

# ANDREW RAFACZ

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Chicago, IL, September 6, 2024 – ANDREW RAFACZ is thrilled to announce *#23*, a solo exhibition of large-scale charcoal on paper drawings and the premiere of a new 4-channel video installation from Shaun Leonardo, in Galleries One & Two. The exhibition opens Friday, September 6th and continues through Saturday, October 26th, 2024. This is the artist's first exhibition with the gallery.

In 1995, Leonardo was the captain of the Queens Falcons, a borough football team from Queens, NY. The artist grew up in an era punctuated by interracial strife. Events such as the Central Park jogger case in 1989, the Crown Heights Riot and beating of Rodney King both in 1991, the subsequent Los Angeles race riots the following year, and the acquittal of O.J. Simpson in the fall of 1995 all contributed to a complex backdrop of local and national conflicts defined by race. However, he and his teammates, under the mentorship of a diverse coaching staff led by an older Jewish head coach, moved beyond individual ethnic and cultural divides to truly bond as a team.

They were the only multiracial team in their league, and despite their differences, rough practices on asphalt and dirt, beatings from other teams, and epic inter-borough rivalries, they rallied over the course of one magical undefeated season to trounce their opponents and take home that year's championship.

The artist has long since left football behind, but his work remains deeply influenced by his early experiences with masculinity, community, competition, identity and place. Utilizing interviews with coaches and teammates, Leonardo—with the help of actors—reembodies that unforgettable season and ponders the question, 'was it really as good as we remember it?'

*We Went Undefeated* is a multichannel video installation centering on the relationships and memories of the artist's younger self (performed by Nas Rodriguez), his former teammates (as themselves) and head coach Norman Kane (Alan Schneier). The footage moves between rehearsals of monologues extracted from transcribed interviews by the artist with his former coach and teammates, and the reenactment of those memories on the original field where they practiced and played. Transitioning between screens and moving between the studio and the field, the viewer is surrounded by Leonardo and his teammates' attempts to embody those memories—a process of words moving to action, as the recalled past becomes a dynamic present.

In conversation with *We Went Undefeated*, Leonardo also presents large-scale charcoal on paper drawings from two ongoing series that explore the complexities of the sport, during and after. These works from his *Concussion* and *CTE* series draw on the artist's own experiences as a football player and coach, and extend to his recent investigations into sports-related head trauma. Taken together, these series depict the intimate experience of engaging in a contact sport and the hard science of its deleterious results. They both embody Leonardo's memories of the rituals of violence embedded in football—utilized to foster team unity as players are forced to not only collectively exert a certain level of aggression, but also suffer the same pain.

Referencing Leonardo's own number as a player, *#23* asks important and difficult questions. As the artist articulates, 'why, as young men, would we commit ourselves to a rite of passage that necessitates violence as a means of obtaining a sense of belonging? What continues to draw us back to this concept of *team* and its

associations of honor and glory, even when all evidence shows that the punishment quite literally eats away at our ability to think... to be human?

**SHAUN LEONARDO** (American, b. 1979, Queens, NY) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He received his BA from Bowdoin College (Brunswick, ME), and his MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute (San Francisco, CA). Residencies include the Vermont Studio Center (Johnson, VT) and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (Skowhegan, ME), where he served as faculty in 2023. Recent and notable solo exhibitions include Cristin Tierney (New York, NY), FDR Four Freedoms State Park (Roosevelt Island, NY), The Bronx Museum of the Arts (Bronx, NY), Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (North Adams, MA), Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, MD, La Curtiduria (Oaxaca, MX), and Performa 07 (New York, NY). Group exhibitions include the Smithsonian Institution (SITES), Museo del Barrio (New York, NY), David Kordansky Gallery, (Los Angeles, CA), Blaffer Art Museum (Houston, TX), New Museum (New York, NY), MoMA PS1 (Long Island City, NY), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), PS1 Contemporary Art Center (Long Island City, NY), and Zacheta National Gallery of Art (Warsaw, PL). His work will be included in *Get in the Game*, opening at SFMOMA (San Francisco, CA) this October and subsequently traveling to Crystal Bridges (Bentonville, AR) in September 2025 and Perez Art Museum (Miami, FL) in March 2026. His practice has been written about in *The New York Times*, *Flash Art*, *Forbes*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Art Newspaper*, among others. His work included is in numerous public and private collections.