

Esmaa Mohamoud, *ELEMENT*
(Excerpts, full text forthcoming)
By Matthew Kyba

ELEMENT is not about football. While Esmaa Mohamoud's exhibition features many aspects of football, they are mere vehicles for societal issues that afflict North American society. Mohamoud adeptly smuggles an incisive critique of ignored racist histories and current conditions of racial identity under the guise of America's favourite sport. By appropriating easily recognizable sports objects, Mohamoud uses the NFL as a springboard to discuss latent concerns spanning inequality, socio-economic precarity, and systemic racism. *ELEMENT* examines how Black players operate and exist within the landscape of the National Football League to elucidate a matrix of neo-slavery. Mohamoud unapologetically interweaves America's affluence-obsession, military propaganda, Black identity, body ownership, slavery, and corporeal abuse to expose an urgent plea regarding football culture. *ELEMENT* is a solemn and silent protest of the socio-politics of the NFL that questions how we consume live sports entertainment and at what cost.

The exhibition opens with *Glorious Bones*, an installation that consists of 46 football helmets surrounded by black vinyl wall text. Each helmet is covered in an African wax print and has had its safety padding removed, which renders them decorative rather than functional. Aesthetically suggestive, these helmets invoke a discussion pertaining to the deterioration and subjugation of Black individuals within the NFL. The surrounding text equates a college football game with the Battle of Gettysburg. Lifted from the film *Remember the Titans* (2000), it reads as a war address characterizing football players as disposable individuals that are void of autonomy. *Glorious Bones* acknowledges perceptions of identity and symbolizes a heterogeneous understanding of Blackness rather than one that is monolithic.

Sitting discreetly on a black acrylic panel in the second room of the gallery are two 10k gold grills, one a mold of teeth and the other a football mouthguard. *Why See the World When You Got the Beach?* equates identifiers of wealth to idolized artifacts, objects that suggest success. With this piece, Mohamoud is referencing the desire of younger Black Americans for glitz and glamour, as grills have been an improbably achieved marker of "making it" for Black people in North America for many years. While the majority of African American football players come from non-wealthy backgrounds, the top players make an average of 10 million dollars a year (not including endorsements). *Why See the World...* coldly states how the goal to obtain stardom ultimately requires figurative blinders that detract from many the societal issues that plague American society.

And You Too, Shall Kneel consists of black text wrapped around three walls naming Super Bowl XL's (the 2006 Super Bowl's) participating head coaches, Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith. These men were the first Black head coaches to ever participate in a Super Bowl, an event which inaugurated forty-years prior. Dungy and Smith's achievement has seldom been referenced or acknowledged by the National Football League. Just as the names of

oft-forgotten murdered African American youths must be burned into memory, so to must the achievements of Black people.

Blood and Tears Instead of Milk and Honey is a series of 22 branded black footballs (equivalent to the number of NFL players on the field during any given play) that have been placed on black artificial grass in the formation of a football play. Each football shares the same custom 'Kente' design. The monolith of Black culture previously acknowledged by *Glorious Bones* is here insinuated rather than contradicted. Black leather materiality and subtly seared patterns indicate the matrix of visibility and invisibility in society that Black people endure. Through the burning of logos, patterns, and designs into these footballs, there is a declaration that the NFL (like the NBA) manifests aspects of neo-slavery. Mohamoud subverts these exclusively negative readings by using an African Kente pattern to correctly reclaim a sport that has erased Black culture.

A Seat Above the Table (Warren Moon) is a 10-foot-tall, black rattan peacock chair that towers above the other works in the gallery. The seat stands as an oxymoron; it indicates a pinnacle that is too high to be reached. Such is the plight of so many Black quarterbacks like Warren Moon, the first and only Black quarterback to ever be inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame. *A Seat Above the Table* not only references the ignored achievements of Black athletes but of Black people in general by focusing on the NFL Hall of Fame's lack of equal representation. Although NFL players use the Hall of Fame as a measuring stick for validation, the fact that the chair rises so high questions and critiques the need for validation on an unfair playing field.

Chain Gang is a 10-yard chain that has been suspended from the ceiling, with Under Armour cleats attached every three feet. Mohamoud's *Chain Gang* references the nickname for the on-field referees that measure the 10 yards needed for a first down in football. The title originates from the name that was given to a group of prisoners chained together (usually feet and necks) to perform menial and physical tasks. Prisoners who were selected to be in a chain gang would be put into more inhumane working and sleeping conditions than other inmates. Is it any surprise that both these chain gangs and NFL positions of impact (players who are most likely to get hit/hit each other) are almost always Black? Chain gangs are indentured servitude, a system where primarily Black workers are put in harmful working conditions while being vastly underpaid. With this piece, Mohamoud perfectly parallels how NFL players, individuals who are likely to suffer injury and be paid the least in the NFL power hierarchy, are today's chain gang.