

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Sharon Hayes

KRISTINA KITE GALLERY

“What do you sacrifice to play?” “Do you feel connected to a feminist movement?” “Does football make you a better lover?” The questions are direct and grow increasingly personal as members of the group being queried warm up to the interviewer. The subjects—members of two Texas-based women’s tackle-football teams, the Arlington Impact and the Dallas Elite Mustangs—stand in a field under cool daylight. A few of the players are shifting their weight from foot to foot, while others grasp the fronts of their protective padding—we come to learn that some of the women wear kids’ pads because they better fit the female frame. Their unfiltered answers comprise *Ricerche: two*, 2020, part of Sharon Hayes’s ongoing video series examining gender, sexuality, collectivity, equity, and family, among other topics. As the focus of this exhibition, the two-channel work was smartly projected on a curved surface suspended from an armature at roughly human height. The viewer was thus forced to huddle up with these athletes, to meet them on their level and get familiar with their stories, their presence. In this respect, the nearly forty-minute piece presented an intimate and affirmative document about women’s participation in male-dominated rituals of physicality, their victories and challenges, and their navigation of a culture that so easily labels their participation in the sport an act of transgression.

While Hayes borrowed the basic structure of the video from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Comizi d’amore* (Love Encounters), a 1964 film that examines sex and sexuality in postwar Italy, her work owes less to Pasolini than to the present moment’s institutional fervor for policing gender. With tact and efficiency, Hayes’s line of questioning addresses the realities of these women, gleaned stories about race, motherhood, homosexuality, trans rights, community, economic hardship, passion, empowerment, and the struggle against gender norms. Hayes even teases out unspoken emotional truths: Her camera, with a scopophilic drift, focuses on the more silent subjects as they listen patiently and respectfully to their teammates—but not without the occasional flash of anger or wistfulness. Around minute seven of the video, one player accidentally bumps into another, who glares back at her, poised for confrontation. After an exchange of apologetic if forced smiles, both players relax their bodies and keep listening (was this some unspoken rivalry politely kept in check?). In another instance, Hayes asks a subject, “Are women more free now than they were in your mother’s or grandmother’s generation?” A player answers on one channel of the video—describing how her grandmother in fact played football, too—as the other channel surveys the reactions of those on the opposing team. One nods in agreement, while two others stare downward, almost solemnly. In moments like this, the work casually takes into account instances of inequality and double standards. Ultimately, however, Hayes locates joy in the feminist model of team dynamics.

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Tanya Leighton

Hayes's art proves again and again that the collective is a constantly evolving and powerful force; this underlying theme resonates in an era of social distancing and isolation. The works displayed in the gallery's back space drove this point home. The exhibition included *Ricerche: one*, 2019, a two-channel video that on one monitor showed interviews with the small children of LGBTQ+ couples, while on a reverse monitor discussions with teens and young adults of parents from that same community unspooled. In each part, questions such as "How are babies born?" elicit alternately fantastic or politically complex answers: A small child describes how "your moms make you," explaining that first you're "in heaven, then you come down into a tummy that rips open. . . ." On the other channel, an eloquent teenager describes being "born through



a culture of homophobia" when her mother was still in the closet. Another young adult explains how she is "D.I., which is when you're created through donor insemination," and how the AIDS crisis further informs her birth story. Drawing connections between these age groups, the work bookends poignant and touching narratives of communities formed through alternative structures. But Hayes also gestures toward the darker side of collective behavior—especially when it becomes brutal or fascistic—in *When Will This End?* 2021. The title of this wall-based textile, gummed up with torn bits of newspaper, was written on the work's verso, causing the phrase to appear backwards on its recto. The headlines of these papers clearly report on the insurgence at the Capitol that took place January 6, 2021. As the artist reminds us, a violent mob is another form of so-called collectivity.

—Catherine Taft

Sharon Hayes,
Ricerche: two, 2020,
two-channel video
projection, color,
sound, 38 minutes
47 seconds.
Installation view.