

CROSSING THE EQUATOR

Basketball as a metaphor in life and art

Jenny Smith, October 12, 2020

Basketball is mythologized to have “sprung full-blown”, as Athena did from Zeus’ head, from James Naismith’s head, when he had his secretary type the original 13 rules.¹

James was born in Canada and orphaned early in life. He studied at McGill University in the late 1800s. The same university where the CIA performed their MK Ultra program that could be linked to the affair of Marilyn Monroe’s forced psychiatric care, evoking our modern day #FreeBritney movement. James studied physical education and divinity, earning his BA in PE 1888, the same year that TS Eliot who penned *The Wasteland*, was born in St. Louis, where basketball first became a demonstration sport at the 1904 summer Olympics. After graduating James moved to Springfield, the same town that the Simpsons T.V. show which satirically depicts archetypes of the all-American family is based in, where he worked at the YMCA as a PE teacher, and it was there that he *conceived* of the game.

The Triangle, Springfield’s college newspaper first wrote about the sport in an article entitled “A New Game”. The YMCA, who uses a triangle in their logo, representing mind, body, and spirit, participated in the *birth* of the game, introducing it internationally prior to it being featured in the Olympics.

Basketball is also a game that has been pointedly depicted in high art. Daniel Arsham, replicates cultural symbols often using hydrostone and crystals, chiseling at certain points to reveal what I can only describe as the decay of the future. Arsham has cited his objective as to “compress time, at once referencing the past, informing the present, and reaching towards a crystallized future.”² Daniel has depicted basketballs many times in his art. His collection “Static Mythologies”, is awash in chalky rose pigments and includes a sand Zen Buddhist garden lit by a large circular window that illuminates the

¹ Colás, Yago. "Our Myth of Creation: The Politics of Narrating Basketball’s Origin." *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 43 no. 1, 2016, p. 37-54. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/619819.

² <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2020/01/crystal-sculptures-daniel-arsham/>

installation with a diffuse white light, a Life magazine featuring articles on Buzz Aldrin, and a rack of Spalding basketballs with pink selenite crystal erosions. The work feels self-contemplating. His piece, "Moving Basketball" alludes to the fabric of time being moved by planetary force.

Damien Hurst is probably best known for his work "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", a tiger shark suspended in a tank of liquid, which sold for 12 million. In 2016 he collaborated for the show "Now" with Jeff Koons, wherein Koons showed his 1985 work from his show "Equilibrium", that featured a series of basketballs floating in tanks filled with distilled water and some sodium chloride reagent. Koons said of the work that he "wanted to keep it a very womb-like situation with water". Koons also referred to basketball as "A metaphor for social mobility. Enjoying life, enjoying the possibilities we have to reach our potential". Koons has said that his usage of inflatables represents us as we become alive as we take air in.

Tyrrell Winston has been criticized for lack of originality regarding his use of basketballs as ready-made art. However I have to side with Jerry Saltz in that "art is a cosmic force", and Jonathan Meese who says "I do not play with art. Art plays with me". So really, I view Tyrrell's work as more of a continuation and him as an artist as more as a tool of the universe, which is reflected perfectly in the globes he deals with.

The artistic usage of the ball paired with celebrity footage such as that of Beyoncé swaying hypnotically courtside, is what truly intrigued me to further examine basketball. The value we place on being an audience to the game speaks to the collective-subconscious. Compounding this, it is interesting how in the era of COVID-19 an actual audience has been replaced by Microsoft Teams' new Together Mode, which places fans virtually courtside during live games. An inversion has taken place as the players now watch televised fans. The virtual projection of people parodies the theory of solipsism.

A sphere is infinite, and though there are lines on a basketball, a sphere as a shape allows infinite lines of symmetry or duality to be drawn, and in that, no actual lines of duality can be drawn, juxtaposing against the one-dimensional court which it is bounced, a plane which can be folded a limited number of times. The interaction of the sphere and the plane represent a struggle to integrate our spirituality (eternal selves) with a world where we are metaphysically governed by time. A ghost can travel through walls because it has shed its metaphysical shackles, in its infinite presence, where an infinite number of walls have been erected and fallen, all of them exist at once and in that simultaneous existence cease to exist - a wall cannot exist without its place in time. It may be a reach, but it is interesting nevertheless

that Damien Hurst chose a tiger shark, that a basketball shares its colour scheme with that of a tiger, and that in William Blake's poem *The Tyger*, he wrote:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

As *The Lamb* from Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, is the sister or contrary poem to *The Tyger*, it could also be followed that the players as the lambs of God are wrestling with their tiger selves. Like the sphere, the human condition is also an entity of infinite duality, yet it sees itself in the plane of a mirror. The court itself also illustrates symmetry or duality as it is divided into two sides with the same features - the dual takes place in the duality.

The mythology of the game depicts yet another duality, which is that of meanings, as it vacillates between the males controlling, but also being controlled by the game that plays them. As Athena, a female goddess sprung from Zeus' head, Zeus having merely swallowed her, much as the net could be viewed as a birth canal, it is also reminiscent of a tunnel or a throat.

David Hammons' work, "Higher Goals" that includes pieces such as "Untitled" 2000, a hoop that has transmogrified into an elegant and rococo object. The transmogrification of the hoop indicating not only the glory that one achieves when playing the game at a higher level, but also the commodification of the game taking it from the street and transforming it to an opulent item to signal status. In this respect, the myth also "internalizes and repeats a broader class-biased preference for intellectual over manual *labor* in assigning creative agency to human activity"³.

Basketball also expresses itself in sexual symbolism. The free throw and no-go zones are phallic outlines. They point at each other further illustrating the homoeroticism of male sports, as well as masculine competition. A score is made by getting it through the net, which was originally a peach basket. The peach, a symbol for a woman's anatomy which has endured to contemporary times depicted most often in usage of the emoji. The players clamour to defend their matriarch or net, as the opposing tribe strives to score in it and visa versa. Crossing the center line is a metaphor for the rite of passage akin to what male's experience when becoming a man and achieving sexual conquest or even procreation.

Two of the largest celebrities in contemporary times share unprecedented humiliation by having the most intimate moments of their lives shared with the world through the dissemination of their sex tapes. Kim Kardashian has said that she "owes" her "career to Paris Hilton". In crossing from ordinary

³ Colás, Yago. "Our Myth of Creation: The Politics of Narrating Basketball's Origin." *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2016, pp. 37–54. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jsporthistory.43.1.37. Accessed 11 Oct. 2020.

person to idol, they share their humiliation with others who have experienced hazing rituals, particularly sailors who have undergone a ceremony for crossing the equator in which they receive a certificate stamped with “silent mystery of the deep”. In the ritual, first time crossers or initiates are thrown into a bizarre existential theatre as an actor without a script. During the ceremony they are tortured and humiliated, often sexually, made to wear their clothing inside out and backwards, or clothing of the opposite sex. The directors, or already initiated, perform insanely, but with impunity. The ceremony is witnessed by King Neptune, his assistant Davy Jones, and her Highness Amphitrite, the mythological sea goddess or queen of the sea and wife of Poseidon, who are represented by those who have already been initiated. Much as Hirst has suspended his tiger shark and Koons his basketball in water, equatorial baptism, is described as a being an initiation to the *court* of King Neptune. The reason for the hazing is that equator and the sky are both liminal zones, they are thresholds, the middle stages of a rite of passage.

On Sunday, January 26, 2020, at the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kobe Bryant and his 13-year-old daughter met their untimely death as their helicopter plummeted to the ground in Calabasas, California. Calabasas is the original home of Warner Bros. Ranch Studio. Its named is derived from the Spanish calabaza, meaning pumpkin. Pumpkin isn't something you would associate with the glamour of the area. When I think of a pumpkin, I think of both a jack-o'-lantern, a pumpkin in which a face is carved and illuminated from within, and Cinderella's coach after the spell broke. Apparently, the name comes from the legend that a farmer spilled a wagon load of pumpkins alongside its main road and the following year hundreds of pumpkin seeds sprouted, earning the name Las Calabasas “the place where pumpkins fell”.