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Art review: 'Patrick McDonough: reck room' at Flashpoint

By Jessica Dawson

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Guy: How tough is it to turn an art gallery into a rec room?

Pal: [Feebly] Too hard, dude.

Guy: [Impassively] Let's get a beer.

Pal: Cool.

I offer this Beckettian dialectic (from the landmark sports-fan buddy play, "Waiting for Slow-Mo") as a kind of shorthand to understanding Patrick McDonough's latest exhibition at Flashpoint. Riffing on both the art and sports worlds, McDonough has attempted to convert the white box gallery into a den of beer pong and Coors Light: Our Nation's Moldy Basement.

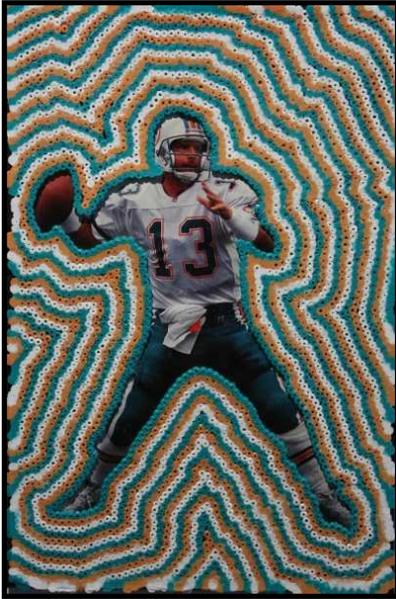
His success is limited. Flashpoint's concrete floor, exposed ductwork and white walls weren't going anywhere -- and no amount of bar mirrors and cannabis-scented candles were going to make them. To further complicate the issue, the young McDonough, 28, had no Thomas Hirschhorn-at-Barbara Gladstone budget to fund this dream.



Yet, like the best of Beckett's dialogues, McDonough's theater of the absurd -- the show's title is the intentionally misspelled and lowercased "reck room" -- has a few good ideas to share.

How often does the rarefied world of high art interact with the mass-marketing extravaganza of professional sports? (More often than ever, thanks to some key exhibitions mounted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Wexner Center, but never often enough.) In juxtaposing these opposites, McDonough gets us thinking about both.

It would have been easy enough for McDonough to stick to the sports fans who orbit professional athletics for this show, but McDonough chooses also to weave in the objects and heroes of his own industry. Armchair artists and weekend crafters are as much a part of "reck room" as big-finger-waving cheeseheads, thanks to McDonough's liberal use of materials you can buy at Michael's.



At its core, McDonough's show is about fandom. This rec room was built for us, bystanders of the famous. We can play foosball or table tennis (McDonough's show offers both) while our heroes battle it out at the World Cup or U.S. Open. We can make sculptures out of Legos (McDonough gives us these, too) and imagine we're Whitney Biennial contenders. Whether fans of sports or art, we live vicariously. So what if we can't all be LeBron or LeWitt?

But fandom carries some uneasy implications. One is passivity. As fans, we accept a life lived through others, or through amateur sports and gaming culture (or through art history classes, exhibition visits and -- I'm talking to you -- exhibition reviews). This all hints at a larger cultural laziness, the kind of meekness that allows bad things to happen on our watch. If our life goals are cheap gas, a home to call our own and a high-def TV, we'll only bark when they're taken away. Cocooned in the beer-stocked rec room, we may luxuriously ignore real life.

McDonough also taps into our lust for entertainment. Witness this show's centerpiece: a ping-pong table straddling a foosball console (a clear glass sheet replaces the table's typical green surface so you can make out the foosball field below). This particular composition opens up some curious gaming possibilities (you can play both at the same time). But in terms of intellectual stimulation, it could be the beginning and end of many visitors' experiences. (Rumors that lawyers from a nearby firm play daily on their lunch break are entirely true.)

The fact that you can walk into a gallery and play a game invites all manner of questions about what art can -- or should -- be about. It makes not thinking about things very easy. McDonough leaves the work of reflection up to us and even tempts us not to do it.

And then there is McDonough's portrait of the fan, implicit in this show. He offers some wince-worthy moments, some of which feel authentic, if also a little vamped. (Yes, I mean the mirror across which "Losers, Buddies, Hotties, Bitches" is written in 40-point frat-boy scrawl.) Misogyny in sports is hardly news, and the Guerrilla Girls have been complaining about the patriarchal art world for decades, but staring it in the face is rough.

Don't get me wrong: Not all is dark in "reck room." There's sly, self-deprecating humor to be found among the miscellany tacked onto the gallery walls. I love the unfolded paper airplanes that look like Morris Louis stain paintings, with their washes of rich color soaked into sturdy stock.

I also love the posters. One features Shaquille O'Neal, back when he played with the Magic, just after he's released a jump shot. Concentric lines of variously colored beads emanate from his form like the visual embodiment of his impressive skills. Another poster stars 1980s-era Miami Dolphins' quarterback Dan Marino as he winds up for a pass. Marino looks like a late-20th-century version of classical Greek sculpture -- the National Football League's own Discobolus.

In "reck room" we dream of greatness but accept mediocrity. We drink beer (check out the slide projector screening images of a Coors Light can; it must be seen to be believed) and get psyched for tonight's game. We remember the Greeks and step right over the '80s-era Pictures artists (there's a Sherrie Levine rug).

As for McDonough's foray into fandom? He's off to a running start.