

The Art World Loves Basketballs. And Hoops and Jerseys and Backboards.

Andrew Keh | June 12, 2022

Fine art inspired by the sport is everywhere. One gallery filled nearly 5,000 square feet, and its curator said she “could do a Part 2 and Part 3 because there is that much work out there.”

The basketballs are deflated, doused in spray paint or covered in 24-karat gold leaf. They’re sculpted from porcelain, plopped in cement or layered into enormous pyramids. They’re splashed onto canvases, carved into cheeky jack-o’-lanterns, flattened out like flower petals.

Stroll through galleries, museums and studios, flick through auction catalogs and social media feeds, and it starts to become obvious: The art world is increasingly strewn with basketballs.

“It’s like the best sport ever,” said Jonas Wood, who has become one of the world’s most sought-after painters while making basketball a recurring theme in his work.

Titans of art who contemplated the sport in years past are having their work revisited in basketball-specific shows. Younger artists are engaging with the game as avid fans, wary skeptics or nostalgic adults. And the market is responding.

Consider a cross section of recent exhibitions: Last summer, drawings by the influential artist David Hammons, made by bouncing dirt-covered basketballs on paper, appeared at Nahmad Contemporary on the Upper East Side in a show called “Basketball and Kool-Aid.” This spring, Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea presented basketball-themed paintings from Barkley L. Hendricks, who died in 2017, at an exhibition called “In the Paint.”

That was not to be confused with a hoops-oriented group show called “In the Paint” that opened this year at the Local Gallery in Toronto or another exhibition, also called “In the Paint,” a few years back at the William Benton Museum of Art in Connecticut. The Weatherspoon Art Museum, in Greensboro, N.C., had its own basketball-inspired group show, “To the Hoop,” in 2020.



An exhibit of basketball-inspired art called “To the Hoop” at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C., including “Akheth I” by David Huffman and “Well Hung” by Suzanne McClelland. Credit...Martin W. Kane for UNCG University Communications, 2020



Akhet I, 2020, rubber basketballs, speakers and audio track, and wood, 90 x 120 x 120in

“We filled a nearly 5,000-square-foot gallery, and really I could do a Part 2 and Part 3 because there is that much work out there that is strong work,” said Emily Stamey, the curator of exhibitions at the Weatherspoon, which experienced record-breaking attendance numbers in the opening weeks of the show.

The proliferation of basketball as both a subject and medium in art is the result of a convergence of multiple cultural currents and creative impulses, artists and others in the industry say.

The generation of artists currently reaching the height of their powers came of age alongside the exploding popularity of the N.B.A. over the past few decades, following the rise of players like Larry Bird, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. Even artists who are not outright fans of the game said they observed how deeply it penetrated society.

“We have grown up with the advent of the sports industrial complex,” said Derek Fordjour, 48, who painted a portrait of Johnson for a solo exhibition this year at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. “So artists, as cultural observers, would of course be influenced heavily by such a dominant force coming into view.”

Fordjour and others also pointed to a gradual, belated diversification of art spaces and institutions — with a strong focus in the market in recent years on Black artists — as well as a general rethinking about what can be considered fine art, which has invited more ideas and influences from pop and street culture and mainstream commercial realms.

“The demographics of who’s being seen is definitely changing,” said Hank Williams Thomas, 46, who has drawn from the sport repeatedly in his work, which includes a 22-foot bronze sculpture of the Philadelphia 76ers star Joel Embiid’s arm installed at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

For artists, then, basketball can serve as both a powerful, eminently interpretable symbol and a banal object of modern American life.

“It’s like painting a still life of a fruit bowl,” the New York-based sculptor Hugh Hayden said.

But Hayden, whose solo show at Lisson Gallery in Chelsea last summer featured basketball hoops woven out of rattan and vine, conceded that basketball and fruit bowls could elicit different reactions.

“There is a huge waiting list,” Hayden said about his basketball pieces. “I could make 100 basketball goals, and it would not satisfy the demand for them.”

The sports-inspired pieces these artists saw in museums and books while growing up, to the extent they saw any at all, typically drew from baseball, they said.

But today, baseball's fading cultural relevance, and basketball's simultaneous ascendance as a cultural force, is plainly observable in galleries across the country.

"Baseball was the poetry growing up, and I can still get teary eyed when I see a baseball game," said Andrew Kuo, a painter from New York. "But my heart pounds when I see a basketball game."

Kuo had kept his fandom and art practice separate — "painting all day, then at night silk-screening Stephon Marbury shirts" — until the thrilling rise of Jeremy Lin with the Knicks in 2012 compelled him to address the game more directly in his work.

He compared the recent proliferation of basketballs in galleries — a snowballing dynamic combining inspiration, evolution, market acceptance and plain copying — to the way the Eurostep gradually took over the N.B.A.

"It's our generation growing into the people who make things," said Kuo, 44, who last year co-authored an irreverent, illustrated encyclopedia of the game, "The Joy of Basketball," with the writer Ben Detrick. (Kuo and Detrick have also contributed to The New York Times.)

Andy Warhol included Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in a series of athlete portraits he made in 1977.

In 1986, Hammons, who is now 78, made a series of improvised outdoor hoops, some 30 feet tall, titled "Higher Goals," which he described to The New York Times that year as "anti-basketball" sculptures. (The art world stirred in 2013 when a frosted glass basketball goal adorned with crystal-laced candelabras made by Hammons in 2000 sold at auction for \$8,005,000.)

And any basketball sitting in a gallery exists at least circuitously in conversation with Jeff Koons and the basketballs he began suspending in fish tanks in 1985.

The editors of "Common Practice: Basketball & Contemporary Art," a book published last year, tracked basketball-related art as far back as 1913 in a lithograph called "Basket Ball Girl."

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The exhibition had work, for example, from the Canadian artist Esmaa Mohamoud, 29, who stitched N.B.A. jerseys into ballroom gowns as a means of interrogating the interplay of sports and gender roles in her childhood, and David Huffman, 59, who installed an enormous pyramid made out of 650 basketballs, connecting the grandeur and moral ambiguity of the modern game to that of the ancient Egyptian structures.

Elsewhere in the world, the London-based artist Alvaro Barrington has made basketballs sitting in cement-filled crates a recurring motif in his shows over the past year in London, New York and Los Angeles. At the Richard Prince exhibition currently on view at Gagosian Gallery in New York, a weathered basketball goal sits askew in the middle of a room. And later this month, the Cranbrook Art Museum in Detroit will open a solo show from Tyrrell Winston, who arranges basketballs and nets he finds into large-scale formations.

The growing interplay between fine art and fashion has put basketballs on the runway, too: The artist Josh Smith collaborated with Givenchy for their Spring/Summer 2022 collection to make a basketball jack-o'-lantern handbag, and other clothing with the same imagery, reviving a jack-o'-lantern piece he made in 2015.

"Basketball intersects with so many subjects, points of view, different things we're talking about culturally and interested in," Stamey said. "That's what makes it such a rich topic and why so many artists gravitate toward it."

The N.B.A. is now backing this wave of work and engaging directly with the art world with increasing regularity.

The artist Victor Solomon has become a go-to collaborator within the league, making objects like stained-glass backboards and porcelain basketballs in partnership with clients like Kevin Durant, LeBron James, Nike and the Boston Celtics. The N.B.A. recently commissioned Solomon, in collaboration with Tiffany & Company, to redesign the trophy that the eventual champions, either the Boston Celtics or the Golden State Warriors, will lift this month.

Two years ago, the Cleveland Cavaliers took the unusual step of naming the New York-based artist Daniel Arsham as their creative director. A year before that, Arsham, 41, had installed a large fiberglass and plaster work, "Moving Basketball," inside the Cavaliers' home arena as part of a redesign by the team's majority owner, Dan Gilbert, that arranged more than 100 pieces from almost two dozen other artists, including Nina Chanel Abney and KAWS, around the building.

This month, Arsham will open a solo show, "Le Modular du Basketball," in Marseilles, France, turning the top floor of a Le Corbusier building into a gym-inspired art space with works that blend the visual language of the famed architect with the universe of basketball.

Wood, 45, is one of the art world's most ardent fans of basketball, mining the game and his own nostalgia for inspiration. He idolized Bird growing up and frequently played pickup games with other artists when he first moved to Los Angeles two decades ago. His studio today features two hoops, an enormous basketball-shaped throne and countless other basketball knickknacks.

“Basketball is rock ‘n’ roll,” said Wood, who has season tickets for the Clippers and often finds visual material for his portraits in trading cards. “It’s hip-hop. It’s box office.”

Marty Eisenberg, a prominent New York-based collector, owns several of Wood’s paintings, including a portrait of Bird from 2004, which he likened to possessing a Babe Ruth card.

But Eisenberg is haunted by the one that got away: a painting of Chris Kaman, the hirsute former Clippers center, from Wood’s first-ever solo show at Black Dragon Society in Los Angeles in 2006. Eisenberg missed the piece, and it was purchased by the California art dealer Jeff Poe. Wood’s pieces today are often valued at six figures.

“Poe always hangs that over me, that he owns the Chris Kaman portrait,” Eisenberg said. “That’s one of Jonas Wood’s greatest pieces. And at the time it was, what, a thousand dollars.”

In the time since, the game has infiltrated all corners of the art world.

Last year, the renowned portrait artist Kehinde Wiley began selling basketballs featuring an image of his 2017 painting “The Death of St. Joseph” for \$175, to benefit his nonprofit art organization in Senegal. (A plastic stand for the ball is sold separately, for \$35.)

Hebru Brantley, an artist whose work has been collected by Jay-Z and Beyoncé, created graffiti-style basketballs recently for Wilson, the sports brand, while Mr. Brainwash, the French street artist, made “vandalized basketballs” of his own last year.

Even the Museum of Modern Art sells a basketball — designed by Marco Oggian, an Italian multidisciplinary artist — for \$119.

Amid all this, it can be easy to forget that the art world has not been completely overtaken by hoops enthusiasts, that there are scores of art lovers happily oblivious to the game.

Jack Eisenberg, an adviser at Art Intelligence Global and an avid basketball fan (and Marty Eisenberg’s son), laughed as he recalled attending an opening in New York a few years ago and extricating himself from the party to watch a big college game.

“I told them, ‘I have to go watch Syracuse versus Duke,’ ” he said. “And these people were like, ‘What does that mean? I don’t know what that means.’”