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## Making Microart That Can Suggest Macrotruths

By LINDA YABLONSKY



James Estrin/The New York Times

Paul Pfeiffer with his video "The Long Count": boxing scenes in which the boxers have been removed.

THE current vogue for large-scale artworks does not faze Paul Pfeiffer. He is mad for the miniature. "Race Riot," for example, his startling new video, is only as large as the tiny pop-out screen on a digital camera. The peepholelike presentation of the piece, which is mounted on a pedestal in a tall glass vitrine, might seem more appropriate for a display of insect specimens than a work of contemporary art. But there is a reason behind it. "It forces concentration," Mr. Pfeiffer explains, "and a very intimate distance with the viewer."

Yet "Race Riot," which Mr. Pfeiffer calls

a video sculpture, could hardly be more contemporary or have more to do with the viewing of art. It pictures not an insurrection, but a pileup on a basketball court as several players skirmish for the ball. Only after adjusting to the reduced scale and bleached tone of the image does one see what is there: frantic, dark hands stroking white-uniformed bodies in a clinical undressing of desire.

"There's an absence of detail and context that unveils the latent eroticism of the sports spectacle," says Debra Singer, the Whitney Museum's associate curator of contemporary art. Ms. Singer selected "Race Riot" and "The Long Count" (2000-01) for Mr. Pfeiffer's exhibition, on view at the museum from Thursday

through Feb. 24. "Paul makes the point that digital technology has subliminal effects that operate without our knowing."

At 35, Mr. Pfeiffer is one of the country's leading digital artists, but because he works in other media as well, his art-world reputation as just "the little-video guy" makes him uncomfortable. Three years ago few people took note of his debut at the Project, a cutting-edge gallery in Harlem, where he showed sculptural installations and digitally manipulated photographs.

Then, in March 2000, Mr. Pfeiffer contributed a silent, trance-inducing, 30-second video loop titled "John 3:16" to the sprawling "Greater New York" exhibition at P.S. 1 in Queens. Viewers peering up at a minuscule monitor set at hoop height were riveted by the repeated passage of a basketball being snapped, as if by magic, from one invisible player's hands to another's. It just about stole the show.

A week later, the Whitney Biennial catapulted Mr. Pfeiffer to overnight stardom. It included two videos, "Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)" and "The Pure

Products Go Crazy," which he had placed side by side on pocket-size screens. The first captured the New York Knicks forward Larry Johnson exulting after winning a game in the National Basketball Association playoffs, but because Mr. Pfeiffer had slowed the action and deleted the other players, the basketball and the markings on the court, the continually repeating image turned into a profound expression of human anguish trapped, like the viewer's eye, in the loop. The other tape, extracted from the film "Risky Business," made Tom Cruise's comic dance in his underwear an act of extreme desperation. Mr. Pfeiffer won the museum's first Bucksbaum Award, which includes \$100,000 and a residency as the biennial's most promising artist. The museum says it is the largest single prize for a visual artist anywhere.

"I didn't start out a sports fan," Mr. Pfeiffer says, "but sometimes I'd tune into sporting events and feel that if there was a way to disassociate the human figure from the context of the wild, over-lit environment of a stadium, it could be kind of moving."

He was right about that. He applied the same principle to "The Long Count," a video triptych that transforms the final rounds of three of Muhammad Ali's heavyweight title bouts — with Sonny Liston (1964), George Foreman (1974) and Joe Frazier (1975) — into a poignant ghost dance.

Here Mr. Pfeiffer has edited out the boxers, leaving what appear to be shape-shifting currents of air rippling across the ebullient faces of the crowd at ringside. At the Whitney, the videos appear on five-inch screens that extend from the wall on long steel armatures. The Ali-Frazier fight ("The Thrilla in Manila"), placed at the center, has an eerie soundtrack taken from recorded conversations among the four boxers. Their speech has been removed; what remains is the sound of breathing, stammering and grunting. As Ms. Singer says, "It gives the absent violence a physical reality."

Mr. Pfeiffer's own reality is a study in multiculturalism. The middle of three sons born in Hawaii to a Filipino mother and a white American father, he lived for a time in a small town south of Manila, where both parents taught music at a local missionary school. When he was 15, the family moved to New Mexico, and for two years Mr. Pfeiffer attended a Navajo school where his parents were on the faculty. Later, after his father's death from cancer, he enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he became active in radical gay and Asian-American politics and studied printmaking.

"I actually think of what I've been doing as an extension of my background in printmaking," Mr. Pfeiffer says. "What I liked about it was the repetition and degradation of successive iterations of images, the mechanical process. So taking a pre-existing image and putting it in a different context to mean something else — that kind of layering of meaning and image is something I've been interested in from the start."

Mr. Pfeiffer not only borrows from commercial sources, he also uses the history of art, most conspicuously the work of Marcel Duchamp, Francis Bacon, Andy Warhol and the contemporary British artist Steve McQueen. "I can't think of any higher pleasure than to have an audience, or dialogue, with another artist's work that I admire," he says. Viewers may also detect a relationship between Mr. Pfeiffer's frame-by-frame editing technique and Robert Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning," a 1953 drawing by Willem de Kooning

that Mr. Rauschenberg erased, leaving bare traces of the original before exhibiting it as his own.

"Somewhere," Mr. Pfeiffer says, "I read a statement by Duchamp to the effect that his art was intended as a destroyer, specifically of identity. I find that really inspiring. Putting a mustache on Mona Lisa makes a pretty basic point about the fluidity of identity and the depths to which gender, race and nationality are encoded into vision. I'm interested in multiple meanings and a kind of ambiguity that frustrates any attempt to pin it down. But because I use references to pop culture and tools that are associated with advertising, some people see my work as an example of the collapse of art into the world of advertising or entertainment. It's curious, because my intent is completely different."

A recent foray into monumentalism, an installation titled "Self-Portrait as a Fountain," was an enormous white tub and shower affair that clearly evoked the murder scene in the film "Psycho." It met with derision from critics in both Los Angeles and New York. "It was a mistake making the 'Psycho' reference so obvious," Mr. Pfeiffer says about the piece. All he wanted anyone to see was its terrifying whiteness.

MORE successful was "Orpheus Descending," a commission from the Public Art Fund, for which he enlisted a friend with a farm in upstate New York and the novelist Lawrence Chua, his companion for the last six years, to help him raise chickens. For 24 hours a day over a six-week period, Mr. Pfeiffer trained his camera on the incubating eggs and then the hatched chicks as they grew to maturity. The completed real-time video ran on full-size monitors for 75 days. Since Sept. 11, it has retrospectively taken on even more meaning than it had during its installation last spring in two walkways at the World Trade Center, where Mr. Pfeiffer hoped it might affect commuters' appreciation of the brief span of a life.

At present, Mr. Pfeiffer is sticking with the small. Even his SoHo studio is small. It consists of one corner of an office he shares with three other people and it allows him just enough room for the computers on which he edits his videos. Viewers can catch up with the four earliest in "Loop," a group exhibition opening today at P.S. 1 and continuing through Jan. 7. It includes the mesmerizing "John 3:16," whose title refers to the New Testament passage that Mr. Pfeiffer describes as "the Christian formula for eternal life." (It reads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.")

"For me," he adds, "digital media presents an image that can last forever."

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