

## FRIEZE

### Sharon Hayes Turns the Camera on People Who Have Found Their People

At a time of enforced distancing, Sharon Hayes's *Ricerche: two* examines the intimacy of women's American football teams

M BY MADDIE KLETT IN FILM, OPINION | 19 MAY 21



American football is a 'contact' sport. Plays are intensely physical and strategic manoeuvres are often communicated non-verbally. In early 2020, the artist Sharon Hayes filmed herself interviewing the players of two Texas-based women's tackle football teams: Arlington Impact and Dallas Elite Mustangs. In *Ricerche: two* (2020), the players are filmed at close range; some sling their arms around each other as they squeeze into the camera's frame. When the video was presented last winter as part of the group show 'Commonwealth', at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond, it was projected onto an arched screen that stretched across the length of the gallery, mimicking a huddle formation. With social-distancing measures in effect at the museum, it was remarkable to watch such bodily intimacy in the knowledge that it was captured only a month before lockdown.

'Does football make you a better lover?' Hayes asks the teammates. Some laugh, others duck their heads to avoid the camera's gaze. 'It makes for an attractive situation [...] and the women come,' says one, while another notes: 'I've had guys not talk to me because they're intimidated.' Sexual difference is implicit in these responses, without the invocation of fixed labels. Hayes's questions are direct, but feel leading in a way that's meant to elicit laughter and a sense of familiarity with the players. Optically, Hayes does not film these athletes mid-play in the style of National Football League (NFL) games, using aerial cameras, but pulls in close to capture the helmets-off camaraderie of pre-play huddles, foregrounding the differences between teammates. Rather than conceal the individuals who make up the team, Hayes gives them the space to be themselves.

Frieze, May 2021

# Tanya Leighton



Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: two*, from the 'Commonwealth' group show, 2020, installation shot. Courtesy: ICA and VCU, Philadelphia; photograph: David Hale

*Ricerche: two* is the third work in Hayes's series 'Ricerche' (Italian for 'research'), which she began in 2013. In *Ricerche: three* (2013), she interviews students at an all-women's college in Massachusetts, while in *Ricerche: one* (2019) she speaks with a group of children of queer or gender non-conforming parents. Hayes attributes this style of interviewing people in groups to Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 documentary *Comizi d'amore* (Love Meetings), in which the Italian director films himself informally interviewing subjects on the street about sex and sexuality. Like Pasolini, Hayes exclusively films outdoors: on the university quad, the beach and the playing field. These spacious open-air environments amplify the choice these individuals have made to convene in tight groups together.

For the 'Ricerche' series, Hayes takes her cue from Pasolini and asks questions about gender and sexuality to unearth the politics at the heart of affinity groups. In *Ricerche: two*, the common point of contention among the players is financial precarity; unlike the men's professional NFL, athletes in the Women's Football Association (WFA), the league to which the Impact and Mustangs belong, are unpaid and extend dues to participate. They speak about the challenges of sustaining a fulltime job alongside their football commitments: getting hurt on the field is riskier when it threatens reporting to work on Monday; protective gear is a steep personal expense; and, in the US, where women make 82 cents on the dollar compared to men, a fulltime job may not provide adequate financial security in the first place. With the Mustangs and Impact largely comprised of Black women and non-binary folks, that disparity is even starker: Black women make just 62 cents on the dollar compared to their white male counterparts.

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin

+49 (0)30 21 972 220, [info@tanyaleighton.com](mailto:info@tanyaleighton.com), [www.tanyaleighton.com](http://www.tanyaleighton.com)

# Tanya Leighton



Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: two*, 2020, video still. Photograph: Rolando Sepulveda II; courtesy: ICA and VCU, Philadelphia

The conversation in *Ricerche: two* revolves around physical and socioeconomic precarity, but it is not joyless. Hayes has turned the camera on people who have found their people – a condition central to organized resistance and a theme throughout the 'Ricerche' series. I was happy to note recently that the players' desires to get on the field haven't changed since early 2020, when the communion of a huddle felt more cathartic than contagious. According to the WFA website, the Mustangs are scheduled to face-off against the Impact for the first game of the spring 2021 season.