

Anne Zahalka - Playing the game! 2009

Exhibition statement

Sport looms large in Australia's psyche. It is played, observed, idealized. Our collective subconscious is saturated with sports imagery; from illustrations of heroic sportsmen on army recruitment posters to the instantly recognisable faces of today's sports celebrities on milk cartons and television advertisements. Anne Zahalka's latest body of work, draws on, and re-invents, this rich visual history. *Playing the game!* was initially inspired by the "pub paintings" of the 1930s - 1960s, which depicted archetypal portraits of sportsmen. Usually accompanied by the tag-line "After the Game", these colourful paintings were used in suburban and regional NSW pubs to advertise beer.

In *Playing the game!* Zahalka replaces painted impressions of sun-bronzed (male) athletes with crisp, colour-saturated photographs of real citizens. The suite of nine images re-addresses the visual history of sport in Australia to reflect the contemporary moment. Using the tools of documentary photography, Zahalka's portraits reveal changes in urban lifestyle and demography: "I wanted to consider the diversity of sports practiced now, and to explore those who consume and are consumed by it." Her sportsmen and women are ordinary people, a representative cross-section of class, gender and ethnicity. Zahalka has replaced the "ideal" Australian with "other".

Yet the heroic aesthetic remains in tact. Zahalka's sporting archetypes are presented through the lens of Hollywood glamour portraits. The models are air-brushed, back-lit and blemish free. Zahalka has mimicked the quality and colour of Kodochrome film with Photoshop filters and the resulting luminescent images read like pages extracted from glossy sports magazines, or even "hall-of-fame" style posters. By transforming "ordinary" people into glamorous pin-ups, Zahalka deconstructs the notion of celebrity and subtly parodies the contemporary obsession with it. The slick advertising aesthetic also highlights recent changes in the formation and presentation of personal identity. Just as popular social networking sites have become spaces for self-presentation/advertisement through photo-album uploads, so too these images could be interpreted as glamorized advertisements for our imagined or projected selves: Olivia the golfer, Olivia the writer, Olivia the gallery assistant.

Indeed, the twist is in the titles. *Karen, Educational Designer* suggests a very different image to that of the enthusiastic basketballer. Zahalka's portraits consider how little these sporting activities relate to the sitter's working or public lives, and reflect on the way in which identity has become increasingly fractured and compartmentalized. So much is projected onto the subject through the title or the chosen props, yet these are only partial aspects of a sitter's personality. What is left out of a portrait is often as significant as what is included. Such questions are central to the complex genre of portraiture, an ongoing preoccupation in Zahalka's work. As a series, *Playing the game!* offers an insightful glimpse into Australia's modern sporting culture, but it also constitutes a sophisticated consideration of portraiture's role in self-definition and the complexity of contemporary identity politics.

Olivia Sophia, 2009