Past Interference

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Past Interference

A Thesis Presented

by

TOVAH RUDAWSKI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2016

Department of Art
PAST INTERFERENCE

A Thesis Presented

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TOVAH RUDAWSKI

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ABSTRACT

PAST INTERFERENCE

MAY 2016

TOVAH RUDAWSKI B.A., THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE, OLYMPIA, WA

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

Past Interference connects the subjects of religion, spirituality and sports, through an examination of my own personal and political connections to football culture, as well as through my attempt to intervene artistically, using a strategy of conflating various historical references into the media of the National Football League. The question at the heart of this paper is what it means to be on the inside of a spectacle, specifically trying to puzzle out how one comes to know that about oneself.
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Can these bones live?
O ye dry bones hear the word of the Lord!
Can these bones live?
These bones shall live: and ye shall know that I am the Lord!
So I prophesied.
--Ezekiel 37:15-22

In 2008, I went to New Orleans to visit my friends who had moved there; a few years had passed since Hurricane Katrina, and many parts of the city were still destroyed. On a particularly balmy night, we went for a drive; deep into the abandoned part of the Lower Ninth Ward, where high grasses covered the remains of schools, homes, and sports fields, only recognizable by the rusted goal posts at either end. The biblical verse above was painted on a marquee outside of a deserted church.

Not that the marquee in and of itself was profound — you can look at any image in the aftermath of a disaster and feel something— but I asked my friend to stop, and when he did, I took a picture with a disposable camera. I felt aware of myself as a tourist in a very fragile city, participating in an act of documentation that was ubiquitous and oftentimes exploitative. I didn’t know then that this would be the city that I would come to live in or that the image of that marquee would later come to inform my practice in graduate school in Massachusetts.

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I moved to New Orleans the following year and got a job bartending, oftentimes working Sundays when the Saints played. Sundays hold a religious undertone for me, but one that was specific to Judeo-Christian worship in the morning, as marked by my own upbringing of going to weekly Sunday school. As I sank into my new role of bartender, I began to see Sundays as a venue for another kind of worship: late afternoon or evening ‘fellowship’ over football. The season following the Saints winning their first Super Bowl was an especially significant one—triumphant, but also steeped in recovery. After so much had been lost, the victory at the Super Bowl was a rapture that both physically and spiritually brought the people of New Orleans together.

There is more to the connection between football and religion than the holiest day of the week. Coaches use inspirational scripture in their locker room speeches to inspire their players for battle, and the players themselves thank God in their post-victory interviews. There are the physical rituals of fans: the call and response of the fan song “Who Dat?”, the application of face paint and glitter and gold boas, the gathering of families around TVs or in bars, the grilling of meat and the drinking to excess, the marching and the music and the parades. Women line up and apply brown makeup in circles to their right cheeks, an adoring imitation of quarterback Drew Brees' birthmark. While these traditions are specific to the culture of New Orleans, and have connections to second line parades and Sunday worship, they are at the same time familiar and bizarre; they exist in their own particular way in every place that has a football team and its own mythology.
As the largest physical reminder of the constant state of recuperation of the city, there is the stadium itself. Every stadium has its own history. They are places built for spectacles based on the ancient tradition of people battling other people. But a gathering at the Superdome can’t happen without the visceral memory of human despair—thousands of people seeking shelter in the stadium that was anything but a sanctuary, as it fell down around them. The scale of that catastrophe will always stain the Superdome’s legacy and perhaps even the legacy of the football stadium as a “heroic” structure.

The connections between spirituality and football abound. Some of them are physical spaces: stadiums as sites for gathering en masse for a common goal. Some involve the physical body of the spectators or church goers: the adorning of the clothes and accessories as personal ritual -- a getting oneself ready, whether for the trip to the stadium or for the televised game. The coach represents the moral authority of the game -- the television camera continuously cuts to him, serious and intent, bedecked in his headset and gripping his clipboard. There is a righteousness to this sport, a game that has one outcome, a winning side and a losing side. Two examples of this righteousness share Texas as the site: the myth that the Dallas Cowboys’ Stadium has a hole in its roof so God can watch His favorite team play comes to mind, or the high school cheerleaders in Kountze, Texas, who won a court battle for the right to hold banners with “If God is for us, who can be against us?” written on them.

Are football fans actually religious? Is the stadium a place of worship? Do the evocations of a church service mean that fans are worshipping the righteousness of their
home team? Are football players gods who have the power to bring people together in meaningful, spiritual ways?

![Image](Image.png)

**Figure 1. Can These Bones Live?** by Tovah Rudawski, 2014. Acrylic on paper.

Over the past three years, these questions lie at the heart of the work. The first iterations appear in the painting above, where I placed the question from the marquee in New Orleans on a sign, held up by a fan. If I hadn’t moved to New Orleans and worked as a bartender, I wouldn’t have begun to pay attention to football culture in the first place.

When I moved to Massachusetts three years ago, I found another manifestation of football worship in the form of the New England Patriots. In fact, one can go anywhere in the United States and find worship of this sport because it is embedded in the fabric of American culture. It’s also rooted in family, which is why I’ve come to see football culture as inextricably tied to patriarchal relationships. Memories of my own father come to mind: Sunday afternoons were when he was almost always home, and responsible for
cooking a meal, and he would make beef stew week after week, in the crock pot, while his afternoon unfolded in front of the TV watching the game. More often than not he would fall asleep and when he did my sister and I would play a game, switch the channel to static and see how long it would take him to notice the noise had changed and wake up. These rituals are specific to my own family but just about everyone I’ve spoken to seems to have a story about their upbringing that involves a football team -- whether it be a connection through an uncle, their grandfather, their brothers, or a coach. The way in which these connections inform how people support the sport plays out in surprising ways.
As the 2015 football season began, I began a purposeful and active practice of watching every Sunday, and on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, too, depending on who was playing. I chose teams to root for based on players that I thought seemed like ‘good’ people, determining their goodness based on things I read and also by watching the way they appeared when sitting on the sidelines. I went to public places to watch, sometimes by myself, and sometimes with friends. When I was by myself, I wasn’t alone for long: I would end up in conversation with elderly men who were also watching the game alone, and for the most part the conversations were pleasant. I always had a notebook and pen with me, and they were curious about what I was doing at a sports bar by myself, drawing and taking notes. If I revealed that I was an artist working with football as a source, the developing trust between us would crumble. If I said I really liked the game, or was rooting for a particular team, there was camaraderie, and no uneasiness moving forward in the conversation.

I did not approach these conversations, or the act of watching the game, as an anthropologist. I had no agenda other than wanting to understand what a person feels for a team, and where they thought that feeling came from. And in the act of diligently watching games every week, with different people each time, I began to see my spectator status as a new kind of artistic practice. In retrospect, I knew a part of me wanted to feel it, the thing that motivates a person to root, to believe, to care -- the fire, the fervor -- I’m unsure of the most fitting word for what that is.
The question I would always ask the men I had conversations with is who they supported and why. It usually had to do with where they had come from, and who their father’s teams were. Because I watched at bars in Amherst MA, the majority of men were Patriots fans; there was one Kansas City Chiefs fan, a sweet man in his seventies named Charlie, that I remember fondly. He told me he was a Chiefs fans for two reasons: one, because he grew up there, and two, because he thinks the quarterback for the Chiefs is a good man. And then we had this exchange:

2 Within all the of the time I spent watching football this past season, I was never approached by a woman. Women that were watching football in the bars and restaurants I watched in were with their families or with men, and were never by themselves. I became acutely aware of my femaleness as linked to my solitariness. The NFL says that 45 percent of football fans are women, but there are no statistics on why and how these women came to be fans. Perhaps it is a way for women to connect to the various men in their lives.

3 Charlie’s reasons for believing this about quarterback Alex Smith are because of his straightforward approach to the game and because of his charity work off the field. When I told Charlie that I would watch
Charlie: Why are you here watching the Dolphins? Think you are the only fan here...
Me: Because I think they are a funny team.

Charlie: What do you mean “funny”?
Me: I don’t know; something about them makes me laugh.

Charlie: What’s so funny about big guys slamming into other big guys?
Me: ……

I remember this exchange in detail because it was the only time I heard someone reprimand me (albeit gently) about my lighthearted approach to watching. I felt exposed and inauthentic, because I know there isn’t really anything funny about big men hitting other big men!

It’s easy to pretend while you are watching a game when the bar is filled with people rooting for a team in common. There are unending cues to applaud, to boo, to get angry or excited and, maybe, if one is feeling particularly confident, yell something out. I did all the above, sometimes surprising myself, and sometimes doing so as a poseur. Participating in this way made me feel both part of the culture and like a complete trickster. These two opposing identities pushed me to an outsider status, which I think is crucial in understanding how I see the game.

What is it like to be on the inside of the spectacle of football fandom? How does one begin to see one’s identity as a fan? Does it have to be something one learns as a child and practices into adulthood? Is it totally missing the point to view being a fan of a

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4 Charlie Richardson. Personal Interview. 15 October 2015.
team as a practice, as something that one has to work towards? To solve some of these questions as I sank into my practice of weekly watching, I began to look for symbols within the game itself, symbols that linked the game to other systems of belief that have existed much longer than football. This kind of search is an act of conflation that I think defines how I have always approached my own art: I make connections between seemingly disparate things. What made this use of conflation distinctly different is that I had become an active participant. When I reflect back upon this time of praxis, I see complications and mysteries that seem new: myself as a fan, myself as a relational mapper (connecting the reasons that people that root for a specific team), myself as a creator of a ritual, myself as having a desire to be “one of the boys.”
"In the interpretation of unknown languages and symbols, the observer gladly allows that much may be wrong; but this does not prevent him believing that some may be right."

-- Thomas Inman

Once I began to watch the game for hidden clues and influences, I found them everywhere; from the cryptic gestures of the referee to the instruments of measurement that mark downs on the field. They exist in the various team logos as well as in how the clothes that fans wear become active sources of power. I became aware of a new visual language — one that connects to ancient symbologies. This new language required that I begin an active process of weaving one system of beliefs onto another. And through that process, I began to see the game as a kind of magic: the symbols and arrows and logos and the endless stream of visual information flashing before me took on a power very much like a spell being cast. If I were to tell people and they reacted with skepticism or doubt, I found myself defensive about this connection between football and witchcraft that I had essentially conjured up.

Of course I am aware that my role as an artist/observer, as opposed to a participant/observer, and my purposeful practice of active watching, pushed me outside

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6 The NFL sells gloves that have logos of various team spread across the palms of two gloves; when you put your hands up and interlock your fingers together, you form the symbol of the team, also signifying a source of power. This image, once I stripped it of the logo and relied instead on the image of the hands coming together, became a recurring motif in my work.
the circle of the typical football enthusiast/spectator. However, I didn’t consider my unorthodox approach as coming from an anthropologist’s or archaeologist's point of view. I didn’t feel as if I was bound by any set of rules -- someone could point out a visual reference from the game to notice, or I could notice it on my own, and then I would immediately put it into a painting or drawing, and because of that action, I firmly established a relationship.

Besides the occasional curiosity about why people root for who they root for, and the link to masculinity and patriarchy, this project has allowed me to care about the game for the first time in a way that makes sense. A part of me worries that it’s a very selfish project. But when I think about how much space the presence of football has taken up within my life, the noise, the visual language that I didn’t understand -- and the time it took away from time spent with my father -- I feel as though I have something to say to the world.

I felt a need to connect to the game that was directly linked to a system of belief of my choosing. I decided to start casting my own spells. Initially, I saw this action as a desire to join the history of women doing this work. But in hindsight, I see another reason: to carve out my own rituals around watching, to create a participatory identity to fold into each week. This identity, one of my own making but connected to fan culture, helped me to understand another part of the culture of watching, one that encourages illusionary thinking or ritualistic behaviors. Some examples of superstitious behaviors that fans believe affect their team’s success include gambling, eating and drinking the same thing in a particular order, putting on a “lucky” jersey, and avoiding a “cursed”
jersey: these are all socially acceptable forms of how to be an active fan. My Sundays began to reflect this: I would cast spells in my studio in the morning and watch the game in the afternoon and evening.

My spellcasting undertaking wasn’t always easy. During week eight, I cast a couple of spells, one of them for a winning spell for the Seahawks to overcome the Cowboys. During the game, Ricardo Lockette, a wide receiver for the Seahawks, was hit hard and fell, landing on his side directly onto the large Cowboys logo on the field. The Cowboys logo is a five-pointed white star, which from the physical angle that I was watching the game, and from the cognitive position I was in, was an upside-down pentagram. The pentagram has a variety of meanings and usages within Wicca, most importantly as a source of power when casting spells. There he was, Ricardo Lockette, live on the television, lying across this incredible power source. He remained there, unmoving, with a swarm of people around him, for perhaps fifteen minutes, until he was carted off on a stretcher.

7 Upon researching the oddities of superstitious fan behavior, I found a 2014 Bud Light campaign, whose commercials showcased a variety of odd behaviors of fans watching games, all the while drinking Bud Light, of course. The tagline for this campaign was, “It’s only weird if it doesn’t work,” implying that the actions that people do have power.
The following day, I painted an image of this scene. At some point it occurred to me to see how Ricardo was doing, and I read that he was going in to have surgery on his spinal cord. A paranoid feeling washed over me: did I cause this man’s injury? I frantically read through the spellbook I had been using to see if there was anything I could do when something goes wrong. I found a section on closing your pentagrams, or closing up any openings in energy when you cast spells, and I realized I had not been doing this. I quickly closed any open pentagrams in my studio, destroyed the painting I had made of Ricardo on the Cowboys logo, and cast a healing spell for him.

This paranoia-inducing and emotionally frantic experience was a lesson: the rituals we generate around watching this game are only as powerful as we believe them to be, and nothing we do can change the truth that this is a violent, brutal sport that puts men's lives at risk. And there isn’t anything funny about big men hitting other big men.
I stopped casting spells on the games during playoffs; the fear I felt around the Ricardo Lockette incident was enough to give me pause. I felt deep concern for these men, heightened further when I saw a segment on ESPN called “Injury Roundup.” It consisted of cartoonish outlines of actual football players, with large bubble text flashing “GROIN” or “SHOULDER” or “NECK” or “KNEES” over each of them, indicating the bodily injuries of the week. The point of the “roundup” was to demonstrate how each of these injuries decreased each player’s team's chances of winning. This gruesome news segment made plain how physically expendable these men are — and how each injury can be twisted into an advantageous scenario.

I’m not alone in thinking that this is awful. While being at an all-time high of being watched and supported, football has never been under so much scrutiny as it is today. As research gives us more insight into the long-term effects of repeated concussions on players, and the link between unchecked male aggression and sexual assault and domestic violence, the question becomes: what is to be done? Where is football headed? Will the game as we know it end in my lifetime? What good does it do to think of the sport as something with a life span?
“All the world must suffer a big jolt. There will be such a game that the ungodly will be thrown off their seats, and the downtrodden will rise.”

--Thomas Muntzer

I have made little to no mention of the actual physical work I’ve made -- the paintings and drawings, the objects that contain the spells, the conflation, the questions I keep raising but don’t have any answers to. I am unsure if pointing to the specifics of the symbologies will make the work function better. The question I am asking is: can the work act as a living source for the performances that I did during the 2015 NFL season? Does it satisfy to propose that what I’m left with is an archive? If I provide the viewer with a key or titles will they understand what is in front of them?

I know what this work has done for me. I now believe that there is a kind of magic in painting and drawing, and through this body of work I have access to a consciousness that feels rooted in something ancient, deeply erotic and feminine. Tapping into a feminine (and feminist) consciousness while working within a passionately and aggressively masculine world is a gift. My paintings and drawings have begun to reflect a set of ideas that, although overtly referring to known systems of belief, now seem to illuminate a world that is outside the bounds of what I know and can understand. When I mix essential oils into the tints, the colors have hidden meanings; when the work includes

written text, I dim the visual noise of the paper, letting the text stand on its own. If I ask myself the question: Can these bones live? I know the answer is yes, because I feel it.

While I hesitate to define the symbology within the work, I’d like to address my artistic strategy that I employed for the last year. Reflecting on the work as a whole I see how the objects have different functions, even if I wasn’t fully aware of it when I made them. The spells I cast are in and on the pieces of paper that make up much of the work of this exhibition: I like to think of them as fallen pages from a spellbook I was making up as I went. The works on paper also function to bring out some of the symbology directly, leaving room for the viewer to establish connections between imagery and text as they see fit. As I sank into the practice of watching for symbols within the game, I relied on an actual spellbook, Janet and Stewart Farrars’ *A Witches Bible Compleat*. Because of this simultaneous act, the imagery from the history of witchcraft and the media of the NFL are now woven together so that source has disappeared, becoming extraneous. The paintings on wood have a more permanent and physical presence: they represent iconic symbols or moments that I found to have a magical presence within them. The videos are the only living moments: they loop in on themselves and the actions made within them are infinite. These actions are examples of the physical rituals of the spectacle of the game, as performed by those in the stands and on the sidelines. The gesture of making these actions infinite comes from a desire to take an ephemeral moment and make it endless.

What of the future? And how do I reconcile the fact that I know this has been a rich journey for me sifting through the culture of the many-headed beast of football, a culture that desperately needs to change?
The ‘what ifs’ feel endless. What would happen if the Super Bowl was cancelled due to concern for the physical and emotional well-being of the players? What if stadiums became spaces for gathering in silence, in efforts to heal? The energy that fans propel into this world - does it come back out again, and if so, where? What does someone feel like when they’ve dressed up, head to toe, and painted their face and body, and gone to a game, and their team loses? Can these bones live?

I wrote this right before the Super Bowl:

There is a very deep feeling within me right now as the Super Bowl approaches -- I am certain that I know a language outside of one I know -- it’s one I’ve created. And yet the act of being certain is the one that I’ve been toying with all year, or the past few months, in that I am questioning the idea of a system of belief. To give up oneself to something outside of oneself seems to be a hopeful one. It’s one that I believe people do when they commit themselves to rooting for a football team. So what did I do, exactly? Did I make a new system of belief that I only hold the key to? Does my work serve any other purpose than making me feel connected? I hope so.

Then the Super Bowl happened, and the season ended, and I felt great relief: it felt finished, a thing of the past. It’s overwhelmingly surreal to think of all of the energies put into that event, both physical, psychological, and emotional. And I am left with the remains, the residue of my ‘performance’ as a fan: the paintings, drawings and videos. I see them as an offering, of a new symbology that, however new, forever reflects back onto the fading nature of football and witchcraft, two systems of belief that I see as eternally interwoven. The ways in which people come together and feel are forever changing and this work is my musing and attempt to be a part of these cultures. If it is a prophecy, I know it’s an earnest and hopeful one.
I remember the feeling of being a tourist in a fragile city, looking into something that felt both solid and ephemeral, and I wonder about how we come to know what we know about the world, and how we get to be on the inside of something….
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHOTO OF THE ARTIST-AT-WORK