

CRISTIN TIERNEY

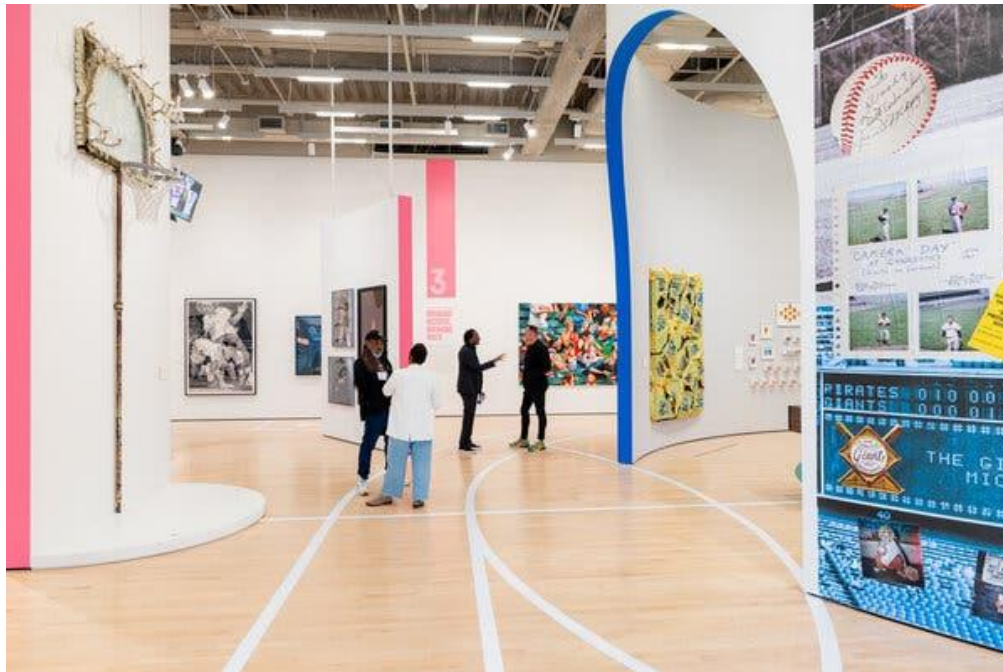
## The New York Times

# Draw Sports Fans to an Art Museum? That's the Goal.

Through design objects and artwork by former athletes, “Get in the Game” at SFMOMA examines the central, and often provocative, role that sports occupy in American culture.

By Emmanuel Morgan

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As museums experiment with ways of attracting new visitors beyond a niche audience of art lovers, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has assembled an ambitious exhibition anchored in a subject with wide appeal: sports.

Occupying over 13,000 square feet and the museum's entire seventh floor, “Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture” opens this week and runs through February. The exhibition, whose curators say is the largest SFMOMA has undertaken, features more than 150 objects, including paintings, sculptures and photographs — many of them by former athletes — as well as examples of design innovations in sporting equipment and

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apparel. The idea is to explore the central, and often provocative, place that sports occupy in American culture.

“We are really thinking more about broad audiences and how do we make art meaningful to more people, and to make it matter in the world in the way that sports matters to people,” said Katy Siegel, the museum’s research director and one of the exhibition’s curators. (Another curator, Seph Rodney, is a New York Times contributor.) “I think we’re interested in, how do we hook into some of that cultural energy for art and make it meaningful and accessible?”

SFMOMA is also presenting six smaller shows inspired by sports on other floors, including one devoted to the culture of skateboarding and another about major international competitions like the Olympics.

In interviews, some of those artists discussed their works.



Charcoal drawings by the artist Shaun Leonardo depict brain scans showing chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which is caused by repeated blows to the head and has been diagnosed posthumously in many former football players. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

## Shaun Leonardo

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Shaun Leonardo made headlines in 2020 when the director of a Cleveland Museum apologized and later resigned after she canceled a show that included artwork by Leonardo depicting real-life acts of police violence. SFMOMA is including work by Leonardo that tackles a polarizing subject in the National Football League.

The exhibit will feature two charcoal drawings of brain scans showing chronic traumatic encephalopathy or C.T.E., a degenerative brain disease caused by repeated blows to the head. C.T.E. has been found in posthumous examinations of many professional football players, including Aaron Hernandez and Junior Seau, both of whom died by suicide.

Leonardo, who played Division III football at Bowdoin College in Maine, said the drawings are meant to express the dynamic between football's cultural pull and its violence. Even with more knowledge about the dangers of C.T.E. and other injuries, professional football remains the most popular sport in America, and the N.F.L. is the richest sports league in the world.

"It takes an abstraction of the brain and says, 'Sit with this,'" Leonardo said of his drawings. "Our viewership, the spectacle of sport, we are enabling this punishment."