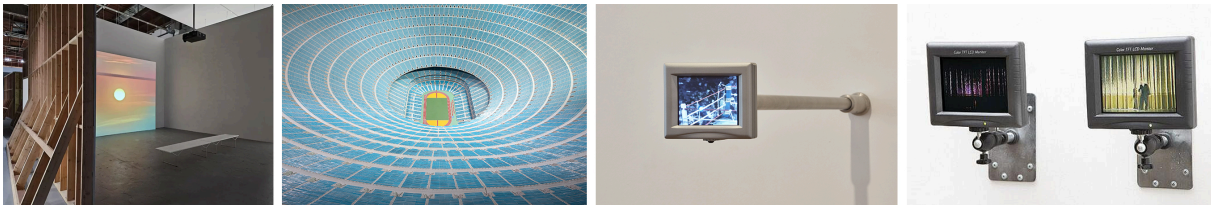


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Paul Pfeiffer: 'Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom'  
*Drawing from Art, Historical, Biblical and Religious References*  
MOCA  
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by Jody Zellen



Paul Pfeiffer began exhibiting his mixed media works in the mid 1990s and was immediately applauded for using a technical innovation in a conceptually significant manner — digitally erasing aspects of stock sports photographs and video clips using programs like Adobe Photoshop and Premiere. In *John 3:16*, (2000) he cropped and composited 5000 frames culled from National Basketball Association games, carefully manipulating the footage so that the basketball remained centered in the frame while the background and players' hands were in constant motion swirling around it. Rather than project this two-minute video loop or present it on a large screen, Pfeiffer displayed it on a small monitor that extended out from the wall on a long metal armature so it appeared to be floating in space like the basketball. This iconic work is among the thirty pieces that comprises *Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom*, his first museum survey.

Titled after Cecil B. DeMille's opening remarks introducing *The Ten Commandments*, the show spans the expansive MOCA Geffen warehouse space which has been divided into separate rooms to house the individual works. The exhibition design was done in collaboration with the New York City-based architecture firm Büro Korak Duman and facilitates thematic rather than chronological pathways through Pfeiffer's works. Throughout his various still and moving pieces, Pfeiffer investigates ideas relating to "spectacle" — in both sports and entertainment — and draws from abundant found footage and photographs to create his idiosyncratic and compelling works. When Pfeiffer started, the culture of appropriation was still in vogue and he found innovative ways to critique and comment on popular culture. Much of Pfeiffer's work involves the process of recreation — be it filling in erased elements from the original source material or by hiring foley artists to mimic the shouts and gestures of stadium crowds.

The title of the exhibition is also the title of a 2000 video diptych presented on small monitors where Cecil B. DeMille is caught in a loop walking in and out of the draped curtains at the Egyptian Theater in Hollywood to deliver a speech, but never quite reaching the stage. Endless loops are prevalent and can be seen in works including *Caryatid* (2003), *Live Evil* (2003) and *The Long Count* (2000-2001), a trilogy of short video works that manipulate Muhammad Ali's most famous boxing matches so that the fighters appear to be ghostly images in an otherwise empty ring. While many of Pfeiffer's videos are exhibited on small monitors, he also creates room-sized installations.

For the MOCA presentation, these include *The Saints* (2007) and *Vitruvian Figure* (2008). *The Saints* was commissioned by Artangel and first presented in London in 2007. It is a recreation of an iconic football (soccer) match at Wembley Stadium in 1966 where England beat West Germany and won its only World Cup title. Upon entering a large, empty, bright space with

seventeen wall mounted speakers emitting the sound of a roaring crowd, one is struck by the contrast between the minimal installation and the maximal sound. Inset into a wall toward the far end of the space is a tiny monitor positioned in the center of a large wall on which a version of the game appears. In this iteration of the footage, Pfeiffer has removed all but one of the players. He is alone running back and forth across the empty field as the disembodied sound of the spectators fills the room and surrounds the audience. On the other side of the wall, Pfeiffer projects two videos side by side. On the right is the original footage from the game and on the left, a taped re-staging of the sound by 1000 Filipinos voicing the cries and cheers in sync with the action.

Like *The Saints*, *Vitruvian Figure* is also a re-creation but this time, rather than work with the footage of an event, Pfeiffer built a room-sized replica of the proposed 2000 Sydney Olympic Stadium (that seats 80,000 people). His version is scaled up to accommodate one million people. He states, *"It's a sculpture based on the stadium form, which I think of as one of the oldest architectural types in the Western building tradition. For me it's a way to think about mass viewership through the ages, from Classical Greek Antiquity to the present and into the future. I also think of the stadium as a reflection of the larger social environment. All the conditions that shape the viewing experience of spectators in a stadium are equally active in the daily lives of people outside the stadium."* To access the work, viewers ascend via a ramp and a stairway, and look down on the simulated seats and tiny green playing field, made with the help of artisans in the Philippines. Pfeiffer is Filipino-American and although he is mostly based in New York, he has taught and lived in the Philippines on numerous occasions and has repeatedly worked with Filipino laborers and students on his projects.

Although Pfeiffer makes contemporary works using a range of analog and digital mediums, his practice is rooted in history as well as his cultural heritage. He often draws from art, historical, biblical and religious references, infusing the pieces with a timeless aura linking past to present. This well-deserved survey introduces audiences to a range of his exceptional, thought provoking and challenging works and allows them to wander freely through the many different aspects of his oeuvre.

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