

VICTORY SITS IN TITAN'S HANDS, A BOLT FROM THE BLUE, AN ERA ENDS, IN THE
TRIUMPH OF LUCK

by

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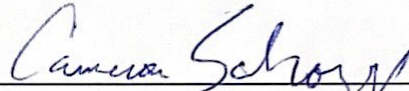
APPROVAL

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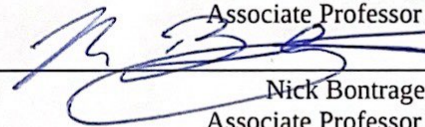
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A POINT OF ORIGIN

The origins of *VICTORY SITS IN TITAN'S HANDS*, *A BOLT FROM THE BLUE*, *AN ERA ENDS*, *IN THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*, began with a series of questions. How do mainstream mythologies and folklore develop in a place like the United States? Why have specific stories and rituals associated with these mythologies persevered over others, and how are they acted upon in day-to-day life? The broad nature of these questions necessitated a case study in which the subject of said study had to be innately and specifically American, as well as culturally important enough to warrant mythologization. In the end, there was only one clear choice.



Figure 1. Image depicting Super Bowl LVIII

American football is not only one of the most popular mainstream customs in the United States but is also a tradition of sport unique to the nation. Emerging “in the late nineteenth century as the trophy event of college athletics,” American football has since expanded to

include youth, high school, and professional leagues as well (Bronner 2011, 352). Defined by the United States embassy as “a distinct type of football that developed in the United States in the 19th century from soccer and rugby,” players “run, throw and kick an oval ball across a 100-yard field” (U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany 2009). This humble definition does little to explain why in 2024, Nielsen, a company known for measuring audiences for television, radio, and newspapers, reported an estimated “123.7 million viewers tuning in for Super Bowl LVIII with 120.3 million viewers on CBS alone, making it the largest audience for a single-network telecast to date” (The Nielsen Company 2024). But what makes American football so popular? And, if the game’s beginnings do come from soccer and rugby then do the origins of those sports have any specific bearing on the American football we know today? A look into the past reveals that many ancient civilizations had similar forms of ball games. However, as my priority was the study of American football, I chose to focus on the ancient civilization credited as the birthplace of Western culture, Greece.

The ancient Greeks did have a ball game known as episkyros¹, which subsequently evolved into the Roman game of harpastum, a game considered an ancestor of today’s rugby (Discentes 2023).² Although this constitutes a kind of historic origin of the game, it does little to explain the mythological space American football inhabits within the mainstream culture of the United States. It was then that I began looking at American football as not just a sport but, more broadly, as a folk ritual. In his book *Explaining Traditions: Folk Behavior in Modern Culture*, Simon J. Bronner suggests that “Football is a metaphor for civil or folk religion, which arose

¹ A game involving two teams of equal numbers with play consisting of throwing the ball back and forth until one team in the exchange was finally forced back over its rear line.

² A game involving two teams of approximately a dozen men each that took place on a rectangular field with the objective being to move the ball beyond the opposing team’s baseline by passing the ball to teammates or perhaps even volleying it. The opposing team would attempt to gain possession of the ball by intercepting it in the air or tackling players to the ground.

with the decline of organized religion as a moral arbiter and communal institution in America” (Bronner 2011, 355). The validity of this theory is apparent when observing how the Super Bowl is celebrated nationally with large gatherings involving particular foods, drinks, and apparel, not unlike other religious holidays. On a smaller, regional scale, this communal ritual is enacted when the bulk of a small town’s population assembles each Friday night to cheer on their high school team. The connections to religious or ritualistic practices continue as American football has a specialized space in which the act of the sport takes place. Specific materials are tied to the sport, such as leather or pigskin, and both the teams and fans that participate wear distinct garments for the occasion. Additionally, American football has a unique language utilized in both the terminology of the game as well as the creation and execution of plays or strategies, unknown to those who do not regularly engage with the game.

Combining these ritualistic components of specific place, materials, and language, I began to imagine an origin story that would explain why football developed in the first place, why it perseveres, and how it became what it is today. Because of the aforementioned ties to ancient Greece, it made sense to take cues from that civilization’s fantastical origin myths while creating my own, resulting in a merger that would become, *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*.

WHITE

The journey begins with two glass doors. They are closed, clouded with an accumulation of wide, cross-hatching marks applied on the interior glass, resulting in a subtle green tint. With the room ahead obscured, the only option is to push forward into the unknown space beyond. Through the threshold, the air in the space is frigidly cold, introducing the viewer to a monochrome corridor of white. A white flag, reminiscent of the championship pennant banners

that inhabit high school and college gymnasiums, hangs on the ten-foot-tall white gallery wall directly behind the doors. The sports jersey fabric undulates and puckers under the weight of itself and the white duct tape with which the sides of the flag are bordered. The letters of an unknown alphabet, painted in stark white across its surface, cast ghostly shadows on the wall. Two white clasped claws appear to grip the flag at the top right and left corners. Four-toed and bird-like, these withered hands hold the flag far above the eye line of an average human so that one must look up at it. Completing the set of *ENTRY FLAGS*, two almost identical white flags hang on the wall down the corridor to the left (Appendix). On the right, the gallery wall gives way to a series of makeshift walls that help form the perimeter of the outer corridor, their white plastic stretched around unseen frames. White duct tape acts as both seam and ornamentation for the plastic walls as the vertical stripes of tape become column-like, once again pulling the eye upward.



Figure 2. Installation view of *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*

At the end of the corridor are a set of six windows, their surfaces purposefully caked in the same combination of watered-down tempera paint and dish soap as the doors of the entrance. With bold white symbols painted on top, these windows recall the messages of fans, scrawled in shoe polish, that annually populate shop fronts and car windows from August to February (Appendix).³ In a departure from the symbols on the first set of windows, a large white mural, *TITAN'S TASK*, stretches across them, depicting two enormous clawed hands holding a pinched sphere. Past the mural, symbols reappear on the final set of six windows that butt up to the familiar white wall of the gallery. Around the bend and directly mirroring the entrance to the space, three white flags, *DEPARTURE FLAGS*, hang at the exit of the maze (Appendix).



Figure 3. Installation view of *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*

³ Regular seasons for high school, college and professional football teams collectively run from August to February

Purposeful and effective, this slow, monochrome transition utilizes the white of the familiar gallery space as a means of transportation through transformation. Common in gallery spaces and museums, hard, featureless, white walls indicate an expectation of etiquette. Do not touch. Move quietly. This is a divine space for thought and contemplation. This ability of the gallery space is commented on in Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube*, where he writes about the history and intention behind these white walls. He connects sacred space to the gallery by suggesting, "A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light." (O'Doherty 1986, 15). He goes on to say that this specific environment is what enables the transformation of the ordinary into the holy. "In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object." (O'Doherty 1986, 15). It is this power of the white cube that is used advantageously to transport the viewer from one sacred space to another, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from gallery space to *TITAN'S TEMPLE*.

The idea of transformation began with an earnest consideration of the gallery space itself. The traditional white walls that constitute the north, east and west walls of the gallery give way to a slowly bending wall of windows in the south that spans approximately fifty feet. Finding this curving mass of metal and glass evocative of both the materiality and obround shape of most collegiate and professional sports stadiums, the choice was made to integrate these inherent features of the gallery rather than attempt to work against them. However, to create a believable environment for *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*, these features would have to be modified. Looking back to ancient Greece for inspiration, I recalled the myth of the minotaur and the deadly labyrinth that acted as both prison and abode. Finding the labyrinth's never-ending corridors comparable to the interior space of a contemporary stadium, the decision was made to transform the gallery into a similar structure, a maze.

BLUE

At the midpoint of the mural, a warm light seeps outward from an open threshold, illuminating a path to the right. A sliver of bright yellow splits the sea of white encountered up to this point. Stepping inside the second layer of the maze, the viewer is swallowed by color. Yellow to the left and blue to the right. A turn to the right, into the blue corridor introduces the viewer suddenly to *THE HEAD AND THE BLOOD OF POWER*.



Figure 4. Detail of *THE HEAD OF POWER*

Much larger than a human, Power's head takes on the facial features of a bull, evoking both the mythic Greek creature, the Minotaur, and Bevo⁴, the mascot of the University of Texas.⁵

Encircled in a mixed media pool of his own orange-glittered gore and spilled blood the decapitated head sits, impaled on a tall black pole. Erupting from the top of Power's head, a black duct-taped, four-toed hand makes a gesture that mockingly resembles Power's horns.

Blood streams down from the hand to the top of Power's head and onto his layered, orange, ribbon-like fur. The gore emanating from his neck hangs down like streamers, encrusted in orange glitter blood. His three eyes, cold white Styrofoam with black X's for pupils add an air of cartoonish humor, offsetting the brutality signified by the large slash in the blue wall just behind his head. The ominous shadow of this once great warrior falls behind him, pointing the way onward into the maze.

Ahead on the ground, a yellow duct tape-clad form wraps its curved shape around the bend of the corridor as its conical studs protrude outward. Turning the corner, another abstract yellow duct-taped object hangs precariously from the top of a wall as if aggressively ripped away and discarded. Representing what remains of the warrior's helmet, these objects, known as *THE HELM OF POWER*, seem to have been of little help against his assassin.

Between the two pieces of the helm lies *THE HAND AND THE BLOOD OF FAITH*. Sitting in bright red opposition to its blue-walled backdrop, Faith's foam hand keeps its clawed index finger raised in a perpetual gesture of "We're # 1", even as his glittering blood congregates in red

⁴ Bevo appears at games both as an actual longhorn steer and a costumed mascot with a human-like physique and the head of a bull, usually sporting a cowboy hat.

⁵ The University of Texas or UT is known both regionally and nationally for its football prowess. An affiliate of Sports Illustrated, James Parks of College Football HQ, ranks UT sixth in his article "*Ranking college football's ten winningest teams all-time*".

pools that spill from his felt-feathered, severed arm. Spreading fully across the floor of the corridor, the viewer is forced to cross this macabre line to proceed.



Figure 5. Installation view of *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*

As the walls of the maze change from fluttering plastic blue back to hard white, *THE SHIELD OF FORTUNE* sits propped in a corner. Round and silver in color the shield recalls the coin toss performed at the start of a game. Following this theme of luck, the border of *THE SHIELD OF FORTUNE* imitates the leaves of a clover with four rounded pieces projecting

outwards from the shield's circumference. This border gives way to a ring of mum-like layered aluminum, partially encrusted in Power's blood.⁶ Following the dried blood to the center of the shield reveals a human-like face sporting a helmet. Though the exaggerated features of the face seem cartoonish, the sort of helmet depicted ties the face to that of an ancient Greek warrior. Above on the wall, thickly written in the same blood that coats the shield, is a line of symbols that reach around the corner to the left and out of sight (Appendix).

A VIOLENT LEGACY

THE HEAD OF POWER represents an iconographic legacy connecting the mythical creature, the Minotaur, to Bevo, the mascot of the University of Texas.⁷ Both appearing as part bull and part-man, this resemblance ties past to present through form as well as physical violence. However, somewhere between the ancient past and the present is another connection that shares these similarities. One of a man and his ox. Although most think of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Big Blue Ox as folk heroes, these often light hearted tales of a giant man and his giant ox clearing the land out west are metaphors for the concept of westward expansion. Though glossed over in many American folk tales, this clearing and claiming of the western frontier included cruel and violent acts against indigenous peoples. Acting as a kind of reenactment,

⁶ Short for chrysanthemum, mums are a traditional Texan adornment worn by girls at homecoming. Mums usually consist of assorted ribbons, bells, glitter and other plastic football decorations that hang from at least one central flower.

⁷ The Minotaur was a creature born of the disobedience of Minos to the god Poseidon. After the old king of the island had died, Minos drove away his own brothers, claiming he was best suited to rule. He asked that the sea god prove this to everyone by sending a magnificent bull from the seas as a sign, an animal Minos promised to sacrifice to Poseidon. The bull duly arose, but it was so splendid that Minos couldn't bear to kill it, so he sent it to his own herd and substituted a lesser beast. Poseidon was not pleased and in an act of perverse revenge caused Pasiphae, the wife of Minos, to fall madly in love with the bull he had sent. The queen became pregnant by the bull and in due time gave birth to an ill-tempered creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man. Minos therefore ordered Daedalus to build a complex maze called the Labyrinth to hide the creature and serve as a punishment for prisoners. Those unfortunates who were forced into the complex passageway full of twists and turns could not find their way out—at least not before the Minotaur found and devoured them.

contemporary American football seems to hint at the same violence through its structure and play. Simon J. Bronner writes, “The frontier experience is inextricably tied to American identity, and central to that experience is the acquisition of land as a result of overcoming a hostile enemy in the character of the fearsome Indians.” (Bronner 2011, 367). This scenario is recreated in American football as each team attempts to acquire land or gain yardage to overcome the other team through physical means and win the game. However, Bronner is by no means the first to make a connection between the American frontier and American football. He goes on to note that “President Theodore Roosevelt” a mythological figure himself, “was known to have publicly declared that when he put together his band of “Rough Riders” for the foreign adventure of the Spanish-American War, he sought men who had played football because of their character as well as their old-fashioned fight, reminiscent of America’s conquest of the frontier” (Bronner 2011, 367). By illuminating a kind of historic lineage, visually represented through the iconography of man and bull, the path from ancient Greek myth to American folklore begins to present a pattern of allegorical violence from which the mythologization of American football draws precedent.

YELLOW

A turn to the left and a blue-felt feathered form known as *THE HORN OF FAITH* sits stoically within a yellow corridor. It stands on its mouth, unable to sound the alarm. Detritus, a reference to the material of the plastic walls, hangs from a horizontal brace above. Suspended by its side is a long, soft, sequined tube. Red, glimmering, and intestinal. Further down the corridor, leaning against a concrete pillar is a sword – a cut pattern reminiscent of a four-leaf clover spreads across its metal surface. Known as *THE SWORD OF FORTUNE*, the point of this dull blade glitters attractively with a light purple that reflects upward from a pool of shimmering

blood dried on the floor beneath it. On the ground diagonally opposite, a red foam hand creeps around a yellow wall. Its crisp, taloned shadow beckons the viewer further into the maze only to



Figure 6. Installation view of *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*

reveals itself severed, accompanied only by a splattering of red glimmering blood, the second *HAND OF FAITH*. On the floor to the left lies the source of the purple blood soaking *THE SWORD OF FORTUNE* in the form of *THE BODY AND THE BLOOD OF DEFT*.⁸ Spilling forth up the corridor, Deft's rich purple fluid trails back to a headless neck. Above Deft's body, on the wall to the left, slashes in the yellow plastic suggest a short fight before the killing blow. The bone protruding from his open wound shimmers white in the light, as if jewel-encrusted, while Deft's limp and crumpled body remains still. His fur, a textured compilation of purple painted

⁸ Deft - to be ready and skilled in physical movement

paper mache, in tandem with his paws, made of painted paper pulp, materially hint at the humble origins of mascot making. Deft's two tails, stiff in death, sit rigidly propped against the corner behind him where the walls transition from thin yellow to solid white.



Figure 7. Detail of *THE BODY AND THE BLOOD OF DEFT*

A tall black pole sporting a familiar four-toed claw sits back in the corner, apparently the mate to the one on which Power's skull now hangs; its placement echoes that of *THE SHIELD OF FORTUNE*. To the right of the pole symbols of the unknown language appear written in Deft's blood. Following the bloody symbols leads the viewer around the corner where hard walls to either side create a tight white corridor.



Figure 8. Installation view of THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK

In the not quite dim light of the hallway, *FORTUNE'S MESSAGE*, a combination of symbols written in the glittering purple, red, and orange blood of Deft, Faith, and Power, runs the span of the left wall (Appendix). At the center of the gory graffiti, another threshold opens to reveal the inky black entrance to the core chamber of *TITAN'S TEMPLE*.

BLACK

Turning the corner the viewer is confronted with a twenty by twelve-foot black room. The walls of the chamber are constituted of layer upon layer of cut fringe, which cascades from the top of the ten-foot-tall walls down to the floor. Made of plastic trash bags, the liquid black surface ripples with light, though the fringe itself remains still, almost static. In the center of the room stand *THE HANDS OF TITAN*.



Figure 9. Installation view of *THE HANDS OF TITAN*

Monumental in size and trophy-like in color, the reflection of these golden hands dances across the fingers of fringe surrounding it. Titan's Hands sit just above eye height atop a rectangular pedestal made of the same fringed material as the walls. Its four-toed and clawed fingers, splayed outward in a gesture of bearing, project a shadow on the ground below that resembles the wings of a great bird. Lit from above, the hands seem to glow highlighting the raised symbols that decorate their skin (Appendix). Winding up the wrists, continuing onto the hands, and ending at

the tips of the fingers, these symbols give context to *THE WORDS OF THE PROPHECY* written on the white windows in the white halls of the maze. Unlike the mural, *TITAN'S TASK*, and the hands that met the viewer at the point of choice between blue and yellow halls, *THE HANDS OF TITAN* appear oddly empty. Whatever treasure or claim to victory that lay in Titan's hands has since been stolen or won.

THE RITUAL OF LABOR

When picturing the materials associated with the image of American football, one may inherently think of turf, leather, jersey fabric, and sweat. However, it was the materiality typically left unconsidered that seemed most important to both the look of the game and its continuing perseverance. *THE HANDS OF TITAN*, although gold, are created of paper mache, as are *THE HEAD OF POWER* and *THE BODY OF DEFT*. Adorning the surface of Titan's Hands are puff-painted symbols made from a mixture of shaving cream and white glue. The attractive glittering gore that beautifully forms *FORTUNE'S MESSAGE*, as well as the pools and splatters of blood encountered in the second layer of the maze, all amount to a combination of this puff paint and common craft glitter. These ephemeral mediums are not the materials commonly associated with the hypermasculinity and toughness of American football. These are the temporary materials of cheerleaders, team moms, and supportive girlfriends who participate in a ritualized season of making.

The frilled black walls of the temple's inner chamber mimic the fringed borders of high school homecoming parade floats and the shifting plastic of cheerleaders' pom-poms. The tempera paint that gives form to both *TITAN'S TASK* and *THE WORDS OF THE PROPHECY* call to mind signs held high at college games spelling out "G-O F-I-G-H-T W-I-N " on flimsy poster board. The plastic tablecloths stretched into walls connote the labor of decorating for the

big game and preparing the Super Bowl spread. Women paint the signage, make the t-shirts, sew the outfits, craft the mums, and decorate the parade floats. Growing up in Texas, a hub of American football, and participating as a young girl, I have personally witnessed all of this. Because the craft materials of this labor are equated with an act of support, they are overshadowed by the materials of the game itself. But if not for this labor, acting as a feminine means of participation, one could hypothesize that American football would not be as popular in the United States as it is today. Historically restricted from playing, women and girls are relegated to cheerleading as a means of physical contribution to the sport. However, by diversifying this contribution through the aforementioned methods of making, women and girls can participate in a multitude of ways that enable American football to become a kind of communal ritual, adding to its overall popularity and contributing to its perseverance.

AN ACT OF MYTH-MAKING

Similar to the inspiration to use a labyrinth or maze, as the setting for *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK*, the language created for the show can be partially credited to the myth of the minotaur as well. While researching in Greece I visited the palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. Once a great Minoan Palace, this now contemporary tourist attraction was, for years, thought to be the palace of King Minos, making it the site that originated the myth of the Minotaur. Though tablets potentially explaining the history of the estate were found at the site, they were written in a language yet to be deciphered. Because of the lack of verifiable information, the discoverer of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans, surmised that the labyrinthian interiors of the palatial estate must be the labyrinth of lore. Further remodeling the ruins as a means of reconstructing what he believed to be historically accurate, Evans created a separate and

incorrect physical history that was taken and spread as truth for many years and persists today in the small minotaur-shaped souvenirs that line the shelves of nearby shops (Jarus 2017).



Figure 10: Image of souvenir Minotaur figurines at the Palace of Knossos

Because of this, the language displayed throughout *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK* was created to replicate how Sir Arthur Evans' theory became an act of unintentional myth-making, due to a lack of information and the passing of said information from person to person. To form this new language, characters and symbols used to illustrate American football plays, such as triangles, squares, arrows, and circles were combined in a variety of ways to create a twenty-six-letter alphabet. Following the illegibility of the Minoan tablets this alphabet is never fully decoded for the viewer. Instead, the promotional show cards for the exhibition act as a cipher for any viewer or group of viewers determined enough to crack the code. This communal decoding

is promoted through the distribution of show cards, each with one letter of the show's title translated into the temple's script. Through decoding the language in the temple, the viewer is granted access to the entirety of the prophecy that appears in the symbols of *TITAN'S TASK* and *THE HANDS OF TITAN*. However, even after decoding the alphabet the exact narrative on display in *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK* is still obfuscated. Like Evans, the viewer cannot know the whole truth of this ancient site and must create their own narrative based on the information they gathered, resulting in divergent and incorrect versions of the temple's story. This act mimics the ways in which myths and legends, like that of the minotaur and American football, evolve and change over time.

END GAME

VICTORY SITS IN TITAN'S HANDS, A BOLT FROM THE BLUE, AN ERA ENDS, IN THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK takes the viewer on an immersive journey to discover the mythological origins of American football. Pulling from ancient Greek myth and American folklore *THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK* presents a violent narrative rife with blood and sacrifice that echoes the brutality inherent in the contemporary ball game. In contrast, the exhibition's materiality focuses on the hidden labor of women by utilizing more delicate media such as glitter, paper mache, and tempera paint. Dropped in the middle the viewer must navigate the maze of Titan's Temple traversing twists and turns, decoding symbols, and participating in a myth-making of their own.

APPENDIX

English Translation of *ENTRY FLAGS*

ENTER

TITAN

TEMPLE

English Translation of *THE WORDS OF THE PROPHECY*

VICTORY SITS IN TITAN'S HANDS A BOLT FROM THE BLUE AN ERA ENDS IN
THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK

English Translation of *FORTUNE'S MESSAGE*

LUCK WAS HERE

English Translation of *THE HANDS OF TITAN*

A GIFT FOR YOU MY CHILDREN HE WHO WOULD TAKE IT MUST KNOW THE
PRICE OF VICTORY THOSE UNWILLING TO PAY THE TOLL ON BOTH BODY
AND MIND WILL FIND THEMSELVES UNABLE TO LEAVE THIS PLACE THE
CHAMPION OF THIS ORDEAL WILL FIND HIMSELF UNABLE TO EVER
RETURN MAY THE GLORY OF VICTORY SHINE UPON YOU AND REMEMBER
THAT TOMORROW IS PROMISED TO NO ONE.

English Translation of *DEPARTURE FLAGS*

DEPART

TITAN

TEMPLE

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VITA

Megan (Max) Marshall was born in Corpus Christi Texas and raised in Rockport Texas. In 2015 she graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. In 2024 Marshall earned a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. She received a graduate fellowship from TCU, where she also served as a sculpture shop technician, a teaching assistant, and an instructor of record in Three-Dimensional Design.

ABSTRACT

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2015, University

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VICTORY SITS IN TITAN'S HANDS, A BOLT FROM THE BLUE, AN ERA ENDS, IN THE TRIUMPH OF LUCK reimagines the origins of American football by melding together the iconography and acts of violence that connect Greek myth, American folklore and contemporary sports culture. Highlighting the hidden labor of women and their contribution to American football's cultural mythologization, the ephemeral materials of the exhibition help form the maze that acts as the setting for this imagined narrative. Taking a journey through the maze the viewer is invited to explore the story within the colored corridors of Titan's Temple while deciphering the symbols of a mysterious language. Acknowledging the viewer's role in the interpretation of the narrative prompts questions asking how mythologies are created, who creates them and how do they impact contemporary life?