



## Fair Ball

### Love of the national pastime, on display at a downtown art gallery

By Carl Nagin

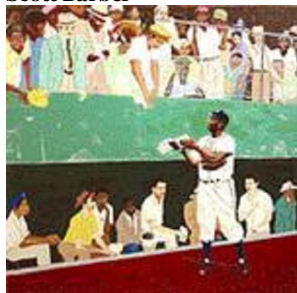
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Shut out at Pac Bell Park and dissed by scalpers for the Giants' first home stand, I found another way to see the game at the sixth annual "Art of Baseball" show, "Crack of the Bat," at the George Krevsky Gallery on Geary. It's free. And more to the point, Krevsky is a seasoned fan of the game, no less a connoisseur of the national pastime than of 20th-century American art. He brings these twin passions together in a richly conceived exhibit of some 70 works spanning 50 years of baseball art and a century of its legends and lore.



Krevsky (who sported an Oakland A's cap and served Cracker Jacks at the opening) and his staff have curated a fascinating journey through the sport's art in diverse media -- collage, assemblage, photography, watercolor, oil, cigar-box art, cardboard painting, wood engraving, and artists' books. These works illuminate the game, its rich history, and its often troubled racial undercurrents. The better-known artists include Ben Shahn and Elaine de Kooning; a few pieces by WPA artists from the '30s and '40s are scattered throughout the show, but to his credit, Krevsky has focused on recent works by contemporary West Coasters.

Scott Barber



Over the Foul Line: Thomas Crawford's Jackie Robinson in Cuba.

Where:

George Krevsky Gallery, 77 Geary (near Kearny), S.F.  
[www.georgekrevskygallery.com](http://www.georgekrevskygallery.com)

Details:

Through April 26

Admission is free

397-9748

Subject(s):

[Crack of the Bat](#)

Even Leonardo da Vinci knew something about baseball, as Charles Hobson demonstrates in his delightful accordion book of monotypes depicting the sequence of a single baseball play juxtaposed with quotes from da Vinci's notebooks. Here's one: "The first picture was nothing but a simple line drawn around the shadow of a man made by the sun on a wall." Hobson's soft-ground etching *SUN (Felder)* illustrates the epigram through the image of an outfielder's balletic leap against a wall, the kind of leap that brings a capacity crowd to its feet with a roar.

Baseball art is accessible because it's both topical and nostalgic, and Krevsky has covered the bases in representing its subgenres: gesture and motion studies like Brett Gottschall's striking charcoal and pastel image of pitcher Bob Feller's windup (*Feller Up*); action narratives of great baseball moments like Christopher Felver's gelatin silver print of *Barry Bonds -- Going for 600*; and iconic portraits of the game's heroes and superstars. He even includes conceptual takes on its paraphernalia, rituals, and landscapes,

accenting the geometry of nostalgia -- the ballparks and playing fields that burn their way into the heart of every American kid who has ever played the game and dreamed of its glories.

The wonder and terror of that rite of passage is portrayed in Sidney Goodman's graphically intense oil

painting *The Try Out*, in which a naked batter takes a swing from the home plate of an ominously darkened ballpark, empty but for a lone umpirelike figure in the distance. A no-less-troubling version of that allegory of ambition and vulnerability is a small, deceptively simple painting on frayed cardboard by UC Berkeley artist and teacher Anthony Dubovsky titled *Baseball and Empire II*. It depicts a child with a bat, painted, Dubovsky tells me, a week before the U.S. invaded Iraq. Bush did own the Texas Rangers, but on the eve of war, Dubovsky says, "I needed a sensibility that acknowledges damage." In other words, Bush may once have shared every child's dream of victory, but that dream can turn warlike in combination with power.

From the antic side of the plate, there's local bail bondsman, filmmaker, and junk sculptor Jerry Barrish's *Springtime for Santa in USA*; his Santa is a red-necked ballplayer who resembles a tipsy, lankier cousin of the Michelin Man. Beat poet laureate Lawrence Ferlinghetti also takes a crack at the bat in his assemblage *7th Inning Stretch: Night Games*, which features a pair of baggy pants with a miniature Louisville Slugger, wooden and firm, hanging from the crotch. I predict a knockoff will soon appear on the Internet as a marketing ploy for the hottest growth industry in cyberspace: pop-up penis-enlargement ads.

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Baseball art is also about the open green space of the fields, the hometown attachments of fans, and the boundaries of what's foul and fair. One such locale is beautifully evoked in Rob Cox's *Gone*, an homage to Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. The image's focus is on Fenway's forbidding left-field wall -- the "Green Monster," as it's been dubbed by fans and sportscasters -- no less a monument in Beantown than Bunker Hill. This 37-by-240-foot barrier, made of 30,000 pounds of Toncan iron, is capped by a 27-foot screen, and for more than 60 years it has confounded left fielders who've tried to master its quirky fly-ball caroms. (Baseball is not pool.) In Cox's narrow, color field-esque vertical canvas, an outfielder with his back to the viewer squeezes his fist in frustration as a home-run ball soars over the Green Monster, headed for the red-and-white neon ARCO sign, another Boston landmark.

The show is full of baseball lore and social history. It's got Phillip Dewey's miniature collage-portraits of Negro League greats like "Smokey Joe" Williams and Leroy "Satchel" Paige framed in turn-of-the-century negative holders. Paige was baseball's Muhammad Ali, and first learned to pitch in an Alabama reform school. He made his major-league debut in his 40s as baseball's oldest rookie. A model of endurance and control, Paige pitched until he was 59. Dewey's collage captures his signature 150-degree pitching arc, set against a background of tiny matchbook-cover ads for Alka-Seltzer and Wrigley's Spearmint gum plastered on the outfield walls of a Negro League ballpark from the 1940s. There's a reason for those matchbox cutouts, an admiring fan told me at Krevsky's opening: He'd seen Paige's debut in the majors, and remembered his pre-game warm-up, in which Paige lobbed his patented pitches (among them the jump-ball, wobbly ball, midnight rider, and hesitation pitch) at matchboxes positioned in the strike zone of a mocked-up batter's box.

Paige also figures in a Thomas Crawford homage to the days when major leaguers visited Havana for exhibition games and winter baseball. Crawford is a self-taught Bay Area painter and former Peace Corps director in the Caribbean. There he absorbed the naive painting traditions of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and his works commemorate the Afro-Caribbean and Latino heritage that has produced so many baseball heroes. Crawford's *Baseball in Cuba* portrays three players on that country's 1930 Santa Clara Leopards and documents an obscure chapter of baseball history, as does his portrait of Jackie Robinson signing an autograph for a fan during a 1950s Havana exhibition game. In *Jackie Robinson in Cuba*, the player stands like a colossus before a cannily observed group of Cuban sports reporters and spectators. Among them, a mustachioed, pre-revolutionary Fidel Castro smokes a cigar as he waits in the wings to hurl his own set of strikes.

Angelica Villegas is one of half a dozen women artists whose works appear in Krevsky's celebratory show. *Roberto Clemente*, her acrylic portrait of the Pittsburgh Pirate right fielder fans called "the great one," is a study in stoic, heroic intensity. Clemente, a child of Puerto Rico's barrios, was baseball's first Latino superstar, a status he achieved through more than the prowess of his fielding arm and his hitting. At the height of his career, Clemente left a 1972 New Year's Eve party in San Juan to fly a rescue mission bringing food and medical supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Soon after takeoff, the plane went down in a storm, and Clemente's body was never recovered. Villegas' portrait transforms a classic pose of baseball-card iconography: the head shot of a power hitter gripping his diagonally cocked bat as he stares down a pitcher. Villegas turns Clemente's fiercely focused attention into a statement about his unflinching moral character and physical courage.

Tina Hoggatt is a Washington-based sports artist acclaimed for her set of large, porcelain-enamel-on-steel panels commissioned for the upper concourse of the Seattle Mariners' Safeco Field in 1999. In the Krevsky show, Hoggatt's exceptional graphic skill is apparent in a precisely rendered watercolor action study (*Billy Martin Turns the Double Play*). Hoggatt shows the Yankee second baseman sidearming a throw, with a runner belatedly sliding under his legs just as the dexterous Martin releases the ball to complete a double play. The same artist displays her social and historical understanding of the game in a haunting memorial, *Christy Mathewson*, for one of baseball's first Hall of Famers. Mathewson's pitching career -- he set a modern record of 37 wins in one season -- was tragically interrupted in 1918, when he enlisted as a captain in World War I and inhaled mustard gas during a munitions training exercise in the U.S. Army's Gas and Fire unit. A college-educated member of a literary society, he once told a reporter, "You can learn little from victory. You can learn everything from defeat." He was baseball's Gentleman Jim, pitching in an era when players were as ready to fix games as they were to knock out a rival's teeth in a barroom brawl. Hoggatt's watercolor and cameo collage of the genteel pitcher is menacingly juxtaposed with his cane and bat crossed over a skull-like gas mask -- as timely a political statement as appears in this extensive show.

"I love baseball," wrote Krevsky in an announcement for "Diamonds and Dust," an earlier incarnation of this annual show. "I find that an afternoon at the ballpark with my daughter on Father's Day is as meaningful and relaxing as an evening at the symphony." Spend an afternoon in his gallery and see if it changes how you view the game. High art, indeed.