

PELLE CASS



CROWDED FIELDS

FOTO RELEVANCE HOUSTON TEXAS

SEP 11, 2021 - OCT 30, 2021

**Divers (Side View) Mission Viejo
(Cover Image)**

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3

PELLE CASS

CROWDED FIELDS

THE ART OF PELLE CASS

A. S. HAMRAH

The anarchic jumble of athletes in motion in the sports photography of Pelle Cass is real. It is not staged. But it isn't the same reality we see when we're watching a game, a competition, or a meet.

In Cass' photos, all the frames are on top of each other, all at once. Everything exists. All the events that could possibly happen in one scene are happening simultaneously, out of order. No singular moment presides. Instead, there is a spray of out-of-sequence instants, detached from a linear timeline.

Cass' style is not to deploy people and freeze them in place, but to capture them unexpectedly, identify where they were, mark that spot with them in it, and move on. In the jumble of digital images that is our world now, Cass has done something that didn't quite seem possible: he has invented a new kind of sports photography that describes real experience in a previously unseen but instantly recognizable way. He has done it with the barest of means: a fixed camera position from which he takes hundreds of digital photographs, and Photoshop, which he learned in one adult education class.

Cass talks about what he got from Eadweard Muybridge. The 19th-century British-American photographer took pictures of horses trotting in sequence to prove that their hooves all left the ground at the same time at some point as they galloped. In Cass' photographs, sequentiality and ground have become detached. His subjects fly off in all directions, competing for space.

The complex, crowded field of play in a Pelle Cass photograph can be tangled and confusing, as bodies in motion block other bodies, obscuring the action. It breaks the cardinal rule of sports photography, which aims to present clear, blink-of-an-eye moments that are instantly get-able and easy to grasp. The goal of the basic sports photograph is to encapsulate an exact moment of victory or defeat—only thrill or agony are allowed. In a Cass photo, many more things are happening. He does not render the exact moment of the dunk, the catch, or the goal because he is not going for timelessness, but rather motion in time. He eliminates the sense of inevitability that typical sports photography implies, replacing it with something uncertain, without guarantees. It's more like watching sports as they happen than finding out who won.

It's not glory and winning he's trying to depict, but "collisions without wincing," and the tensions between exuberance and violence, optimism and fright. When he's putting together a photograph, he looks for details and conflicts, thinking to himself, "That's gonna be confusing, that might be nice."

Cass has come to understand that his weird, unique photographs are an example of popular art. "They have something for everyone," he says. Sports fans come up to him after they've seen one to announce to him "Dude, that's sick!" If he has rejected the mainstream of 20th century photography as represented by Winogrand, it was because his influences come more from painting, anyway. Two subjects from art history interest him most: war and heaven, which repel and attract him, and which he filters through the lens of later abstractionists. Cass has wedded the crowded heavens of the 18th century Venetian master Tiepolo—with their densely-populated, cloud-dwelling gods, goddesses, angels, and cherubs—to the explosive shock of Picasso's *Guernica*, the late cubism of which severs limbs, heads, and torsos into screams of individual destruction. In Cass' sports photographs, the ornate paintings of the 17th-century French Baroque master Nicolas Poussin, with their crowds of warring figures at battle in open squares, set against the sky, meet Jackson Pollock's vast fields of colorful drip.

For Cass, sports allegorizes war and heaven in kinetic compositions snatched from reality, where everything is acting on everything else in violent competition. Cass finds men's football and lacrosse to be a little vicious, and his hockey photographs can't help but remind viewers of Pieter Bruegel the *Elder's Hunters in the Snow*. The horror of Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* is somewhere under the surface of Cass' photos, along with Poussin's *Sabine Women*. The circles and lines of balls, paddles, and poles fill half of Cass' mural-like photos, while conflict rages among his athletic figures beneath and around these objects of sport. He says that the numbers on the jerseys create problems for him. He uses the same players throughout one photograph, but he doesn't want the same number repeated in the visual field over and over. By putting all the moments of one game together, he has found a way to get past the individual athlete and honor the whole team, the whole activity and concept of sport as a human activity. We see how much life is in these spaces. So much action is revealed in the way Cass breaks down time. But there's so much claustrophobia and chaos, too—so much strain and violence along with the grace. Cass says the technique he arrived at to get all this into his photographs doesn't matter. "The world is mysterious and time is mysterious," he says. "Not Photoshop."

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A full version of this article was originally published online in SSENSE and Victory Journal's collaboration on November 15th, 2019.

A. S. Hamrah is the film critic for The Baffler. A collection of his work, The Earth Dies Streaming: Film Writing, 2002–2018, has recently been published.



Thalia Beach Friday No. 2

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



From Longfellow Bridge

Archival Pigment Print

24x36" • Edition of 10

40x60" • Edition of 3



Dartmouth Football Scrimmage

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Ham Polo Club

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Volleyball At Northeastern (close)

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Dartmouth Softball
Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Hawks from Under

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Futures from Baseline Court 6, Thursday

Archival Pigment Print
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40x60" • Edition of 3



Men's Water Polo at Harvard

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



Harvard Football Game from End Zone

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
40x60" • Edition of 3



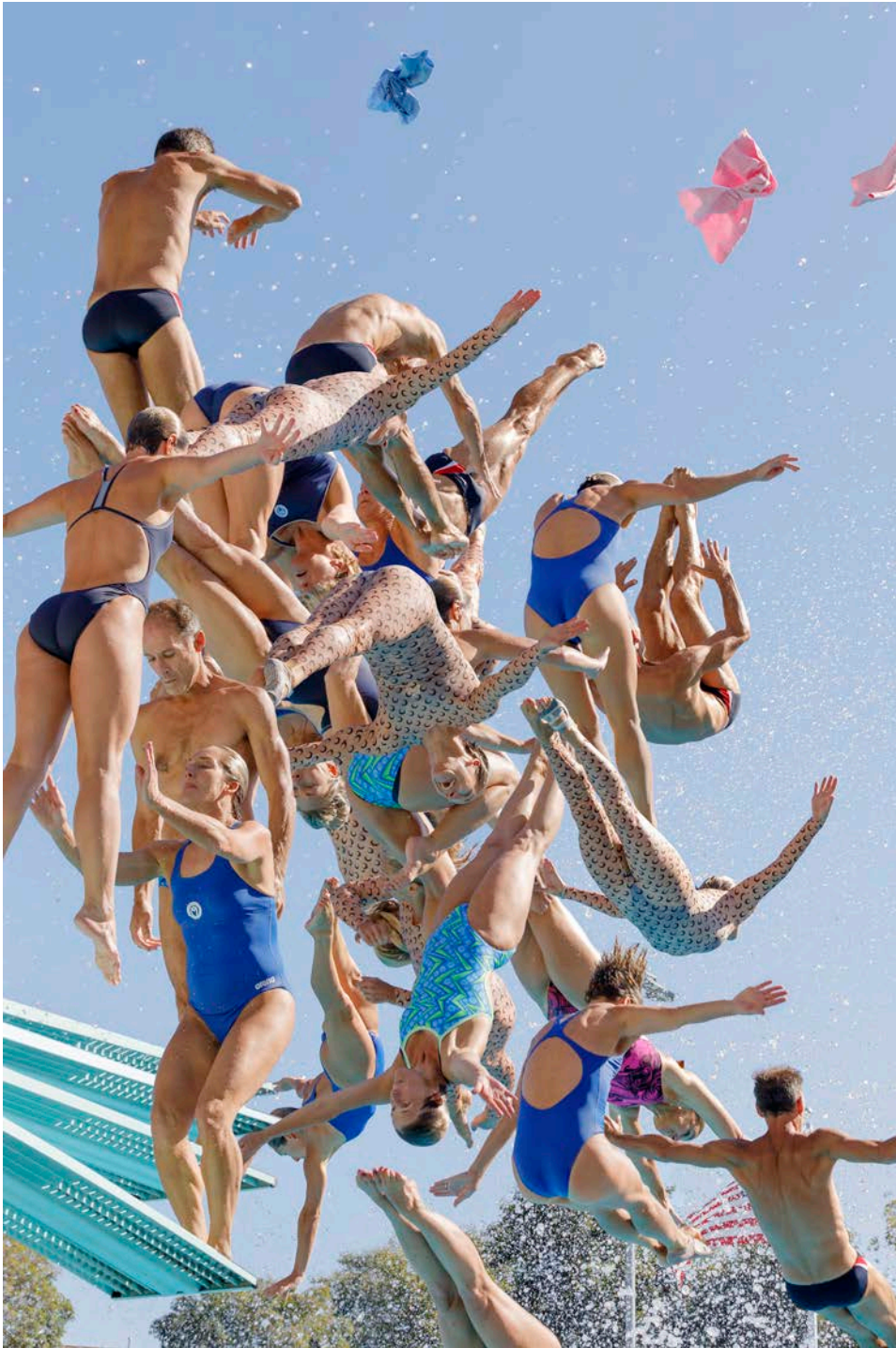
Basketball Game, Boston College

Archival Pigment Print
24x36" • Edition of 10
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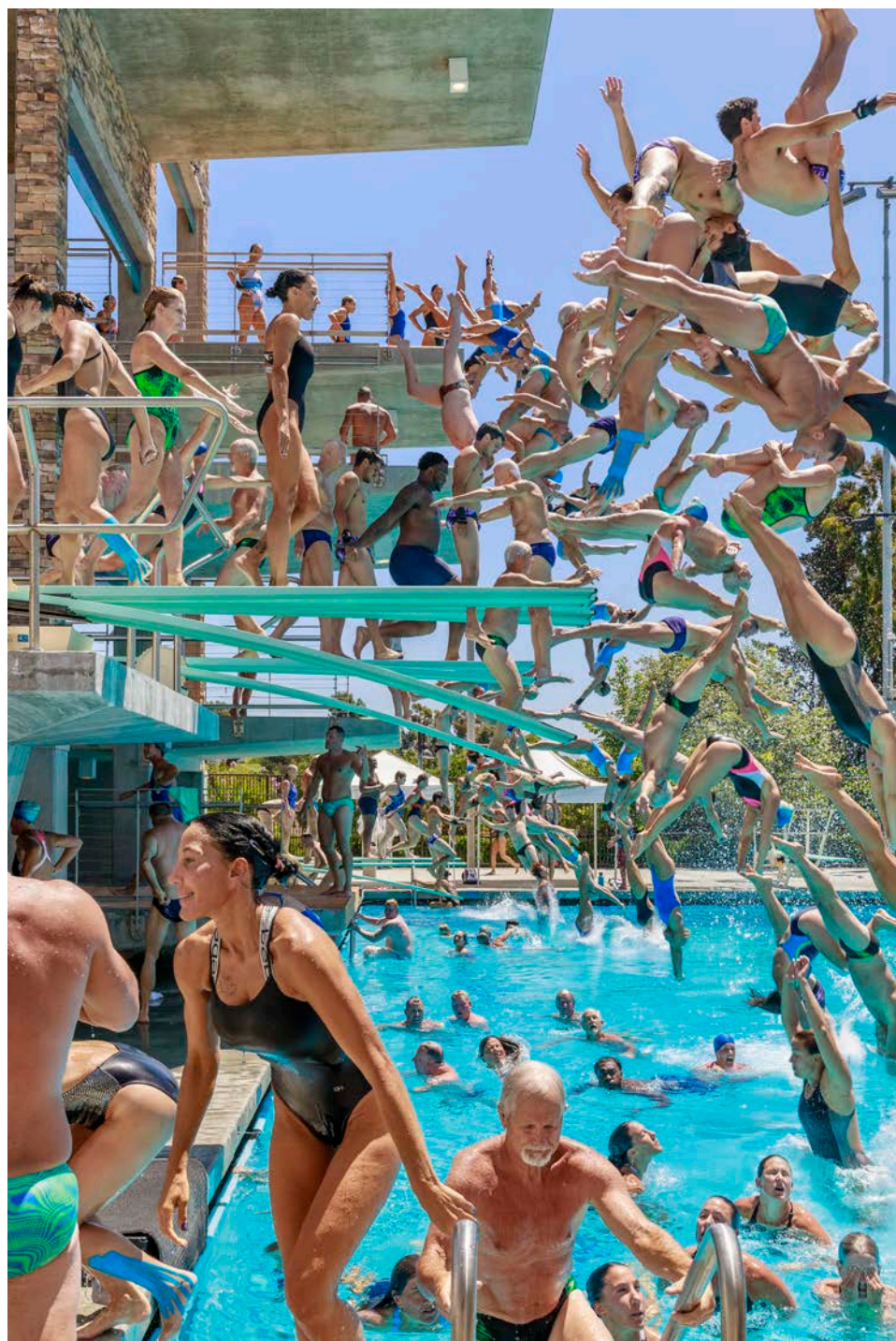
Soccer Game, Northeastern University

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Divers and Sammys, Mission Viejo

Archival Pigment Print
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Divers (Side View), Mission Viejo

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Dartmouth Baseball
Archival Pigment Print
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Dartmouth Basketball

Archival Pigment Print
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Boston University Softball

Archival Pigment Print
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Atlanta Hawks

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P E L L E
C A S S

THE ARTIST

Pelle Cass is a photographer from Brookline, Massachusetts. His work is owned by the Fogg Art Museum, the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Polaroid Collection, the DeCordova Museum, the Peabody Essex Museum, and the MFA, Houston. He has exhibited at the George Eastman House, the Albright Knox Gallery, the New Mexico Museum of Art, and the Metamorf Biennial for Art and Technology in Norway, and has presented shows at the Abigail Ogilvy Gallery (Boston), Stux Gallery (Boston), Gallery Kayafas (Boston), and the Houston Center for Photography. Cass' photos have appeared in books such as *Photoviz (Gestalten)*, *Deleuze and the City (Edinburgh University Press)*, *Langford's Basic Photography (Focal Press)*, *The Beautiful Sparkle: Optical Illusions in Art (Prestel)*, and in magazines such as *Beaux Arts (France)*, *McSweeney's*, *FOAM*, *GQ*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *The Atlantic*, and many others. He has received fellowships from Yaddo, Artists Resource Trust, and the Polaroid Collection. You can find Pelle Cass at @pellecass on Instagram.

FOTO RELEVANCE

Since 2016, Foto Relevance cofounders Geoffrey C. Koslov and Bryn Larsen have focused on the exhibition and acquisition of museum quality contemporary fine art photography and photography-based work. Foto Relevance is dedicated to providing a platform for an innovative selection of American and international photographic artists pushing the boundaries of photography. The gallery has mounted monographic exhibitions as well as group shows to investigate current trends and themes in contemporary art, showcasing a broad range of both darkroom and digital photographic techniques. In addition to promoting the work of artists, Foto Relevance provides guidance, educating individual collectors and corporations in the acquisition and sale of art. Foto Relevance is a member of the Houston Art Gallery Association (HAGA). The gallery is located in the historic Museum District of Houston, Texas.



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