

Artillery Magazine Gallery Rounds
November 17, 2021

Rob Thom
Fumbly Punts
M+B Gallery
October 23 - December 4, 2021

by Jody Zellen



Football is considered the greatest American pastime by many of its fans. It is played in intense heat, rain or snow, with diehard followers who prioritize the game above many aspects of normal life. In his exhibition *Fumbly Punts*, Rob Thom humorously critiques American football by creating highly saturated paintings filled with contorted images of fans and players, fields and stadiums. These satirical works continue Thom's investigations of crowds and athletes. Where in the past he depicted scenes of excess that included parties, pastimes and sporting events, he now focuses exclusively on the game of football. Though perhaps a fan, Thom uses found imagery, transforming photographs sourced from the internet into detailed yet distorted representations of these chaotic spectacles.

In the evocative painting *Hail Mary* (all works 2021), the mostly orange-shirted crowd in the stands occupies the top half of the image. They are depicted gazing upon a carefully composed array of six players in orange and yellow football pants that contrast with the bright green field. The uplifted hands of player number five, who wears a white jersey with an orange number, futilely extend high into the air reaching for an unseen ball while the players from the other team surround him, their bodies forming an upward diagonal. A "Hail Mary" pass has little chance of being caught and in the painting, Thom captures the feelings of expectation and let down seen in the facial expressions of both the players and the crowd.

In addition to painting exteriors — players on the field and crowds in the stands or in adjacent parking lots, Thom also includes paintings of interiors— large sports bars and betting sites— filled with huge grids of TV screens. In these settings, fans can watch many different games simultaneously. *Sunday Sportsbet* and *World Champions Bar and Grill* illustrate this multi-screen phenomenon. In these works, it is easy to imagine the cacophony of grunts and cheers emanating from multiple players, announcers and spectators within the paintings. Thom's densely packed compositions present different moments all happening simultaneously and causing a dizzying effect.

While football is often considered a violent sport, there can be moments of compassion and even humor. Thom calls attention to these in his portrayals of the game. In *Endzone Dance* for example, he lyrically illustrates two players in the end zone extended off the ground as if performing a jig. Here, the players' skinny legs and cleated shoes hover above the ground in synchrony. In the background, a line of players from the other team looks on from the sideline, their red helmets shimmering in contrast to a deep green wall that extends across the middle of the composition adjacent to the light green field.

In these stylized representations, Thom reduces bulky male bodies to elongated forms with gangly thin limbs. These unrealistic depictions are the antithesis of macho football players. Although they gesticulate, hug, dance and pile up on the canvases, their actions and interactions are more comical than aggressive. Though the paintings are for the most part representational, Thom intensifies the colors and hones in on specific facial expressions and hand signals to create images that playfully poke fun at the traditions and absurdities of American football. After all, what is a fumbly punt?

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