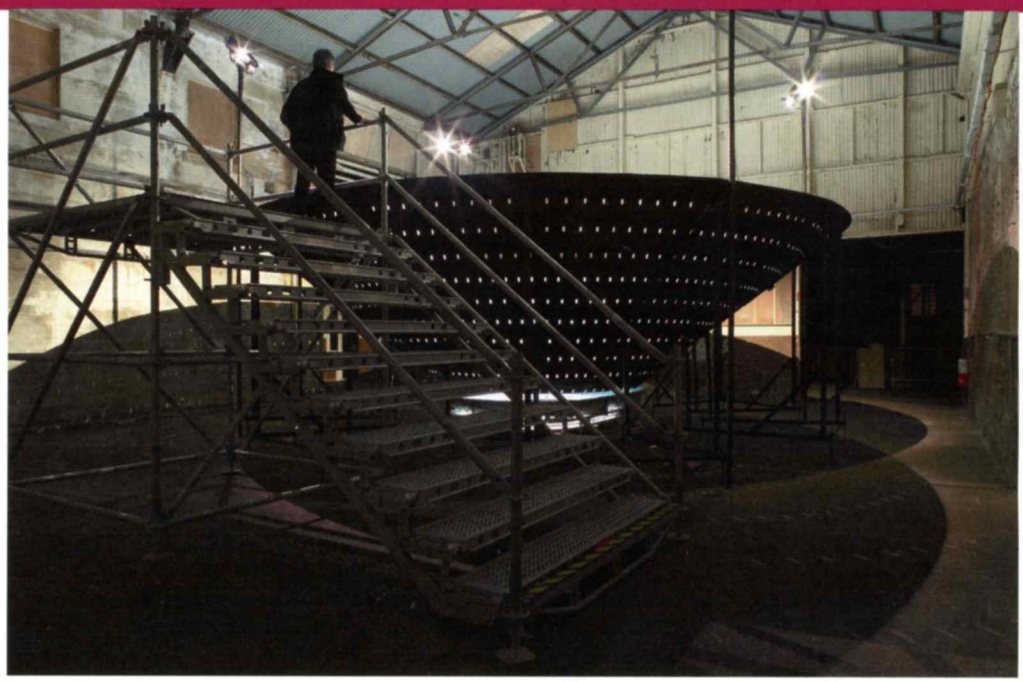
In a 2019 interview with art historian Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, Pfeiffer cites his discovery of classical architecture – specifically the structure of the stadium or coliseum – as foundational to his thinking about collective experience: forms of communion that run deeper than the shallow parameters of, say, ethnicity or nationalism. His vortex-like sculptural installation *Vitruvian Figure* (2008), which imagines in miniature an arena built for one

million spectators, exemplifies this career-long fixation and Pfeiffer's interest in the modalities of space and time to shape social behaviors.

Pfeiffer has experimented with altered environments not only in his practice but in his institutional undertakings. In 2004 he cofounded the artist residency Denniston Hill with artist Julie Mehretu and architect Lawrence Chua, seeking to challenge the increasingly unreasonable demands placed on artistic production by prioritizing time for rest and creative leisure. Leonardo, who was on the board of governors of the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture with Pfeiffer, recalls being part of an online planning cohort with him during the pandemic. The group created an alternative programming model for the residency, underscoring the perpetual need to reinvent conditions of downtime, labor, and pleasure.

Now, Pfeiffer is returning to the stadium – that living organism of culture and society – at full scale. Last year, Pfeiffer was awarded one of the first commissions by the Barclays Center's inaugural arts program, launched to complement the revitalized popularity of women's basketball in the city after New York Liberty's WNBA Championship win in 2024. Pfeiffer will be working with a group of artists and young people from the surrounding area in Brooklyn to study the Barclays Center's inner workings: everything from its broadcast feeds and its strategies in both crowd control and advertising to the operation of the Jumbotron and its interaction with live audiences. Pfeiffer's eyes get big. "It'll be me doing my media laboratory thing – but triple the moving parts," he says. This scale-up also describes the evolution of Pfeiffer's practice, which seems to stretch progressively both forward and backward in time, looking to the future with its new technologies and to the past with its enduring templates of human behavior.

In 2025 the crisis of post-truth politics, along with the growing power of Christian nationalism and the reversal of a decades-long decline in religious groups in the United States, give Pfeiffer's work a renewed heft. Modernity, counter to its association with secularism and rationality, is steeped in the grammar of superstition and tribalism, Pfeiffer explains, adding that his work is about "poking holes" in modern myths. "There's an illusion in the West that history is about linear progress; that we're wiping away the past in favor of something better," he says, "but now it's clearer than ever that that's just propaganda." ●



Views of the installation *Vitruvian Figure*, 2008, at the 16th Biennale of Sydney.