



3000m women finals,
Mary Decker (1984),
by David Burnett

Art Town USA

Do sports inspire art or vice versa?

If the Olympic Track and Field Team Trials coming to Eugene June 27-July 6 has seemingly spawned its own cottage industry of track-and-field related gift shops and gimmickry, surely a few local art galleries can join in on the fun. Athletes performing at full throttle can inspire great photography. However, judging from the pickings at the three galleries showing track-and-field related art — DIVA, Maude Kerns Art Center and the UO's Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art — it can also inspire plenty of bad art. That isn't to say there aren't pieces worth seeing, just that you'll have to hurdle a few doozies on the way.

Let's start with the entirely appropriate exhibit at the J-Schnitz, **"Faster, Higher, Farther: The Spirit of Track-and-Field Sports,"** which displays the sports photography of world-renowned photographers Annie Leibovitz, David Burnett, Kenneth Jarecke and Dilip Mehta. Burnett's blown-up prints take up most of the space in this exhibit (and rightly so), as his photojournalist's eye can capture more than just "action shots." He often veers

away from the field of play to capture a wall of press photographers neatly lined up in rows (*4x400m relay, men*) or the dignity and panache of the Olympic judges (*Track and Field Judges at 1988 Seoul Olympics*) as they enter the stadium.

All the photos in this exhibit appear to be inkjet prints on vellum paperboard, giving the black-and-white photos an appearance (and graininess) of a monoprint. While this makes Burnett's and Mehta's images sparkle, Leibovitz's portraits almost demand a high-gloss print. Her shot of sprinter Marion Jones prior to the 2000 Olympics shows a lean, mean and powerful woman, not the drug-enhanced Jones we've now come to know. Likewise, Leibovitz's in-action shot of sprinter Sanya Richards on a California beach holds up well, but Richards' serious expression seems out of place. For once I'd like to see Leibovitz capture her subject off-guard; humor is nearly always missing from her work.

Just a few blocks from Hayward Field on 15th Avenue, Maude Kerns Art Center would be foolish to not capitalize on the

interest of the Olympic Trials attendees. So with a juried exhibit titled **"Track Town USA,"** MKAC steps up to the plate and offers work in numerous mediums, some of it related to track and field and some not. Mike Leckie's cast hydrotone bas reliefs of athletes in competition recall the Greek art of the first Olympiad in Athens, but Leckie's are a sculpt-by-numbers affair, as if crafted by machine.

Kris Ibach's oil paintings *Release* and *Orbit* appear to be the two major works of the exhibit, which is unfortunate because while they are lustrous and sensuous, their basic composition has gone completely haywire. In *Release* the shot-putter's arm has been warped and stretched like Silly Putty to give it an inhuman, alien effect. *Orbit* appears to abandon common-sense anatomy outright, especially in the arms of the hammer thrower. Similarly disappointing are John Giustina's photoshopped and blown-up "action shots" on canvas. Another viewer wondered, "Why go the extra yard to make it artsy-fartsy?" I'd also like to know: Why print on canvas if you're going to paste it onto flimsy foamcore? Canvas is meant to be stretched.

We start moving into some decent work with Carol Arian's collages. *Sacrifice*, her collage of a long jumper in mid-air looking like Christ on the cross, posits the justified comparison of sports to religion, with the sacrifice of all the many miles and hours of training (and praying) paying off in gold medals. Just like Jesus. Or something.

Speaking of sports and religion, don't miss Ryan Pancoast's three oil paintings in the exhibit, all of which feel like they belong in a church or some other religious setting (making this former-church-turned-gallery the perfect setting). Pancoast's *The Starting Line* certainly quotes French Neoclassicism in its mannered, dignified scene of cross-country runners. Poised at the starting line, the runners could easily be the soldiers in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* while the coaches squatting to the side are the unseen generals directing the athlete-soldiers to a considerably less bloody outcome. Pancoast's *The Spit* is an

oddly affecting portrait in muted yellows and muddy browns of a runner who catches his breath after a race by hawking a loogie. That's a perfect blend of sports and paint.

Sports gets its components broken down into its physics for DIVA's **"The Notion of Motion"** gallery of exhibits. Head first for Don MacLane's stainless steel and river rock kinetic sculptures in the back gallery for an interactive treat. Viewers are asked to gently push the sculptures to throw them off balance, only to gaze at each bobbing, swaying, balanced structure as it falls back into a stasis. *Parabolic Rocker* embodies a precarious balance of weight and form while *Lewis' Cat* has a ball bearing rolling in rhythmic waves on a see-saw structure. It's static beauty in a purest sense.

Sergio Ortiz's blown-up photographs of runners in the Portland Marathon present the average Jane athlete in all her glory, be it a pair of competitors enjoying a friendly conversation (*Stride by Stride*) or a lineup of fleshy legs (*Keeping Pace*). Ortiz's craft is well-honed, as decent as any photojournalist; my one gripe is his choice to mount the canvas prints on foamcore (hey, just like Giustina). Foamcore is a nondurable backing prone to warping, and the DIVA gallery attendants were having a terrible time keeping them flat and hanging on the wall while I viewed the show.

For their pixellated and cheesy rainbow color schemes, Steven Oshatz's poster-size digital printouts of math formulas belong more on a web page from the mid-'90s than in this exhibit. And, unfortunately, Oshatz and Tenold Peterson's large-scale black-and-white paintings of athletes in the main gallery look more like ad graphics for the exhibit than actual works of art (in fact, some of these works are reproduced at the Downtown Library for cross-promotional purposes). When piggybacking art exhibits on the enormous hulk of an event like the Olympic Trials, there are some lines that should not be crossed. **EW**

"Faster, Higher, Farther" shows through Sept. 1; "Track Town USA" through July 11; "The Notion of Motion" through July 26.

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