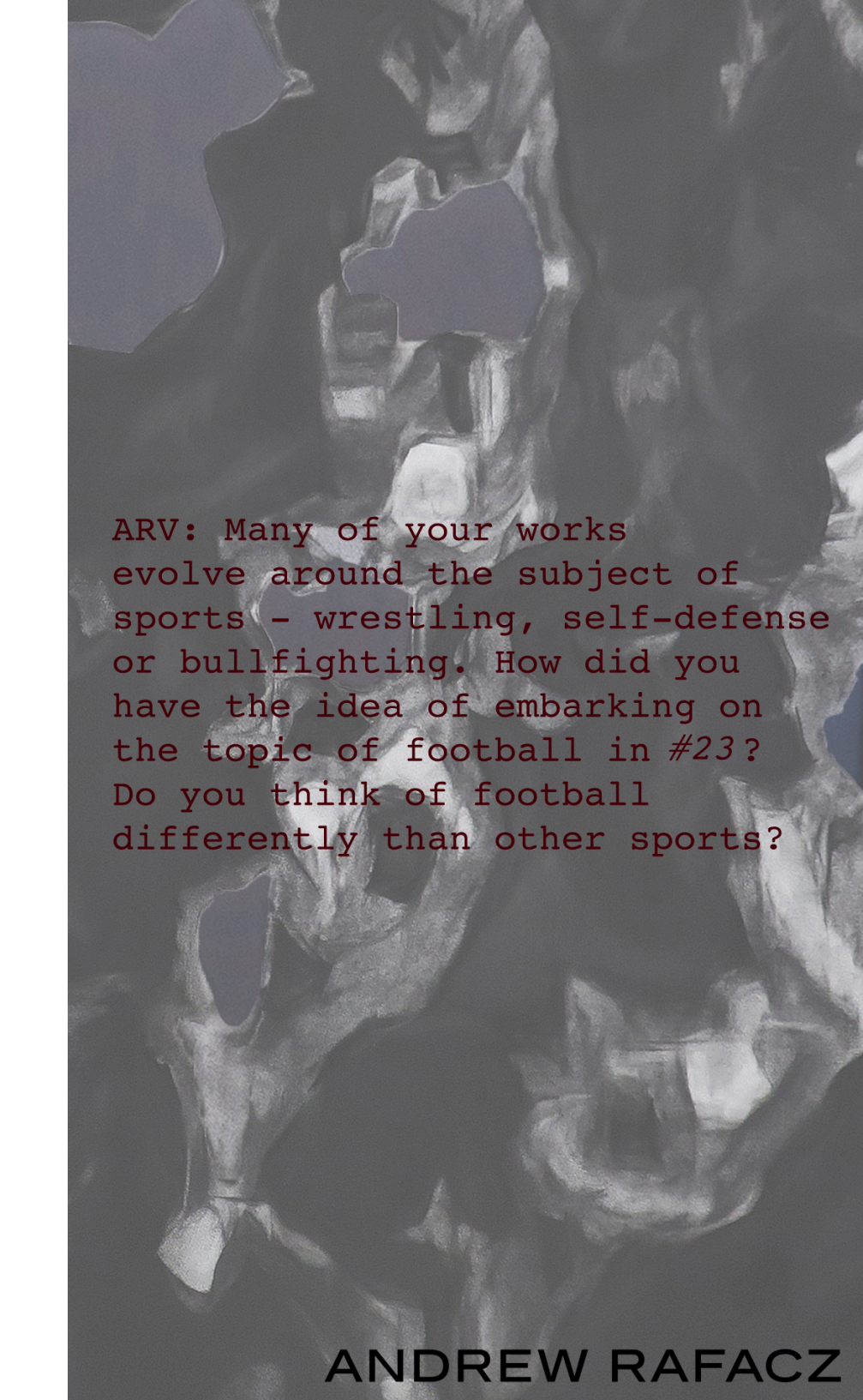


In conversation with:
SHAUN LEONARDO
#23



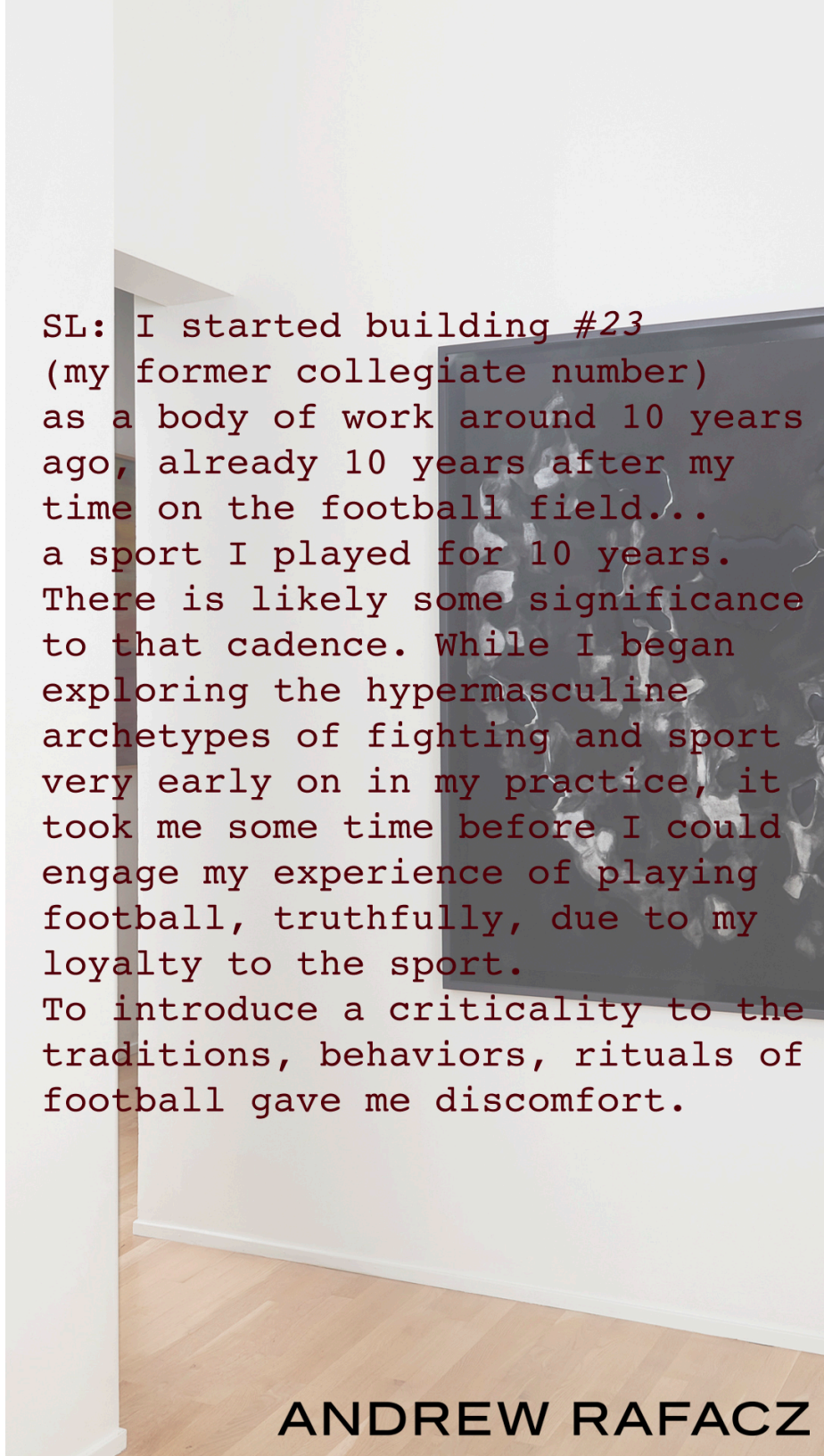
ANDREW RAFACZ

ARV: Aniela Rybak-Vaganay
SL: Shaun Leonardo



ARV: Many of your works evolve around the subject of sports - wrestling, self-defense or bullfighting. How did you have the idea of embarking on the topic of football in #23? Do you think of football differently than other sports?

ANDREW RAFACZ



SL: I started building #23 (my former collegiate number) as a body of work around 10 years ago, already 10 years after my time on the football field... a sport I played for 10 years. There is likely some significance to that cadence. While I began exploring the hypermasculine archetypes of fighting and sport very early on in my practice, it took me some time before I could engage my experience of playing football, truthfully, due to my loyalty to the sport. To introduce a criticality to the traditions, behaviors, rituals of football gave me discomfort.

ANDREW RAFACZ

There was a turn, however, that occurred at two different points in my relationship to watching football: the first with early revelations on CTE accompanied by my own increasingly visceral reactions to witnessing the hits, and the second in response to the cultural ugliness—surrounding Colin Kaepernick's gestural protest of taking a knee during the 1st wave of the Black Lives Matter movement—at each of these moments I understood, whether consciously or not, that it was time for me to turn a critical eye to my experiences and relationship to football.

ANDREW RAFACZ

ARV: When looking at your works in the exhibition we can really see that playing football formed your adolescence. In the video installation *We Went Undefeated* we hear about the struggles you had to overcome as a team and how they brought you closer. How did it feel to transition from the world of sports, where you were always a member of a team, into the art world where you had to make a name for yourself?

Do you think your former experience as an athlete prepared you for art-making?


ANDREW RAFACZ



SL: Please allow me to answer this in two different ways.

Ironically, while football is a team sport, much of my artistic investigation of the sport has to do with how isolating it can be. In that, the experience is quite comparable to that of the art world.

ANDREW RAFACZ



As it pertains to the larger theme of masculinity in my work, football is simply a manifestation of a wider metaphor—in an attempt to join the ranks of manhood, cis-gendered males must “prove” themselves by portraying a front of toughness even while attempting to bond in “brotherhood.” Throughout life, whether it be in athletics, military service, the job force, politics, popular culture, even fatherhood, men will, therefore, sacrifice their individuality for a sense of worth. Within this mold of masculinity, men must define themselves against weakness. The duality being that we achieve true manhood not by becoming a “team player,” but rather by exhibiting our superiority.

ANDREW RAFACZ

Surprisingly, what I do still appreciate from my football training is the learned and ingrained discipline, which has directly translated into my studio and performance practice. The mental and physical endurance has always been useful in my work and a source of pride.

ANDREW RAFACZ

ARV: The idea of motion is very present in the show. We can see the moving bodies during the football practice in the video, we can hear the coach forcefully shouting at the players. At the same time, it is also very much present in the *Concussion* drawing series. Each of the works on paper captures the moment of a fall. Even though the heads are not technically in motion, their expressive character makes us almost believe that they are.

Let's talk about this notion of movement and how it is represented in these two very different mediums (drawing and four channel video installation). How did you decide to pair them together? What effects or emotions were you able to grasp with each technique?

ANDREW RAFACZ

SL: I love this question. I often look for a speed both actual and conceptual that disrupts the viewer's reading of whatever I am presenting. In the 4-channel installation there is a stuttering and repetition to the movement whereas in the drawings there is complete

stillness. Between both modalities, I am able to extract football from its inherent violence, and therefore, the anticipated shock and drama, in order to present a more calculated, quiet study.

ANDREW RAFACZ

ARV: The two drawings (*CTE* and *Concussion*) touch upon the subject of sports-related head trauma. How and why did you become interested in this topic?



Does the scientific knowledge you have today influence your approach towards the sport?

ANDREW RAFACZ

SL: I can no longer support nor even watch the sport. Though I maintain a conflicted relationship to my own memories of playing (thus the complexity of presenting the drawings alongside *We Went Undefeated*) the newer work is much more directly critical. We now know too much and the cultural blindness to the devastating effects of the sport is akin to the Colosseum. We all know it is wrong and that there is suffering. Despite that sentiment, my work stems from a question rather than a statement. Soon after the tragedy of the murders committed by Aaron Hernandez, and later his own suicide (which have been attributed to CTE), a study showed that 9 out of 10 players, knowledgeable of the brain trauma that they have or could suffer, would relive their time playing the sport. My work simply asks why?

ANDREW RAFACZ



Shaun Leonardo
CTE (Drawing 3), 2023
Charcoal on paper, mirror tint
56.25 x 48.875 in.

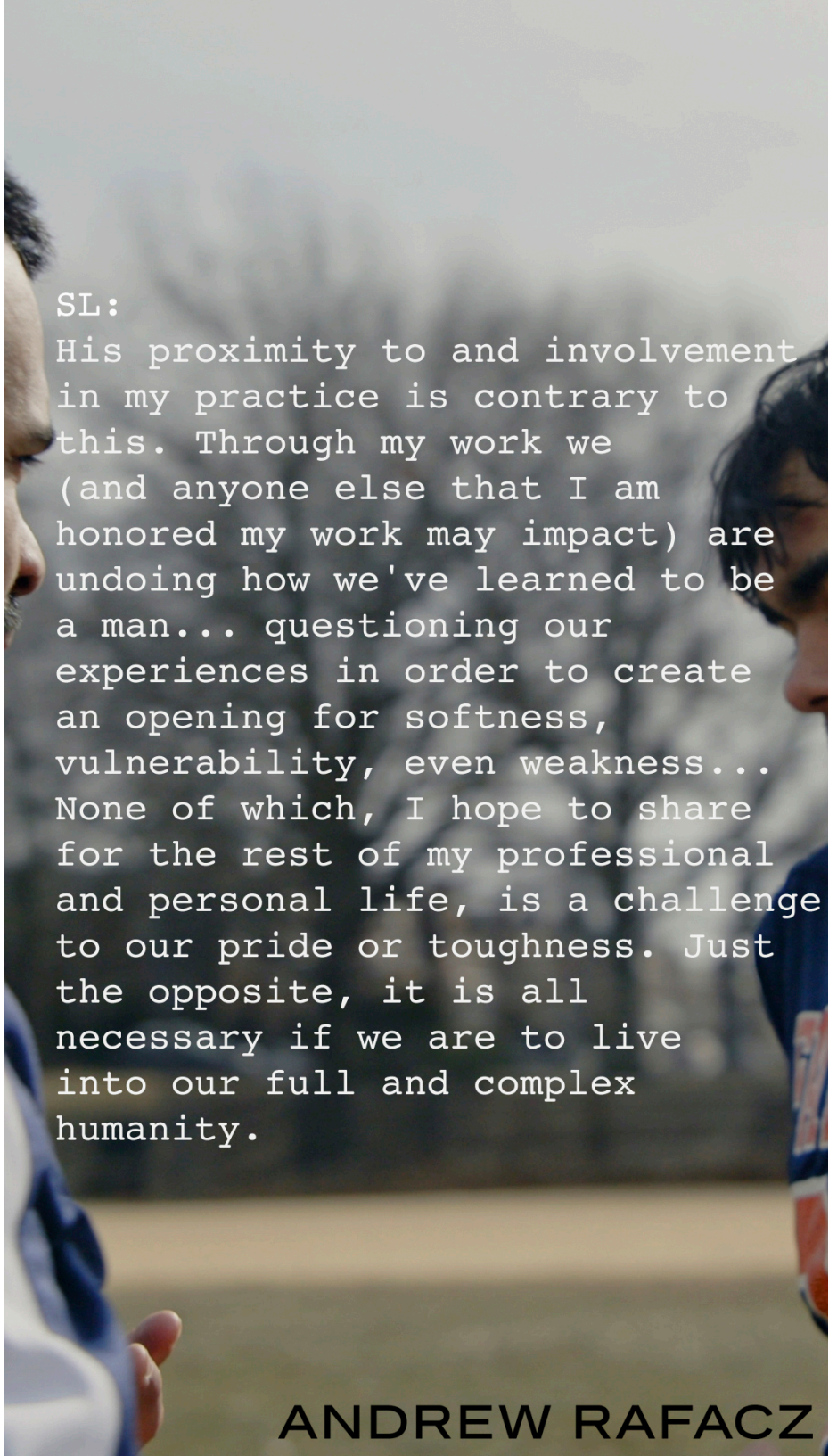
ANDREW RAFACZ

ARV: You have a very special bond with your brother Andrew. At one point you both coached the same Queens Falcons team, and he can be seen as a participant in past performances you have presented.

Can you describe how being involved with football and then performing together influenced your relationship?

Do you think this strong bond also had an impact on your artistic practice?

ANDREW RAFACZ



SL: His proximity to and involvement in my practice is contrary to this. Through my work we (and anyone else that I am honored my work may impact) are undoing how we've learned to be a man... questioning our experiences in order to create an opening for softness, vulnerability, even weakness... None of which, I hope to share for the rest of my professional and personal life, is a challenge to our pride or toughness. Just the opposite, it is all necessary if we are to live into our full and complex humanity.

ANDREW RAFACZ