

I finally confront *Yield*, armed, dangerous, and at peace. Reconciliation has two meanings, in harmony and atonement. As a descendent of colonized people, my identity is in harmony – I'm who I'm meant to be. As a person who has faith in my purpose, my power is in harmony – I'm doing what I'm meant to do. Recounting histories from hundreds to ten years ago I believe colonialism and its benefactors aren't in harmony. Harmonious people don't throw rocks and hide their hands under their jersey. Harmonious nations don't pass oppressive legislation and hide their hands under their flag.

Until complicit parties atone, the racist underbelly in any economic system and political party will remain. In jest, George A. Hughes reclaims colonial distraction with African abstraction, leading us toward time and the missing. We need only follow the path of pink cleats.



*Bulgey with Boombox*, 2022, acrylic and oil on canvas, 64 x 47 inches



*Potru Handed a Shaken Drink*, 2022, acrylic, oil, and enamel on canvas, 40 x 58 inches

#### Essayist Biography

Savion "Quaran" Mingo is an arts organizer from Buffalo, NY and co-founder of D.O.P.E. Collective, Dismantling Oppressive Patterns for Empowerment, which is a community bulletin board and project-based collaborative. D.O.P.E. Collective is rooted in political arts movements including *The Messenger* publication of the Harlem Renaissance, D.I.Y. organizing of 1970's punk culture, and youth resistance of 1980's New York – creating underground hip-hop and ballroom. Currently Quaran (pronounced: Ka-ron) is nurturing his career as an agency graphic designer and several initiatives such as Artbox, a free art supply mutual aid project and Buffalo's Annual Cree Summer Chalk Walk, celebrating black and brown creators and voice actors in animation.

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Buffalo Arts Studio

## *Pink Cleats* by Quaran Mingo Post-curatorial response to *Identity, Power, and Reconciliation*



*Trap 2*, 2022, acrylic, oil, and enamel on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

At entry, George A. Hughes makes us witnesses to an occupation under blush-toned skies. Unsure if our role is military or civic, the painting *Yield* involves us, claiming a horizontal mass of gallery wall spanning 72 inches high and 228 inches long. Active war machines and a fallen white horse serve a dramatic beat to this intertemporal epic of African colonization. Although *Yield* is full of movement and the largest work in *Identity, Power, and Reconciliation*, Hughes' surrounding paintings call for intimacy when sharing their indivisible fate from European violence. Pink and cryptic, the exhibition centers the complicit and continual enslavement of African people through soccer sports trafficking.

Before the opening, I walked through Hughes' work avoidant of *Yield*. With imminent military force, I needed to arm myself before confronting the "boss level" painting. *Trap* began my investigative mission – bold and satirical. A soccer cleat takes the shape of a cloud while a banana, one of several prejudiced symbols towards African descendants, sits on a giant pink mouse trap. I ask, "What is the connection between soccer and racial control?" Several paintings tie themes such as human anatomy, barcodes, and internet command symbols to allude to human trafficking in the digital age – yet knowing the "what" didn't satisfy the "how."

How are black athletes sold into sports trafficking? How is soccer a tool of European imperialism? And with similar concerns in the United States ranging from Colin Kaepernick and American nationalism, to the first Superbowl with two black quarterbacks and our social eagerness to offer black boys to the professional leagues. I wonder how do our African-American and Continental African struggles compare in the tale of two footballs?

TRT World summarizes the current standing of national-immigrant relations in European soccer in a six minute video. First and second generation immigrant identities are diversifying global leagues, some countries with migrants making up the majority of players. However, nationalist views on African and Arab players are fickle – liberal when teams win and xenophobic when taking a loss. In an interview with *The Players' Tribune*, Belgian pro player, Romelu Lukaku states:

When things were going well [...] they were calling me...the 'Belgian striker.' When things weren't going well, they were calling me...the 'Belgian striker of Congolese descent.' I was born here... I'm Belgian. We're all Belgian. That's what makes this country cool, right?

Mario Balotelli Barwuah, a controversial yet iconic Ghanaian-Italian player, echoed similar sentiments.

During an incident in 2009, he was struck with bananas in a Roman bar before the European Under-21 Championships. During the 2012 Finals, a then 21-year old Balotelli stated,

I will not accept racism at all. It's unacceptable. If someone throws a banana at me in the street, I will go to jail, because I will kill them.

Two years later he shared on instagram,

I'm Mario Balotelli. I'm 23 years old and I didn't choose to be Italian...I strongly wanted [to be Italian] because I was born in Italy and have always lived in ITALY.

And in 2019, he catapulted a soccer ball towards fans after hearing monkey chants in the stadium.

Despite first-hand experiences, some Europeans deny that racism exists as it's the birthplace of the Enlightenment Age, and whose revolutions became a foundation for modern democracies. The irony is that Enlightenment was a motive for colonialism, as spreading enlightenment meant – to civilize. French priests in the colonial Congo promoted "the civilizing work that France undertakes in the colonies," and sport to "remove [Congolese people] from the influence of immoral dancing..."



Trap, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas, 36 x 50 inches

Clubs established from the Victorian to Modern Era have legacies in moral, military, and bodily control. British doctor and missionary, Theodore Pennell, used clubs to domesticate modern-day Pakistani military aggression to regulated fields, and instill Victorian moral obedience. Portuguese army captain Ismael Jorge institutionalized his ideal "nationalized body" as physical education in colonial Mozambican school systems. He believed sports were a complex application of physical ability that was racial natural order. Another irony is that white democracies fortified by enslavement, apartheid, land extraction, and predatory debt are still revered as democratic today – cue Haiti entering the chat. If not through waves of immigration like Britain's Windrush generation, some contemporary soccer clubs recruit players from past colonies. In Africa, high-performing boys are imported through local clubs to play in professional European leagues. For many migrant children and their families, this can be a life-changing opportunity. However it also fosters an imperial underbelly for slavers.

ENDEVR documentary, *Soccer Slavery: The African Football Slaves of the 21st Century*, describes how teens are prospected and conned, resulting in an estimated

20,000 former players abandoned on European streets. Illegitimate sports agents, black or white, scout players in sports clubs and local soccer fields. They promise families international schooling and league opportunities in exchange for, in some cases, their life savings. Survivor Ange Mballa Atini spent around 1 million CFA francs (African Financial Community in English), or over \$1,600 US. Agents send teen boys into European countries and desert them without any documentation including contracts, ID, or passports. Underaged and undocumented boys go into unregulated labor and sexual industries – some returning home while others remain missing.

In retrospect I recall works from Hughes, like *Puzzle Pieces: Planes I-XI* where he collages facial photos, highlighting them inside red circles. Are these missing African and Arab players? Are these the ideal creoles of liberal-nationalist colonialism? Another theme of Hughes is blurring and distorting faces. While the style is indigenous to Africa, the use of abstraction has multiple meanings here: assimilation, indigeness, contradiction, whole, process, distraction and emphasis. *Identity, Power, and Reconciliation* rings true in all the puzzle pieces left for us – literally.



Puzzle Pieces: Planes I-XI, 2014, mixed media (detail)