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KURT KAUPER
EVERYBODY KNEW THAT
CANADIANS WERE THE BEST
HOCKEY PLAYERS
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76 GRAND STREET

Collecting baseball cards used to be an essential part of the acculturation of American boys. In Scituate, Massachusetts, however, where Kurt Kauper grew up in the late '60s and 1970s, it was hockey cards that were obsessively collected. In the working class suburbs of Boston, people were fervent fans of the Boston Bruins and their charismatic star, Bobby Orr. The hockey cards that Kauper collected as a boy remained in his mind, and eventually became the inspiration for his new series of paintings.

Kauper explains that “images of hockey players are intended to teach boys how to behave like men.” In his new paintings he confounds conventional expectations by portraying legendary Bruins stars like Bobby Orr and Derek Sanderson in the nude.

Kauper’s exhibition at Deitch Projects will include four larger than life size paintings, two with figures in elaborate interiors, and two with isolated figures on monochrome grounds. There will also be two smaller tondo paintings reminiscent of the format of vintage hockey cards. The nude portrayal of the hockey stars has a deliberate destabilizing, almost surreal effect. Kauper likes the conceptual displacement of a burly hockey player with his uniform removed. He is interested in the perceptual slippage from the expectation of brute masculinity to vulnerability and tenderness.

As part of the research behind his hockey player series, Kauper came across a video that documented a once famous series of games between Canadian professional hockey players and Soviet amateurs. The first line of the documentary, “Everybody knew that Canadians were the best hockey players,” became the title of Kauper’s exhibition. Because professionals were not allowed to compete in the Olympics, Canada’s best players were not able to play on their Olympic teams. Canadians—who invented ice hockey and considered it

to be their national past-time--were humiliated to be defeated in Olympic play the Soviet Union's best players, technically considered amateurs, and it was decided to arrange a series of matches between a team made up of the best Canadian professionals and the Soviet amateurs. The documentary counterposed the well-equipped Canadians against the Soviets with their torn shirts and worn equipment. Against all expectations--as well as the Canadian players' and press member's hubristic predications of quick victory--the Soviet amateurs handily defeated the Canadian all stars in the first game, and nearly won the series; they lost the final and deciding game after one of the Canadian professionals intentionally broke the ankle of the Soviet Union's best player, Valerie Kharlamov. The title has implications of desperation, exhaustion, and cultural enervation and resonates as an analogy of the current state of America. It suggests an illusion of certainty and power that is breaking down.

Kauper likes the idea of making images that stop a viewer, destabilizing their expectations. He believes that the artificial constructions of representational painting can heighten one's perception of the world we live in. His portrayal of hockey players in the nude takes the viewer out of their ordinary understanding of reality. Kauper constructs a tight interweaving of personal recollection, childhood obsession, and desire with contemporary reality; in this way, his work embraces and elaborates on the central tenets of Surrealism.

The hockey player series emerged out of personal references and personal history, not out of a conceptual program. The work developed through the painting process, starting with works that directly referenced hockey cards and evolved into paintings that created their own world.

Art historical as well as personal and pop culture references are always an essential part of Kauper's work. The strangeness of Ingres is an underlying inspiration. The figure of Bobby Orr on a monochrome background was unexpectedly inspired by an unusual George Stubbs equestrian painting, *Whistlejacket*, of 1762, where the horse is portrayed on a pale green monochrome background. Kauper strives for an intensity of finish, emphasizing finish as a "remove from reality." He explains that "paintings become less realistic as they become more realistic."

"Everybody Knew That Canadians Were The Best Hockey Players" is Kurt Kauper's first New York solo exhibition since 2000. His more elaborate paintings take one year to complete. The exhibition will be accompanied by a portfolio-style book with essays by Wayne Koestenbaum and Pepe Karmel.

Kauper's work was included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial and in "Dear Painter" at the Centre Pompidou, the Kunsthalle Wien, and the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt in 2002-2003. He is an influential teacher and has been on the faculty of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Yale University. He is currently a Professor at Queens College.

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