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DESIGN AS SPORT

DIANA BUDDS

The intersection of design and athletics represents largely unexplored territory, yet when these fields converge—as demonstrated in *Weekend Tournament*—something extraordinary emerges. Curators Raquel Cayre and Ariel Ashe have assembled an exhibition that examines how designers harness athletic culture to shape contemporary life, investigates the formal properties of recreational equipment, and applies craft and aesthetic consideration to utilitarian objects traditionally overlooked by such scrutiny. The exhibition offers an accessible entry point for broader critical engagement with our material culture.

The evolution from peach basket to basketball hoop neatly reflects design's entire trajectory from necessity to refinement. When James Naismith nailed peach baskets to the elevated track in his Springfield gymnasium in 1891, he was solving an immediate problem: how to train athletes indoors during Massachusetts winters. Those baskets—chosen simply because they were available—required a janitor with a ladder to retrieve the ball after each successful shot. The subtle variations in silhouette captured in Richard Prince's *Untitled (Backboard)* (2008), entirely useless in its floor-bound state, and Clay Brown & Ryan Kmieske's *Pecan Drop* (2025) with its single tiny Polo logo stencil and

heavy metal net trace this object's metamorphosis from agricultural surplus to precision-engineered equipment with standardized dimensions and nets that released the ball automatically. John Roman Brown's *Ten Feet* (2025) depicts that *decisive moment*: multiple players leap toward a ball whose trajectory remains uncertain, capturing how necessity's improvisation became spectacle's choreography. The peach basket's transformation mirrors every design evolution in the exhibition—functional objects refined through use, standardized through adoption, and elevated through conscious aesthetic consideration.

Design occupies a contested territory between art and engineering, between aesthetic contemplation and bodily engagement. Unlike painting or sculpture, which invite observation, designed objects demand physical interaction to fulfill their purpose—they are incomplete without the user's body in motion. This interdependence becomes most pronounced in athletic equipment, where design failures translate directly into physical limitation or injury. Objects evolve through use, refined by the very bodies that engage with them. Athletic objects crystallize this principle—they must perform under stress, adapt to human biomechanics, and improve through repeated testing. Where fine art might transcend function, sports equipment succeeds only through it.

While we readily appreciate a chair's sculptural qualities, higher-performance objects like

gym equipment often evade such formal consideration. Rachel Harrison's 2016 sculpture *FCHEM* subverts this oversight. Resembling a wood-framed fitness apparatus complete with calisthenics rings, barbell, jump rope, and oversized kettlebell, the piece requests appreciation for these everyday implements' formal qualities and their integration into modern domestic and commercial gyms. Calisthenics, rooted in Ancient Greece and once exclusive to professional athletes, reached broader populations through the 19th-century physical culture movement aimed at societal improvement—a project that accelerated within 20th-century modernism. The kettlebell, meanwhile, originated as a counterweight Russian farmers employed to measure crops. Its integrated handle and spherical mass facilitate easy movement—an advantageous quality for recreational weightlifting.

By assembling objects with legible functions, *Weekend Tournament* engages visitors through familiarity before introducing conceptual complexity. Objects and their users exist in constant dialogue—each reshaping the other through repeated contact. A well-worn pommel horse, attributed to Pierre Jeanneret, from the gymnasium hall at Panjab University, invites reflection on activities deemed essential for modern society's development, which Chandigarh (the Northern Indian city famously masterplanned by Le Corbusier) was designed to foster. Sam Stewart's regulation ping-pong table (2025), featuring handcrafted wooden frame and

turned legs inspired by 1940s and 1950s designs, functions equally as fine furniture and sports equipment.

We navigate a landscape of unexamined objects, each embedded with ideologies and assumptions about how bodies should move, what constitutes improvement, and whose needs matter in design decisions. *Weekend Tournament* reveals that our most mundane recreational tools—the kettlebell’s agricultural origins, the pommel horse’s modernist aspirations, the ping-pong table’s domestic integration—encode entire worldviews about leisure, labor, and human potential. In recognizing design’s athletic dimension, we discover that every object is already in competition: competing for our attention, our space, our bodies. The question becomes not whether we engage with this contest, but whether we do so as conscious participants or passive consumers.

Design as Sport written by Diana Budds
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