

Esmaa Mohamoud

**TO PLAY IN  
THE FACE OF  
CERTAIN DEFEAT**

**JOUER MALGRÉ  
LA CERTITUDE  
DE LA DÉFAITE**

## ***Esmaa Mohamoud: To Play in the Face of Certain Defeat***

The institutionalized and professionalized culture of sports teams is born of the opposition between winners and losers. Football, basketball, hockey, and other games require binaries of one-on-one, “you versus me,” and “us versus them” to operate. London, Ontario-born artist Esmaa Mohamoud exploits such reasoning, appropriating elements of professional sports to express the essentialist thinking that underpins broader issues of social injustice, including racism and gender-based discrimination. Mohamoud also offers hope, re-inscribing notions of cultural eclecticism and social plurality onto the very symbols of injustice.

One of Mohamoud’s major installations is *Blood and Tears instead of Milk and Honey* (2018). The work consists of 22 black leather footballs into which Mohamoud has branded African Kente patterns. On one hand, this marks Black players’ immense and longstanding contributions to organized sport. At the same time, although these players often comprise the majority of the team, their presence is witnessed much more rarely in other areas of the business: for example, as team owners, head coaches, or high-level executives. Mohamoud identifies the staged enactment of (primarily Black) violence for entertainment, paired with a lack of opportunity, as a covert form of neo-slavery.

The patterning can also be seen as paralleling the dehumanizing practice of slave branding. Literally

and figuratively, Mohamoud refocuses signs and experiences from across time and place, creating both a funereal reminder of subjugation and a celebration of Black history within North American culture.

The shackled mass of football footwear in *Chain Gang* (2018) recalls bound prisoners. Under Armour cleats seem to fall from the ceiling to the floor, becoming a bleak monument to past and current forms of normalized and institutionalized oppression, including lynching, capital punishment, and the high incarceration percentage of persons of colour.

The exhibition also includes a quote excerpted from author Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man*. Published in 1952, the book details racial division, Black nationalism, and prejudicial policies during the middle of the 20th century. The quote, applied on the floor in vinyl, largely blends in with the concrete. It mimics Black invisibility within North America: of being unseen or ignored by the larger society. Importantly, the protagonist in Ellison's book is similarly never given an individual identity. He instead acts as a tokenized stand-in, whose identity is supplanted and displaced by stereotyped, and often racist, views.

Oppositional forces drive *From the Ground We Fall* (2019) which, like sports, takes the form of performed conflict. The work is a three-channel video recording of a performance, installed alongside related costume-uniform hybrids. The video is Sisyphean in nature: two players are chained together, yet

continually struggle to run in opposite directions, subsequently pulling each other backwards through sheer force. Opposition and struggle thus lie at the work's very heart. The explicit frustration and lack of progress shown in the video expresses the ubiquitous presence of racism throughout North American society. The activity mirrors a common situation in disenfranchised communities within marginalizing systems, wherein community members are often pitted against one another. Though the setting could represent a field anywhere in North America, it is significant to note that the players were filmed here in London, where Mohamoud grew up.

Photographs and a pair of additional costumes comprise *One of the Boys* (2019), an installation that also considers thematic binaries. The works, which belong to a larger series, imagine new ways of being. The photographs feature a model assuming multiple poses. The costumes blend the fashions of boldly coloured sports attire and glamorous formal wear. Together they suggest non-binary, queer, and otherwise inclusive sexual identities. Such cross-dressing upsets the athletic traditions of hyper-masculinity and queer discrimination, while promoting sensitivity and tenderness within communities that traditionally reward heteronormativity.

This exhibition is a celebration of difference. In the installation *Glorious Bones*, Mohamoud has adorned 46 helmets in eclectic African print patterns to signify the diversity of Black culture. Emblems of identity, they symbolize group belonging within a vital, varied

world. In *Glorious Bones*, multiple identities co-exist, as they are re-envisioned within both the American melting pot and Canadian cultural mosaic.

Mohamoud's practice exposes deeply embedded inequality. Her work replaces a zero-sum, competitive paradigm of accepted conventions with elements of resistance. *To Play in the Face of Certain Defeat* critically interrogates the unsettling associations and ideas behind professional sports culture.

Matthew Kyba  
Exhibition Guest Curator

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