

# ***IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS FOOTBALL***

Online Art Exhibition

July 20 — September 20, 2023



Magdalena Paz, *Women's World Cup I*, 2023, archival pigment print, 16.3 x 25.4 in.; Image Courtesy the Artist.

(Brooklyn, New York & Artsy.net) — Romi Studio is proud to present *In the beginning, there was Football*, an online exhibition exploring the world of football and art on the eve of the 2023 Women's World Cup, set to be co-hosted in New Zealand and Australia. Celebrating the universal nature of the sport, this exhibition presents ten artists from around the world: **Shannon Bono, Marcin Dudek, Ella Littwitz, Jefferson Medeiros, Magdalena Paz, Sheida Soleimani, Sungrea Kim, Victoria Villasana, Wendy White, and Hannah Wilkinson**, who herself will be playing for New Zealand in her fourth FIFA World Cup tournament this July.

"In the *beginning*" alludes to a genesis of time and "there was Football" alludes to disruption and transformation that ensues. Football, once a peaceful game with simple rules, has been affected by the realities of the "outside arena" of life—prejudices, gender inequality, corruption, business interests, and political influences—have permeated onto the football field, casting a dark and long shadow. A recent example in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup was the threat of a "broadcast blackout" which reveals the disparities that exist today:

*whereas broadcasters pay USD 100-200 million for the men's FIFA World Cup, they offer only USD 1-10 million for the FIFA Women's World Cup. This is a slap in the face of all the great FIFA Women's World Cup players and indeed of all women worldwide. So, to be very clear, it is our moral and legal obligation not to undersell the FIFA Women's World Cup.*

— FIFA President Gianni Infantino (May 1, 2023)

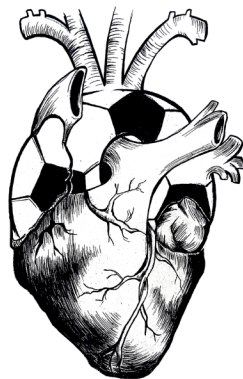
Though a compromise was eventually reached just weeks before the FIFA Women's World Cup, the historical void in media coverage and documentation in women's sports remains an ongoing issue. This exhibition aims to address this interrupted coverage and history by presenting artworks that fill the voids and propel the game and its fundamental values towards the mainstream: women's sports as sports. Furthermore, the group of artists utilizes the transformative potential of sport to prompt new narratives about football, ultimately inspiring new forms of remembrance and mythmaking.

On the beautiful occasion of the ninth Women's World Cup in Oceania, this exhibition celebrates football and the way artists can use it to define our times, reclaim lost time, and evoke a long overdue nostalgia. This exhibition has full "coverage" in its online format and will broadcast worldwide a diverse range of works made between 2007 and today: sculptures, small to large-scale paintings, sports photography, textiles, and four sets of limited edition prints made specifically for this exhibition. Further mirroring the game itself, each of the ten artists embodies a player on the field, while the viewer assumes the active role as eleventh player—akin to a vigilant goalkeeper—holding the greatest vantage point and liable for the game's outcome.

***Thank you to Fujifilm North America Corporation, Galerie Géraldine Banier in Paris, Harlan Levey Projects in Brussels, and OOF Gallery in London.***

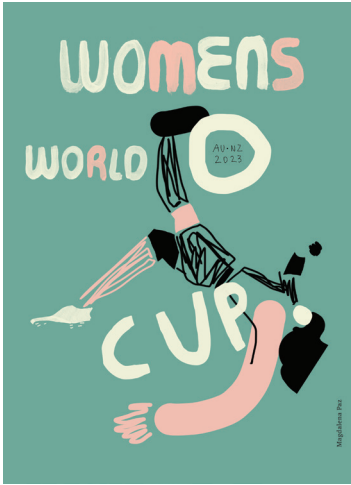
## ***In the beginning, there was Football. . .***

. . . invites viewers to reflect on this interconnectedness of the 90-minute game within the larger world. One artist passes the ball to another, exploring the significance of football in society through art and contributing to the mythmaking around the Women's World Cup.



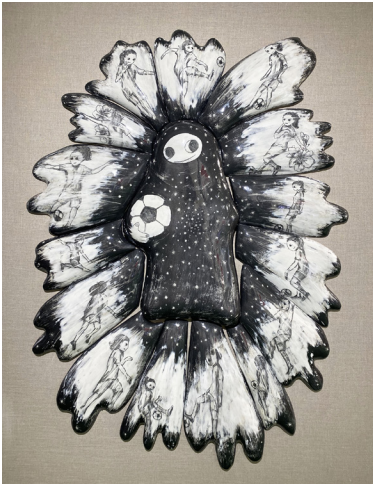
Hannah Wilkinson, *Heart in the Game* [left] & *Soccerates* [right]; both 2023, archival deep matte velvet paper, ed. of 25 + 1 A.P., 17 x 11 in.; Image Courtesy the Artist.

This framework of inquiry takes inspiration from **Hannah Wilkinson**, a three-time Olympian, four-time FIFA World Cup player, musician, and visual artist. Wilkinson's two limited edition prints use powerful imagery and poetical language to explore the philosophy and emotion in football. Her work reveals her deep emotional connection and proximity to the game. In *Heart in the Game*, football is inseparable from her sense of self. On the other hand, in *Soccerates*, Wilkinson playfully positions a football at the feet of Socrates, applying the Socratic method in the context of football. This juxtaposition alludes to the pursuit of virtues and the enrichment of the soul through football, comparable to the ancient Greek peripatetic school. Here, substituting walking with playing football as a means of acquiring knowledge and wisdom. One print focuses on logic ('logos') in understanding the game's significance in society, and its associated ethics and values, while the other explores emotion ('pathos') equating football with love, and expressing what is at stake with football—the heart.



Magdalena Paz, *Women's World Cup III*, 2023, silkscreen, ed. of 50, 16.3 x 25.4 in. [left]; *Empty Landscape*, 2021, acrylic, oil pastel, dry pastel on canvas, wood outer boundary, 56 9/10 x 41 1/10 in. [right]; Image Courtesy the Artist.

The prints created by Chilean artist **Magdalena Paz**, inspired by the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, are representations of her love for the game as an athlete, and her desire to break away from traditional stereotypes associated with women's football. In her visual research, she found that existing illustrations of the Women's World Cup often relied on feminine elements such as pink, flowers, and girls with ponytails, rather than focusing on the actual sport. In contrast, men's posters usually featured soccer-related imagery like a soccer ball or a goal. Challenging these preconceived notions, Paz made the focal point of her prints feature a single, strong figure executing a bicycle kick, colloquially known as a "Chilena" in Chile and other Latin American countries. This movement symbolizes the incredible athleticism that will be on display throughout the tournament. Paz's work includes and captures an authentic representation of a Women's World Cup.



Sungrea Kim, *In the beginning it was football* [left] & *Shooting Star* [right]; both 2022, urethane foam, paper porridge, paper clay, formax, drawing, urethane coating, dimensions variable; Image Courtesy the Artist & Galerie Géraldine Banier.

The exhibition title refers to South Korean artist **Sungrea Kim's** Tree of Knowledge sculpture—wherein, the forbidden fruit is replaced by the forbidden football, and Adam and Eve are replaced by two happy magna-like figures. Here, the artist overturns John Milton's *Paradise Lost* narrative that is maintained in history, and breaks away from the original shame imposed on women. Eve ponders:

*And render me more equal, and perhaps,  
A thing not undesirable, sometime  
Superior: for inferior who is free?*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Book IX)



Sungrea Kim, *Free Kick*, 2022, urethane foam, paper porridge, paper clay, formax, drawing, urethane coating, 22.8 x 22.4 x 2 in.; Image Courtesy the Artist & Galerie Géraldine Banier.

For Sungrea Kim, women voluntarily walk out of the Garden of Eden towards liberation—unparadised and yet free to play the beloved sport in peace. Alternatively, this sculpture can be an homage to the countless times women’s sports have needed a reintroduction into society and one final hard genesis to move forward in the game without setbacks. Moreover, Kim’s other “drawing-sculptures” are made as a response to the men’s FIFA World Cup in Qatar, feature an Islamic girl Laila in her burka inspired by Khaled Hosseini’s novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Kim’s four Laila-inspired sculptures return to the love of the sport—regardless of what people wear and where it’s played—people are happy just to play.



Sheida Soleimani, 2022, 2018, archival pigment print, ed. of 5 + 2 A.P., 24 x 18 in. [left]; *Arab Blockade*, 2018, archival pigment print, ed. of 5 + 2 A.P., 18 x 24 in. [right]; Courtesy The Artist & Harlan Levey Projects.

**Sheida Soleimani’s** prints revisit the 2022 FIFA Men’s World Cup too, and the history of marginalized communities affected by the petroleum trade. As an Iranian-American visual artist, professor, and wildlife rehabilitator, Soleimani draws the theatrical curtain of those in power in her “Medium of Exchange” series, and unveils a carefully staged scene made lovingly in her studio, which exposes the political absurdities and vulnerability of those oppressed. Her prints, inspired by queer portraiture and food photography, portray not a cry but defiance to “spilled milk” in major historical events around football as spectacle.



Marcin Dudek, *Ugochukwu*, 2019 - 2020, acrylic paint, image transfer, medical tape, uv varnish on wood, 10 1/4 x 7 1/4 in. [left]; *How Strong Are Your Teeth*, 2015, steel, stone from a railway track, 17 3/8 x 6 3/4 x 4 in.; Courtesy The Artist & Harlan Levey

Also, pointing our gaze to the darker side of football, the exhibition revisits the 1990s in Poland with multidisciplinary artist **Marcin Dudek**. His sculpture, *How Strong Are Your Teeth*, and small collage, *Ugochukwu*, explore the subcultures of football and the crowd psychology in the stands, primarily hooliganism and violence.



Jefferson Medeiros, *La Pelota Perforada*, 2022, soccer ball, ed. of 3 + 2 A.P. [left]; *Trava Social*, 2019, soccer cleats and 762 rifle shell, ed. of 3 + 2 A.P. [right]; Image Courtesy the Artist.

On the other side of the hemisphere, in São Gonçalo, Brazilian artist **Jefferson Medeiros**, continues to explore how violence pervades the sport beyond the field. As a professor in Rio de Janeiro, he has witnessed students forsake their educations in pursuit of a career in football, only to fall into violence. In his sculpture, *Trava Social*, one of the spikes of the cleats is replaced by a found bullet casing to express violence as an impediment to the full development of young athletes. His works are not monuments to violence, but different ways of thinking about it that prompt a “this shouldn’t be here” visceral response from the viewer. This same feeling occurs in *La Pelota Perforada*—a football is deflated with an abstract incision that resembles a map of Brazil or Latin America. By deliberately puncturing the surface, he conveys his belief that football is a synthesis of society, wherein the wound in the football is a non-return answer of what is happening beyond the field.



Wendy White, *Michelle Akers (The Warrior)*, 2014, acrylic and inkjet on PVC, wood artist's frame, plexiglas appliqué, custom decal, 61 x 41 x 2 in. [left]; *Ronald (Crying)*, 2014, acrylic and inkjet on PVC, wood artist's frame, plexiglas appliqué, 61 x 61 x 2 in. [right]; Image Courtesy the Artist.

**Wendy White** is inspired by the shared goal of artists and athletes to achieve the unachievable. Her paintings represent the multitudes of the game by utilizing real footballs, adidas logos, and fonts directly applied to her canvases. Her painting of the FIFA Female Player of the Century, *Michelle Akers ("The Warrior")* depicts earned and absolute victory, which is juxtaposed with her painting of Cristiano Ronaldo which portrays defeat and a painted wash of tears. What drove her to create some of these paintings was the lack of photographs and source imagery that existed for women athletes compared to their male counterparts.

*Time, instead of adding to the luster of women's sports as it does men's, erodes it.*  
 — Kate Fagan, *NY Times: What Would Happen if Women Athletes Got the Mythology Treatment They Deserve?* (April 3, 2023)

White's paintings lovingly rectify the variable of time in women's sports, and gives them the hype and glory they deserve as competitors.



Shannon Bono, *Weaving Body Spirit (print edition)*, 2023, giclee print on Canson Baryta Gloss, ed. of 14., 11 4/5 x 11 4/5 in.; Image Courtesy the Artist.

The historical stop-and-go motion is echoed in three prints made near Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in north London, where **Shannon Bono** lives and works. Bono's work is inspired by African spirituality, black womanhood, and the magical movements of West African masqueraders. In 2022, Bono formed a connection with Chioma Ubogagu, a footballer who at the time was playing for the Women's Tottenham Spurs Team. Chioma became Bono's muse, and unaware to Bono at the time, Chioma was being suspended for nine months due to anti-doping violations related to prescribed acne medication. This situation exposes another facet of the issue, emphasizing the societal pressures imposed on women to conform to societal pressures to "look good" and perform at a high level, and recalls the lack of research conducted on women's health in sports.



Shannon Bono, *Chioma*, 2022, oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas 78 7/10 x 43.3 in. [left]; *Weaving Body Spirit I*, 2022, acrylic and spray paint on unstretched linen, framed: 17 1/8 x 12 2/5 in. [right]; Image Courtesy the Artist.

While some progress has been made, such as New Zealand opting for blue shorts instead of white due to period anxieties, addressing these challenges requires additional time, research, social acceptance, and investment to find solutions. Regardless, Bono persisted in creating an extraordinary body of work that captures Chioma in motion and celebrates her athletic achievements. Despite facing difficult times and challenges, Bono’s art instills confidence and empowers women, highlighting their resilience and strength in motion.



Victoria Villanasa, *Rise Up*, 2023, paper with textile intervention, 18 x 13 in. [left]; *Your Power*, 2018, paper with textile intervention, 20 x 16 in. [right]; Image Courtesy the Artist.

Dividing her time between Mexico and England, **Victoria Villanasa** is a visual textile artist whose work in this exhibition, like *Take Back Your Power* and *As Within So Without*, aims to inspire a strong mentality that turns adversity into opportunity. Her signature style intuitively weaves colorful yarn into black-and-white iconic photographs. In her piece, *Rise Up*, she depicts Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to officially register and complete the Boston Marathon in 1967, despite facing physical and psychological barriers. For Villanasa, yarn represents a soft and inviting material that symbolizes a sense of belonging. By embroidering yarn into Switzer’s trailblazing path, the artist solidifies her rightful place in the realm of competition. The loose yarn in front of Switzer signifies the ongoing process of individual growth, transformation, and the unfinished nature captured in the photograph. 56 years later, women continue to strive for recognition as athletes and demand respect.

As an example, the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup promises prize money of \$110 million, which marks a 300% increase from 2010. However, it remains significantly less than the men's prize money in Qatar by \$330 million. Furthermore, there is distance from FIFA and compliance issues on how players are compensated by their respective Football Federations. This lack of success and equality at the top level poses challenges for individual countries to effectively implement equitable measures themselves. To publicly raise awareness about the poor treatment by Jamaican Football Federation, the Jamaican Women's National Team published a viral letter this June leading up to the Women's World Cup:

*We are constantly serving in multiple capacities, trying to overcome inadequate and often unacceptable circumstances, while doing our best to meet the physical and mental demands of the sport we love so much.*

— The Reggae Girlz, the Jamaican Women's National Team (June 15, 2023)



Ella Littwitz, *Matter of Time*, 2023, installation view *Substrate*, curated by Tamar Margalit, CCA Tel Aviv - Yafo, 2023. Photo credit: Daniel Hanoach. Courtesy The Artist & Harlan Levey Projects.

Despite the challenges on and off the field, there is that word "love" again present from the beginning. This exhibition comes full circle with Israeli artist **Ella Littwitz** and the genealogy of football unearthed in her two artifacts-cum-sculptures. She places one fossilized football, spanning generations and civilizations, next to a smaller Geode, also known as "Elijah Ball" (or sometimes "Elijah Watermelon"), a hollow stone that is formed inside a rock because of the decomposition of organic matter. Subtly, Littwitz explores the likeness of a very human activity of football to the all-encompassing backdrop of "deep time" in geology. This duality prompts contemplation on the significance of football in shared history within the context of the larger natural world.

*In the beginning, there was Football* celebrates the likeness of football to life, embraces football's ability to synthesize information about society, and evokes an overdue sense of nostalgia to the lineage of all its players. By illuminating significant figures and stories, these artists foster a deeper understanding of football as a shared history and cultural phenomenon. Rather than relying on grand reforms overnight, these artists affect viewers and change begins in the hearts of spectators. With over 1.25 million tickets sold for the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, the time is now to immerse ourselves in the joy and love of football.

**For any inquiries or further information, please contact [info@romistudio.io](mailto:info@romistudio.io) or visit our website at [romistudio.io](http://romistudio.io).**