

OOOF

The Art & Football Magazine







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CEVDET EREK:

‘AWAY TERRACE (US AND THEM)’

LIVERPOOL'S MOST interesting stadium reveal of 2025 wasn't Everton FC's dockside spaceship. That one is fine if you're a fan of clunky architectural metaphors for a club's future (the silver blob) crashing into its heritage (the faux-warehouse it sits on), but it's not a proper stadium is it – you know, an old-school rectangle typology with four sides of compressed tiered seating.

But that type of stadium could still be found in Liverpool, in a small Baltic Triangle district industrial unit, where, for the Liverpool Biennial, Turkish artist Cevdet Erek created a vast, abstracted stadium sculpture. Curated by Marie-Anne McQuay, the city-wide biennial took the overarching theme of 'Bedrock', with Erek's offer suitably formed of hand-pressed earth blocks. Stacked into inward-facing steps, the simple form is unmistakably that of a stadium, akin to a simplified Goodison Park or Anfield, though offering a far more intimate atmosphere.

When invited to participate, Erek wasn't sure what work he would make. McQuay was already planning to show works from his 'Rulers and Rhythm Studies' series in another exhibition in the RIBA North galleries, currently shared with Tate Liverpool while they refurbish their own.

'Marie-Anne probably wanted me to make one of these measuring

works about Liverpool, because I always work site-specifically about a place,' Erek says, talking from his Istanbul Technical University office, where he teaches at the Center for Advanced Studies in Music. Erek studied architecture and is a lifelong Fenerbahçe supporter, so upon arriving in Liverpool for a few days and scavenging for ideas, he asked McQuay if he could visit one of the city's stadiums. He managed both the big ones: getting to watch a match at Anfield and touring Goodison Park shortly before Everton migrated the men's team to their shiny new home. 'Football in art,' Erek says, 'can be a dangerous subject, a cliché thing'. But he felt compelled, not to make a work about Liverpool FC or Everton FC, but to use football as a distillation of wider concerns: 'I wanted to use a simple element, or the difference between two elements, to talk about something deeper.'

Erek's earth-brick sculpture 'Away Terrace (Us and Them)' is loud. Upon entering the gallery, a cacophony of rhythm hits visitors, reverberating off metal walls and ceilings. 'It could feel like chaos,' he says, 'but if the visitor is curious, they hear two different beats.' If that curious visitor then walked around the sculpture, carefully listening to sounds coming from eight brick-sized apertures, they would slowly realise that seven of



the rhythms are the same, and in the corner, the eighth opening thumps out a separate beat.

‘It’s not really a polyrhythm, they’re two totally different tempos – but from a distance, they become one composition.’ Sound here orders spatial experience, the two rhythms contradicting and fighting, then sometimes coming together – the legibility and intermingling of differing beats entirely dependent on the listener’s position and relationship to the eight speakers.

Segregation is a key theme. Seven of the speakers sit in the ‘home’ section of the stadium sculpture, each with the same beat but with differing sonic qualities – one a slight reverb, one with bass drum, another adding metallic crashes, ‘each with shades or depth,’ adds Ereğ. When walking around his stadium, these can be read as distinct areas, just as atmosphere in a stadium shifts across its architecture. Then, in the ‘away section’, the beat changes. It is faster, rawer and slightly louder, and where the other seven are digitally created tracks, this one was laid down by Ereğ – also a drummer in Istanbul-based band Nekropsi – in a Liverpool recording studio.

In a group exhibition at the city’s Walker Art Gallery, Ereğ showed four further works, empty, frame-like wooden wall-sculptures, simplified representations of stadiums as seen



from above. Anfield and Goodison Park make up two of them, gold leaf highlighting sections reserved for away fans. The other two are both of Fenerbahçe’s Şükrü Saracoğlu Stadyumu, identical other than a shift in the amount of gilding, reflecting the reduction in space offered to away fans – the before, as it was in Ereğ’s 1980s childhood, split into quarters for a home/away 50/50 split, and the after, leaving away fans compressed into a tiny corner of the ground.

Here, as with the sound in the larger sculpture, the split between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is demarked through division, whether visually or rhythmically. Pointing at his office window, Ereğ says that on a matchday he can hear the crowds at Beşiktaş’s stadium on the European side of Istanbul. Rivals Fenerbahçe, Ereğ’s team, are based on the other side of the city, across the Bosphorus: ‘If I was to walk there, to the Asian side, I would also be walking to my childhood neighbourhood, and to my childhood.’

Turkish football has changed since Ereğ’s youth. Now harder to get a ticket – especially with reduced away sections – the artist says that ‘clubs started using fandom for commerce’. Turkey, too, has changed a lot over the period, with ‘terrorism and political aggression – not only

physical aggression, but through segregation’. In such a climate, Ereğ fears that we are removing spaces for the other to exist, in wider society as well as football, pointing out that recent Fenerbahçe derbies have not allowed any away fans, leading to a ‘mono-atmosphere without supporters of the other team, the most boring thing I can remember’.

While borne of a passion for football, his earth-brick stadium isn’t about football at all. By reducing the complex architectures of Anfield, Goodison Park and the Şükrü Saracoğlu into geometric sculpture, Ereğ creates poetic spaces in which the language of football is a reflection of wider political and social structures. He also created a thumping, joyous rhythm, reminding viewers that differences and opposition are not awkward characteristics to be avoided in politics or society, but fundamental elements of its operation and energy. **OOF**

SHEILDA



SOLEIMANI

THE FEBRILE POLITICS of the Middle East have consumed world football in recent months. In a World Cup qualifier on the 11th of October 2025, Erling Haaland scored a sumptuous hat-trick as Norway dominated Israel at the Ullevaal Stadion in Oslo under a sky of red, green, and black flares while pro-Palestinian protesters marched through the city. As Qatar gets closer to hosting the Fifa Arab Cup in late November, there are increasing reports of the country's crackdown on protest and freedom of speech (Qatar, who hosted the Arab Cup in 2021, will also stage the 2029 and 2033 iterations, getting real bang for their buck after the £5 billion outlay for the 2022 World Cup). All while Tommy Robinson was in Israel sporting the blue and yellow of Maccabi Tel Aviv and threatening to break West Midlands Police's ban on their fans, who are notorious for hooliganism, from travelling to Birmingham for a Europa League fixture against Aston Villa on the 6th November. For Iranian-American artist Sheida Soleimani, none of this comes as any surprise. 'The collective energy, the rage and elation around wins and losses – mobs, parades, riots – mirror the emotional charge of protest,' she says. It is this charge which animates her artistic work on football and protest, which is often concerned with how crowds

mobilise around athletes and teams with the same urgency of political commitment.

Soleimani's photographic tableaux explore the intersection between art and protest. In 2022, at Harlan Levey Projects in Brussels, the artist displayed a series responding to the Qatar World Cup. Each photograph in the series is, as she describes, 'anchored by a satellite image of the region where a specific crude oil blend is produced'. Layered onto these images are depictions of foodstuffs like milk (sometimes contaminated by oily blacks) and manufactured goods, things which Qatar tends to import from its neighbours because of the agricultural and trade systems that have been reshaped or disrupted by the presence of refineries. Oil pipes flow in and out of the scenes, while in '2022' (p16 features an image from the same series) a woman's body lays on the ground, defeated and dejected, her skin painted green like a football pitch; the black boot and football on her back appear to have delivered the *coup de grace*. 'These juxtapositions trace how oil wealth fuels both excess and dependency', Soleimani says, 'and how the spectacle of sport can be used to obscure these entanglements.'

For Soleimani, sportswashing exploits the spectacle of sport to mask the crimes of the state, and



'GCC (Group)'



'Qatar World Dairy [1]'



'Arab Blockade'



'GCC Trophy'

so 'distract from the extractive and often violent systems underpinning the sports industrial complex: billion-dollar stadiums built by migrant labourers, construction that destroys native habitats and infrastructures financed by regimes with deep human rights abuses.' In her work, she seeks to interrupt that spectacle, cut it up and see through it, and so reimagine its aesthetic and political values. Like all great protest placards, though, there is humour and warmth to be found in Soleimani's pictures. In 'Qatar World Cup Dairy [1]' (2018), she has dressed up in the burnt burgundy and white strip of the Qatari football team and put on an oversized paper mask of the country's Emir, Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, with her own beaming smile seen through a cut-out hole. Her works are playful and inventive, more interested in mocking the propaganda machine of the Gulf states than directly exposing the crimes that sportswashing is designed to cover up.

Bold gestures and body language are employed on the football field just as they are on the political rostrum, like a silent language designed to manipulate us into identifying with 'individuals we've never met, yet invest with intense devotion,' she says. 'I think of body language identification and coaching as the astrology of

professional culture, a supposedly universal code that promises to reveal power and authority.' This perspective was especially prevalent in her exhibition 'Levers of Power' at Denny Dimin Gallery in New York in 2020, in which she isolated the gestures of politicians – focusing on just their hands – to prompt viewers to question the role of body language in popular media images. 'If monuments crystallise gestures of power, and can be read as gestural objects themselves, photographs of world leaders capture a different, fleeting register of political gesture... What happens when they become detached from their bodies and histories? What is the line between performance and political cosplay?' Sometimes, it seems, not very much. As the flames of geopolitical unrest continue to be fanned across the Middle East, and the spectacle of sport continues to be kicked about like a political football, our task will be to distinguish between the game itself and the contentious politics with which it is now so often infected.

OOF

A

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LARSEN



'Playing Deus'

BEYOND THE ODD KICKABOUT

on the school tarmac with my brother, I didn't start playing football until I was 28. Growing up, it was just another thing (along with mud fights, denim jackets and Chad Michael Murray's haircut) that I was told was not for me, 'not for girls'. Turns out, it was the other way around – football was for me, it was the being a girl that wasn't.

I started playing football for a trans-inclusive grassroots club shortly after I came out as non-binary. I didn't join for the sport, I joined because I was lonely. I had hardly any queer friends at the time, let alone any trans friends.

Instantly, it changed my life. It was gay, it was trans and it was fun. It was two and a half hours every week where I could escape from the daily micro (and occasional macro) aggressions that clouded the early days of my transition. As I slowly got to know people, it became apparent that while we all enjoyed the ball-booting, it was a surplus benefit to the real reason we showed up every Wednesday (even in the face of losing every single league match for 12 weeks straight): community. People join Goal Diggers FC to find their people, to find belonging.

A lot of the work I make is about belonging, how it can show up in our lives and where its fragile corners can eclipse or emerge.

I'm interested in the ritualistic aspect of belonging, but also where its boundaries can collapse into commodification. Fashion and domestic objects are central motifs in my work, contested sites where this collapse can play out materially. Religious institutions, political and class tribes are also sites my work seeks to scrutinize; where belonging is not neutral but dependent on towing the party line. This is particularly pertinent in relation to queerness and transness, where every community and space is at all times highly proximal to the question – who wields the power to strip this away?

I was recovering from top surgery earlier this year when I saw the news that the Football Association (off the back of the Supreme Court judgement) were banning trans women from playing in all FA-affiliated leagues, even at amateur grassroots level. Unable to lift my arms further than raising my phone to my face, I watched from the sofa, via Instagram reels, as my team protested at Wembley, appeared on national news outlets and organised community kickabouts objecting to the ban. 'Playing Deus' is a work I made in the immediate aftermath of this news. Stitching from my sickbed, I sewed a doctored version of my British passport, printed on leather and adapted to display



'Stigmata'



'Playing Deus II'

the information that I wished my new gender-hybrid body could somehow map onto my government identification, into the form of a 32-panel football. An ironic comment on the political footballing of trans identity, but also an active gesture in imagining what could be possible beyond the borders of state-assigned sex.

Much of the rhetoric that underpins anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment in the West still stems from archaic religious doctrines. I'm interested in unpicking these indirect but insidious links, which I explored in 'Playing Deus II', a mashup of an England football scarf and a Catholic stole – a garment worn by priests during the 'anointing of the sick', a ritual which has controversial links to conversion therapy. The work features an England men's shirt from 2004, a watershed year for trans rights in the UK with the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act, and a 2025 Lionesses training shirt to signify our present, where those very same rights are becoming undone.

I wrote in a text recently that being trans often feels like 'being constantly surrounded by small deaths' – death to given names; death to tissue and sinew that doesn't belong; death to friendships and family ties that don't, can't or won't affirm us. And it's actions like this one from the

FA that can make that proximity to fragility constantly felt.

The works in my show 'All For One, One For None' at OOF Gallery in 2025 exist as a stark reminder of the safety concerns that plague our community, drawing on the aesthetic of Judeo-Christian memorial rituals as symbols for death, rebirth and metamorphosis. This is perhaps best exemplified in 'Stigmata', a 12-panel leather football printed with the scars from my top surgery, deflated on a plinth resembling the cold tiling of a locker room floor. The work takes its name from the Stigmatics of Christianity, who have similarly been framed as suffering mystics, or occasionally, mentally unwell pariahs.

These works are about death, but they're also an exploration of how through all of these 'small deaths' we can gain so much life. My favourite work in the show is 'Communion'; 11 concrete casts of LED-powered tea lights, which are often lit as devotional or celebratory acts within multiple faiths. The lights are arranged in the Lionesses' Euro '25 winning 4-3-3 formation, a symbol of what can be possible when we're somewhere that we belong, and that belongs to us. **OOF**



'Communion'

DION



KITSON

FEW ARTISTS ENGAGE as deeply, or humorously, with the absolute tedious everydayness of football quite like Dion Kitson. The young Midlands-based conceptualist, and die-hard Wolverhampton Wanderers fan, has woven the sport into almost all of his work. Not the glamour, though, or the glory, not the crowds or the passion, just the total, basic, mundanity of football, over and over again.

‘I remember my first game: Wolves versus Gillingham, 0-0. I think I had to go to five games before I saw a goal. Those were the days,’ he says. A dull start to a life of fandom. ‘Then 4-3 [against] Leicester. If you look closely you can see a six-year-old Kitson crying at half-time in a jester hat. I haven’t checked but I am sure I’m on *Dream Team*. Do you remember that show?

I swear I watched an episode once where their keeper was predicting the future. Those were the days.’ For those who don’t have a clue about *Dream Team*, it was an early-2000s football soap on Sky about the fictional Harchester United, like *Holby City* meets *Ted Lasso*.

‘Then there was 1-0 [against] United. Ronaldo, Van Nistelrooy, Keane, Ferdinand. Couldn’t give a fuck. Kenny Miller slotting it past Tim Howard was the greatest moment of my life. Going into school the next day with your Wolves top hidden under your shirt,’ he says.

That’s the thing. Kitson does what almost no other football-adjacent artist dares to do: he acknowledges that, most of the time, it’s just a bit dull. Not uniquely or bleakly dull, just

realistically dull. Football, just like life, isn’t all thrills – it’s TV soaps and disappointment. And sometimes, if you’re really lucky, something brilliant will happen – like Kenny Miller leading lowly old Wolves to victory over some proper footballing behemoths – and suddenly it all feels worth it.

And once you’re into football, that’s it. ‘It’s like a drug. Once someone introduces it to you, you are done for.’ He’s watched it since he was a kid, and it has been a part of his work from the very beginning. Not just because he really likes it, but because football matters. ‘Football’s panto and expression, a class choir. The Glassboys, The Saddlers, The Blades, The Mariners. These nicknames trace a delicately intertwined pattern of industrial

labour, geography and class, condensed into histories of work, place and trade. They form an index of the labour that shaped towns, identities and the idea of England itself.’

Making work about football is also a convenient excuse to watch absolutely loads of football. ‘It’s probably my attempt to stay connected with it. The sad reality is I’m slowly coming to terms with the fact that after turning 30 I’ll never play for England. That was my dream, to play for England and be an artist. I am now one of those blokes who cries in the pub at England games. I can’t really explain it. It’s something I’ve watched religiously since I was six. I don’t know why my mum watches *EastEnders* but I presume it’s the same thing?’ Yeah, it probably is. **OOF**

‘I’M COMING
TO TERMS WITH
THE FACT THAT
I’LL NEVER PLAY
FOR ENGLAND’



ABANDONED FOOTBALLS

2016 ONWARDS

'They're kind of like prizes, trophies of decline, of growing older. It started with one, and then if you have 90-odd, it suddenly starts becoming art. I work in series: I squeeze something for all it's got, then move on and let the subject matter incubate for a bit. Lost footballs are great metaphors for a lost dream. I like deconstructing the balls, adding to them, animating them or decontextualising them. I played all day and every day as a kid, by a canal. I look back on the hours spent hurling bricks to the far side of a football drifting in the water, waiting for the ripples to nudge it back to the bank, or finding a large branch and slapping it again and again. I can't remember any shot, goal, or moment of playing, just the scenarios around it – a broken greenhouse window, diving onto dog shit, heads and volleys... growing up was a bit like *Lord of the Flies*, but with a football instead of a pig.'



'KEBAB'

2019

'I saw a bloke throw away an electric motor after fixing a coffee machine. I saved it from the bin and after 15 minutes I'd got a pile of rubbish spinning on a table. It's a sort of shrine to the absurdity of glory: shit pints, shit food, a dustbin of thoughts and objects. There's a ball in there, and a pair of signed Jody Craddock football boots from my playing days. Football only feels fun when you're winning, and right now my team, Wolves, are stuck at the bottom of the league, so my positive spins are few and far between. Pun intended.'

'FOOTBALL'

2020

'The dreaded lockdown works. "Foodball" was a small series of footballs used as vessels for various foods and fluids: chips, beer, milk, eggs, etc. The ball for the full English breakfast in particular has appeared in my work at least five times, reincarnated as different sculptures. I still haven't found the best thing for it. Last time I worked on it, it 'breathed', contracting and expanding magically, like a collapsed lung, in some attempt to reflect the decline of the nation. Cheery.'



'FAT BASTARD'

2020

'An important lesson in titling works. At first it was something like "All Hot Air"; my tutor at the time told me to call it "Fat Bastard" and he was right. Both comic and tragic, it was a one-minute sculpture I wanted to make in bulk and let go in the centre of London to show my support for the men's England team, a patriotic inflation but also a fragile, thin-skinned underbelly bobbing around in the rafters, ready to burst at anytime.'



FOOTBALL FILMS

2019 ONWARDS

'I call my films sketches; sometimes editing helps me process what I'm thinking or figure out the emotion I'm trying to get to. Doing them is probably just an excuse to watch moments from football highlights on repeat. I really like the portrait of Mo Salah being lasered. It's a horrific situation but looks like the geezer's raving.'



'FOOTBALL NETS'

2019 ONWARDS

'I never knew Archimedes invented the football, though I know Socrates played a bit. I was sitting one day imagining a football and its stitching, and then cutting its stitching, then deconstructing it. A sort of eureka moment happened when I realised a deconstructed football is a "football net". I got told I failed maths, but I grasp the structure, both mathematical and universal. The geometry of play,

competition, formation. From that first unpicking grew an exploration into the possible variations of the net; 52,000, I think. I've been trying for ages to use Python to create a visualisation of every single variation of the net. It is about canvas on canvas, deconstructing Nike logos. Football undone. Destruction in the pursuit of image. Collapse as method, collapse as meaning.'



'REALLY BIG SAM'

2025

'[The visual artist] Adam Wynn approached me and said he wanted to put up a giant poster of Big Sam in Dudley. Since it was my turf he asked for some help and I said he had to be eating orange chips. We love Big Sam, orange chips and Dudley, these are touchstones of identity, humour and belonging. It is rare for people here to enjoy their surroundings in a place where art, even street art, hardly exists. The massive reaction to "Really Big Sam" shows there is an appetite for people to celebrate their towns and heritage, but the underlying feeling has been bastardised and warped. The blame lies with developers and councils. Whenever I mention I'm from Dudley it's usually met with laughter, often from the supposedly open-armed and welcoming art crowd. That reaction says a lot about geography, class and the hierarchies baked into culture. For Big Sam himself to enjoy it is amazing. Sometimes art's not about unpicking, prodding or investigating, but producing something that people can enjoy. It is Dudley's answer to the Sistine Chapel.'

HEADS OF STATE

EUGENIO MERINO AND
INDECLINE'S ANTI-FASCIST
FOOTBALL ACTIONS





'Freedom Kick: Brazil' (Bolsonaro)

THE DISEMBODIED HEAD of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro rolls through the dirt. As a young man boots it as hard as he can, a drag queen celebrates, and her friends dance with her. It has been transported here in a black bin bag by an anonymous courier on a skateboard, for children and adults of all genders to gleefully kick across a concrete pitch and into the net. What other way to deal with a fascist dictator in this football-mad country, where opposition to its military regime was symbolised by Sócrates, the philosopher-playmaker of the men's national team who organised his club, Corinthians, into a player-led democracy that pressurised the dictatorship into bringing back presidential elections?

The head was obviously not real, it was only a fantasy, a collaborative artwork by Eugenio Merino and anonymous activist collective Indecline called 'Freedom Kick: Brazil'. But Bolsonaro, who has often associated himself with Brazil's famous yellow jersey and has support from stars such as Neymar and Ronaldinho, was livid. Astonishingly thin-skinned even by the miserable standards of 21st-century far-right crybullies, he took a rare break from being hospitalised by another bout of Covid to fume about the piece. He showed a printout of a tweet

depicting the work in a press conference. 'They play soccer with my head and nobody says a single thing,' he complained, launching an all-channels attack on the participants. 'This is not art, it's a threat to the president's life!' shrieked a TV news anchor. Pundits called them 'terrorists' and 'murderers'.

'Bolsonaro became aware of the project shortly after its release on YouTube in 2020,' Merino says. 'The video went viral and was covered extensively by Brazilian TV and newspapers. In turn, Indecline and the participants in the game received death threats, had their home addresses posted online and faced federal charges for, among other things, "inciting violence".' The charges were dropped and in the run-up to the 2022 election, Merino, Indecline and the teams – picked, as usual, from local communities of anarchists, punks and football fans – staged the action again. They unfurled a guerrilla pitch on a highway, filmed the game, and then threw the head to a masked cyclist to whisk away so it might be used another time. But it isn't needed again: the left-wing candidate, Lula, whose imprisonment on trumped-up charges in 2016 paved the way for Bolsonaro, won the presidency. Bolsonaro and his supporters attempted a coup. It failed: he was

sentenced to 27 years in prison and barred from running for office until 2060 (he is currently under house arrest while appeals are filed).

Bolsonaro is not the only far-right leader with dictatorial aspirations to be elected and deposed before attempting a coup, and not the only one to associate himself with football as a means of cementing and extending his power. In Donald Trump's second term, opponents have watched, appalled, as governments, corporations and universities roll over for him, while the spectacle of Fifa president Gianni Infantino cosying up to him in the White House has been exceptionally tawdry. Near the end of Trump's first term, in 2020, Merino and Indecline made 'Freedom Kick: Mexico' in Tijuana: their video opens with Trump talking about how 'America gets back control of its border' on the campaign trail. Again, ritualistically, Trump's head is taken out of a black bag and carried to the pitch. Someone paints a goal on the border wall and people punt the 'ball' through the dirt as MC5's 'Kick Out the Jams' plays; there is real joy in seeing Trump's famous blond hair wave as his head flies through the air. It was easy to film, says Merino, as 'everyone held an unfavourable view of Donald Trump, including the police'.

Unlike Bolsonaro, Trump has most likely not seen the short, music video-style documentation of the event – we would almost certainly know if he had, given his anger at being lampooned on *Saturday Night Live* and *South Park*. The Trump video was one of Merino's earliest collaborations with Indecline: they met at Halle 14 in Leipzig, where Merino was exhibiting a punching ball with Vladimir Putin's head on it and Indecline were presenting 'The Emperor Has No Balls', a series of nude sculptures of Trump that had previously been installed in various US cities. They soon came up with 'Freedom Kick', inspired by other recent works that had engaged with football, such as 'Dirty Balls' by Kendell Geers, in which severed heads sat with footballs in a net, and 'No Glory, No Story' by Priscilla Monge, in which artists played a match against collectors, who had to buy a work from the artists if they lost but got one for free if they won. Then they began to work out its logistics – starting with the heads, which needed to be of the highest quality if the idea was to be realised and documented.

'They are modelled in clay and then cast in platinum silicone,' says Merino. 'The process is long and involves several people. They have human hair and a flexible polyurethane interior, which allows



'Freedom Kick: DC' (Putin)



'Freedom Kick: Mexico' (Trump)



'Freedom Kick 1884' (Bismarck)

them to be hit and withstand matches. The modelling is done in my workshop, the moulds are made in another and the hair implantation is done in a third one. It's important to use the best materials to ensure the pieces can endure the matches, and can also be exhibited. The idea is to preserve all the elements used in the actions so they can be presented as archival material. The outcome of the project includes videos, the heads, photographs, and in some cases, jerseys or other objects.'

Merino mentions 'Freedom Kick 1884', where the project moved from the present to the past, engaging with the Berlin Conference of that same year, headed by Otto von Bismarck, to carve up Africa among Western European powers. On a five-a-side pitch atop a high-rise building, players take a moment's silence, looking at Bismarck's head and thinking about the millions of deaths which led to that conference and followed it – then they take their revenge, as a caption tells the viewer that "'Freedom Kick" is a symbolic action meant to address how to deal with history and heritage using protest art as a medium.' After the filming, 'Freedom Kick 1884' was exhibited in a space transformed into a fan club, with photographs, merchandise, scarves and benches

to sit and watch the video. Additionally, during the opening, an anti-fascist DJ performed, appearing alongside all the immigrant players who were part of the project.

I ask Merino about the game being used as an instrument of colonial expansion, as the British codified the rules of association football in 1863 and then exported it to Europe, Africa and South America, and how that informed 'Freedom Kick 1884'. 'This was a collaboration with Philip Kojo Metz, a German-Ghanaian conceptual artist whose work "The Mimicry Games" offers a postcolonial critique of the culture surrounding football in Africa and Europe,' he replies. 'In this work, football appears as a neocolonial instrument: an effective and seemingly positive way of extending the power of the metropole, and a civilising vehicle. Through it, language, customs and ways of life were imposed on local populations. Philip, Indecine and I wanted to work with the memory of African colonialism and its reflection in contemporary German society. For this reason, the project was developed in Munich, in the building the Bellevue di Monaco, a space for encounters between Munich residents and refugees. The facilities provide housing for 50 refugees, and it was on their

rooftop sports court that the match took place. For us, this exercise in colonial memory is directly connected to 20th- and 21st-century fascism, to the abduction of Africans to the Americas, and to the process of dehumanisation that established an economic order based on racial oppression.'

Merino is Spanish, born in Madrid in 1975, the year that Francisco Franco died. Spain's fascist dictator famously used Real Madrid (and particularly its European Cup successes of the 1950s) and the national side as an instrument of soft power. Fifty years after the end of the regime, Merino staged 'La Copa del Generalísimo' using Franco's head as the ball.

'Historical memory is essential for understanding Spain's past and present,' says Merino. 'Like other sports, football has historically been used as propaganda to control the masses. In Spain, Franco instrumentalised it to demobilise the working class and legitimise his regime, transforming football into a culture of escapism. After the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939, the national cup competition was renamed La Copa del Generalísimo in honour of Franco. The Spanish national team's victories came to represent the image of unification and supremacy of the regime. This strategy became particularly

evident in 1964, when Spain were crowned European champions after defeating the Soviet Union. The symbolic victory of Francoism over communism was thus etched into the collective memory. All of this served to hide the violence of Francoist repression: more than 114,000 bodies remain in mass graves and ditches, there were nearly 300 concentration camps and thousands of people suffered forced exile.'

Merino and Indecline's match took place in the trenches along the Coves del Toll path in Moià, says Merino, 'where the Republicans defended freedom and the legitimacy of the democratic government against the coup plotters'. In the context of the continued rise of the Spanish far right, represented by the Vox party, 'the players kicked the dictator's head in an anti-fascist football match that revived the class struggle and opposed today's neo-fascist and denialist discourses'.

More recently, Indecline's Youtube channel posted a video of a 'Freedom Kick' action outside the United Nations headquarters in New York City, staged just before the 80th session of the UN General Assembly. The players, some of whom were Jewish or Palestinian, used Benjamin Netanyahu's head, while the artists projected commentary about the



'La Copa de Generalísimo' (Franco)

atrocities in Gaza onto the UN building. Merino and Indecible then donated the head to the Palestinian Genocide Museum (whose location is not given) – Netanyahu has not responded, but the video inevitably attracted plenty of responses calling them antisemites or terrorists, and asking why they don't make such work about left-wing leaders. Merino and Indecible's sensible strategy is to not engage – a dignified response that one cannot imagine from their targets.

I ask Merino if he and Indecible planned to continue the project indefinitely, particularly in the context of the far-right strengthening their presence on the streets and in parliaments across the world, often using football as a means of self-promotion and recruitment. 'As long as fascism exists, political art of this nature and scale will be vital,' he says. 'We have no intention of concluding the project anytime soon.' The spectacle of the next World Cup in Trump's United States will no doubt be as contentious as those in Mussolini's Italy in 1934, the junta's Argentina in 1978 or Putin's Russia in 2018, or the sight of the bodies of the migrant workers who built the stadia for Qatar 2022 being flown back to their home countries in plastic coffins: amid the horrors, at least 'Freedom Kick' will continue to offer some much-needed catharsis. **OOF**



'Freedom Kick: United Nations' (Netanyahu)



'Freedom Kick: Mexico' (Trump)

JUST A GAME

ROGER MAYNE'S
FOOTBALL PHOTOGRAPHY

Words **Eddy Frankel**



'Footballers Jumping, Brindley Rd', 1957

IT MAKES SENSE that football would feature so heavily in the work of arguably Britain's most influential photographer. How can you document this country and its people, how can you capture the truth, the essence of England without also capturing its national pastime, its main cultural obsession (second only to class, maybe)? Roger Mayne couldn't avoid it, so he didn't. Football is absolutely everywhere in his work.

It's there in almost everything he did, but it's especially present in his most famous images of the impoverished, Blitz-ravaged West London in the 1950s. Over the course of just a handful of years, he visited Southam Street and Brindley

Road in Paddington dozens of times, taking thousands of photos of the families who lived there, the street urchins who stalked the pavements, the teddy boys who loitered on the corners, and – crucially, for us – the kids who loved nothing more than absolutely leathering a football across the traffic-less road, day in, day out.

His images of West London life – so sensitive, so candid, so full of joy and honesty – would help shape the evolution of street photography. This wasn't a patronising, demeaning, 'Aw, poor them' portrayal of people enduring hardship, it was just the truth of everyday post-war London: complex, difficult, but defiant and full of life.

At no point are the people in his photographs existing for the photographs, they are not vessels of sympathy. They are persevering through adversity, they are having the best times they can, regardless of whether a photographer is there, and regardless of what the rest of society thinks of them. They are just living, and Mayne was lucky enough to witness it, and talented enough to capture it all with such beauty.

'The first thing he'd talk to people about was always cricket and rugby,' says his daughter Katkin Tremayne, who looks after his archive from her rambling, eco-savvy home deep in the Dorset countryside, miles from anything like the urbanity of inner city

London. 'He loved football too, but it was really cricket and rugby first for him.'

Cricket only appears a couple of times in his work though, and rugby is even rarer. But football is everywhere in his photographs, because football was everywhere in English life. To play football on the street, all you need is a ball and some guts; these kids had plenty of the latter and enough of the former to have a go.

Football plays an interesting role in Mayne's photographs. In his work, for the most part, football is a game, not a sport, and that's crucial. Kids in shorts dive to save wild shots on hard concrete, leap into the sky to head



'Boys playing football, Addison Pl', 1956



'View with Footballers, Southam St', 1956

the ball to a mate, dribble down the middle of the road. These are images of kids at play, children living totally free, expressing themselves, even in unimaginably deprived circumstances. They are photographs of joy against the odds.

But these are not just documentary images of post-war London poverty, they are exercises in abstract composition, inspired in large part by his relationships with artists like Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo, leading modernists of their age who had moved to the Cornish town of St. Ives after the war. 'Dad was already interested in modern and abstract art, but he had the chance to go to St. Ives because his mum lived next door to Barbara Hepworth's parents,' says Tremayne. 'That was in 1953, and he met the St. Ives crew and stayed friends with them for his whole life. He looked at their work very deeply. He collected it and had it all around his house. It was a big influence on him, he was trying to produce abstract photography, really.'

Nowhere is that more visible than in his image of three kids playing football in Addison Place, the mews street just off Addison Avenue in Holland Park where Mayne lived in the '50s. There are no real features in this photo, no characters or emotions, the

three kids have been reduced to their geometric elements. They are shapes, interacting in space; triangles and rectangles sharing the composition with a single circle, the ball itself. 'He liked the physicality of people moving their bodies, the funny shapes they get into,' says Tremayne. 'So it was partly the love of sport anyway, but also enjoying the company and the enthusiasm of the kids, and it makes really good abstract photography.'

That Addison Place photo is the root of all of his other football works, the starting point. Born in Cambridge in 1929 (he would go on to study chemistry at Oxford), Mayne was long-fascinated by the working class. 'My dad was in the middle classes, but he had a romantic idea about the working class, because his grandparents in Wales, who he absolutely loved, were builders,' says Tremayne. 'He was trying to almost recapture that, so he would cycle from Holland Park across to Bethnal Green and the East End in order to find working class scenes, never knowing that half a mile up the road was Southam Street.' It turns out that his ultimate muse was actually just around the corner.

Southam Street and the nearby Brindley Road were not easy places to live. By 1923, there were a total of 2,400 people living in the 140 nine-roomed houses of Southam



'Goalie, Brindley Rd', 1956

Street. These were nothing other than slums. But they were filled with characters, and filled with football. The same kids appear in lots of the photos, apparently always out on the street having a kickabout. Lots of the images were taken on the same day, on the same roll of film. You can watch people approaching a game of football with trepidation, before awkwardly rolling up their sleeves and finally losing themselves in the game with total freedom. The images are full of leaping kids and teens, bodies flying into tackles, darting along the road. Their faces are contorted with effort, bursting into smiles as

they get the best of their mate or lose the ball. 'The Goalie' shows a child throwing himself to the ground to stop a shot on Brindley Road, his bare knees covered in scrapes, his hands filthy, his face stuck in a gurn of determination. It doesn't matter, none of it matters, it's just a game, a moment of abandon – and at the same time, at that very second, it sort of matters more than anything else on earth, because that's football.

The images are full of incredible details. If you look closely at 'Shadow Footballers', beyond the amazing abstract shapes cast by the leaping kid and his shadow that



'Shadow Footballers, Southam St', 1957

are the photo's main focus, you see layers of faded graffiti, walls cracking and crumbling, rubbish left lying in the gutter, and – between the two footballers – a hilarious pile-on, three kids stacked in a wrestling sandwich, absolutely losing it in a fit of giggles. Forget the poverty, forget the deprivation, and just look at all of that endless joy.

These are undeniably romantic, nostalgic images. London had not yet become smothered by traffic; people couldn't afford cars, so the streets were open play areas, communal spaces where kids could run around and scuff their knees and tear their sweaters. But the football works also tell a story of the aging of man, the loss of innocence. You get to watch as children become teens, then you get to see those same teens become men.

The figures in 'Footballers Jumping, Brindley Road' are no longer kids, they're adolescents, boys on the path to adulthood. This is still play, but somehow more serious, more weighed down. It happens across Mayne's Southam Street and Brindley Road images; older boys join the fun they see taking place, and things feel different, more competitive, harsher.

This idea would get expanded on in other environments, and again perfectly encapsulated by the use

of football. Images of a kickabout in Hyde Park – the 1950s equivalent of Power League, I guess – show tackles being flown into with way more vicious intent and steely-eyed vigour than anything from Southam Street and Brindley Road.

His photos of professional football being played at Craven Cottage and Highbury equally replace fun and amusement with athleticism and professionalism. There are still kids here, but they go from active participants to spectators; they cheer and shout, but the unbridled joy of street football is absent. In one incredible photo, an old man looms above a small group of children pressed up against the railings in an FA Cup tie between Arsenal and Liverpool at Highbury: with walking stick in hand, he shouts, mouth agape, his hair grey, his skin sallow. A little boy in front of him stares, almost awestruck, at the game before him, while a slightly older boy to his right screams his lungs out. It's the full journey of childhood to old age, youth and innocence to wrinkles and senescence, being played out in one photo.

The Hyde Park and Highbury images would later be featured in an ambitious, five-screen projection installation at the Milan Triennale in 1964 titled 'The British at Leisure', a sort of proto-Martin Parr-esque exploration of this damp nation's

cultural and sporting diversions. But it's the Southam Street and Brindley Road images that have endured, that have become his legacy.

They didn't leave him unscathed, though. Witnessing the poverty and hardship of inner-city London eventually became too heavy for Mayne. It was traumatic. And by the time he had Katkin and her brother in the mid to late 1960s, he'd seen enough. 'He had a really tough childhood, so I think there was a lot of therapy involved in quite a lot of what he did,' says Tremayne. 'He knew Don McCullin and people like that, who were going off to war, and he said, "I just can't." He was too sensitive to inflict that

sort of situation on himself.' So he moved his family to Dorset and set himself the task of documenting the lives of his children. His work was still about youth and growth, but now more personal, private and sentimental.

What's really striking, looking back now, is how Mayne's Paddington images are not just photos of people, but of a city, and one in the midst of chaotic flux. This is a London still trying to recover from the devastation of war, but also on the cusp of radical transformation. This is a liminal city, this is a no man's land, a concrete purgatory. Southam Street and Brindley Road just about survived the bombs of the Blitz, but

they would not survive the tide of modernisation that came with the post-war boom. In 1958, Brindley Road was cleared of properties by the Greater London Council to make way for the Warwick Estate. Southam Street was declared unfit for human habitation and razed to the ground in 1969 – after its destruction, pictures show a deep chasm in the Paddington landscape, a total abyss where once thousands of people had lived – to make way for Trellick Tower. The Westway would soon cut through the area like a vast concrete axe, splitting the landscape and dividing the people, cutting them off from all of their nearest football stadiums in the process; a bypass that

would symbolically sever any links between what was once Southam Street and Brindley Road from grounds like Loftus Road, Stamford Bridge and Craven Cottage.

That feels like an important, symbolic rupture. One between us and them, now and then, the past and present, youth and old age. Football in Roger Mayne's work makes the same symbolic gesture. And through his eyes, football represents something we all seem to eventually forget: the simple ecstasy of youth. **OOF**



'Autumn Park Scene,' 1964



'Cup tie Arsenal v Liverpool', 1963

ITALY VS BRAZIL

PASADENA 1994

Words *Mike Anderson*



THERE IS NOTHING objectively interesting in glory. We venerate and historicise the victor, but we don't much wonder what's going on behind the wide eyes and addled grin. Cataclysm, catastrophe, coming up short: the neck-crimping car-crash curiosity of abject failure holds far greater fascination, its allure proportionate to the size of the stage. Maybe I lean this way after missing the only four penalties I've ever taken but losing is our default state, its executors, the Losers, lingering in the consciousness – individual, national – for longer and with greater empathy than that most alien of concepts, the Winner. Triumph has no texture: no one ever bagged a Pizza Hut advert for scoring a pen like national hero-pariah Gareth Southgate.

All of which brings us to Mike Powell's extraordinary photograph of Roberto Baggio in Pasadena, California, in 1994, the still point of the turning World Cup, a hinge of absolute destiny. There are moments and there are *moments*, and this is both. Three men's World Cup finals have been won by shoot-outs but only 1994's was settled by a miss: 2006 and 2022 saw their decisive kicks scored, massive pile-ons, the works. Baggio's though, its trajectory launching the ball miles out of the ground, is officially football's biggest miss; Baggio,

following a superlative individual tournament, its biggest loser. Head bowed, hands on hips, deflated and disbelieving, reeling from a hamstring injury that no doubt hampered his shot, starting an internal process that's probably still ongoing ('I still dream of it' one of the less bleak reflections he's offered in recent years).

Tradition dictates we acknowledge the winners, Brazil, repped here by goalkeeper Cláudio Taffarel, arms aloft, single-handedly demonstrating the insipidity of success. Bravo: 24 whole years to wait for your fourth World Cup. 0-0. Pens. So dull is Taffarel's glory that his kit sheepishly conspires to vanish into the turf – Baggio wishes the pitch would swallow him, but Taffarel isn't far off from disappearing completely, consumed by the green expanse that dominates the photo.

In football's first flailing attempt for US commercial relevance, the North American Soccer League of the 1970s, Pelé was infamously reduced to playing on pitches painted green; here, the Californian grass is so exotic and encompassing it may as well have been slapped on by Rousseau. Crucially though, this isn't just an orgy of chlorophyll: the pitch's crisp geometry brings order of sorts, byline bisecting image from corner to corner lending an era-appropriate 8-bit console aspect,

giving an illusion of Amiga control over proceedings. A partial penalty area's six-yard box is mirrored in miniature by the goalframe, with its 'D' glimpsed from the bottom left a counterpoint to the turf's curved rim up, beyond the hoardings to the right. The *Sensible Soccer*-esque isometry and flattened uprights take us to the edge of, if not abstraction, at least extreme minimalism, a formal obedience of vectors and right angles and so much green, creating a calm orderliness to throw into relief the emotions on display. This borderline-Bauhaus take feels apt for a World Cup that saw Brazil, the planet's most self-romanticising football nation, bet the farm on 'form follows function' choosing a stolid midfield of Dunga and Mauro Silva.

USA '94 was the last World Cup final played in pure uncut daylight; all since have been played at night, under the artificial glare of floodlight. Roland Barthes wrote of 'the vertical quality of the flood of light... the great solar spectacles' and 'a light without shadow generating an emotion without reserve'. We feel this emotion, and we witness it being felt: there is nowhere for such misery or joy to hide. Instead it is inspected, dissected, beamed across the planet. His subject was wrestling, but then Barthes

didn't live long enough to see the '90s wrap its seductive neoliberal tendrils around football: sport as spectacle, surrounded by cameras and adverts for cameras, focused on the individual, all but engineered to ensure the winners keep winning.

Barthes's light saturates a venue built to receive it: the Rose Bowl, whose squat dimensions render the angle found here by Mike Powell, an experienced sports photographer, vaguely mysterious. In footage it's hard to detect a crane, blimp or tower. Our god's-eye view, divine and detached, casts our characters across a grand renaissance canvas. Taffarel the Redeemer, arms thrown to the heavens, bathed in solar benediction while the referee, resplendently self-important in cardinal red, completes the ritual with an epically pointless full-time whistle. You cannot look away from our penitent protagonist – Roberto Caravaggio, if you like – longing for an absolution he'll never find. It is this reading that resonates above all: history may be written by the winners, their extra star etched above the badge, but it is Baggio, discovering fresh planes of human suffering before a global congregation, who became the icon.

OOF





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