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For World Cup, the beautiful game plays out on museum walls

BY MARY MILLIKEN

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(Reuters) - Petra Cortright played soccer for 14 years so she was very adept at making a video of herself wearing a pink glowing bathing suit and juggling a ball, or rather an IKEA soccer pillow, which was what she had on hand when inspiration struck.

Now the 27-year-old Los Angeles artist finds herself and that webcam video in the company of Andy Warhol and his 1978 portrait of Pele and 50 other works of art by 30 artists celebrating the so-called "beautiful game" in this year of the World Cup in Brazil.

"Futbol: The Beautiful Game", takes place a mere 10,000 kilometers (6,300 miles) from Rio de Janeiro, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art or LACMA, where a curator bitten by soccer has assembled a show about the mythic, the heroic, the poetic and the violent manifestations of the game.

"Timed with the World Cup, it seems like an opportunity to think about some of the things I love about the game, perhaps in a more artistic and intellectual way," said Franklin Sirmans, the 44-

year-old curator and head of contemporary art at LACMA, who was inspired early on by Pele and the Cosmos in his native New York.

The exhibition reflects the global nature of the game, from paintings by an artist obsessed by English club Manchester United to a Colombian artist who shoots a video of a pick-up game in a small courtyard to a photograph of North African slippers bearing a Nike-like swoosh.

Although the United States might not match the passion of other countries for the sport, Los Angeles is arguably its most soccer-mad city with two Major League Soccer teams and a large Hispanic population. "Futbol," the Spanish word for soccer, was chosen for the show's title to denote the international character of the city.

MINI MARACANA

When Sirmans went looking for soccer art, one of the first pieces in mind was the object he chose to greet visitors to the exhibition - a mini rendering of Rio's Maracana Stadium, where the World Cup final will be played in July, by Brazilian artist Nelson Leirner. It is full of different figurines like Buddhas and Japanese beckoning cats, all surrounded by Jesus figures.

Many of the pieces are simple - like a South African video of an artist drawing a soccer ball on the wall - a reflection Sirmans says of the beautiful game's simplicity.

The art is often made from everyday materials, like the display of little soccer jerseys made from cigarette packages or a bag full of balls made from a collage of scrap paper.

Before the show moves on to the icons and heroes, it lingers on the not so beautiful, like photos of fervent Italian fans crammed behind police lines or a soccer boot painted along with a gun.

"We are standing in the room that addresses the more contentious things around the game, hooliganism, racism, colonialism, things that often aren't part of the discussion," said Sirmans.

Two room-size video displays anchor the exhibition. One is a 90-minute video of French star Zinedine Zidane playing, shot from 17 angles. In the other video "Volta," the viewer only sees Brazilian spectators captured in various stadiums with a handheld camera, while players and pitch remain out of sight.

"You are seeing literally thousands of people, holding on to the same jersey and waving it up and down at exactly the same moment," said Sirmans.

"How many times do we see people functioning today in our world today in such a fashion?"

WITH WARHOL, 'REALLY CRAZY'

Towards the end of the exhibition, the Andy Warhol portrait of Pele with a ball on his head comes in to view. It is the oldest piece in the show, painted in 1978, shortly after the great Brazilian striker wrapped up his career in a U.S. exhibition match between his two clubs, Santos and the New York Cosmos, in which he played for both sides.

Cortright was not even born then, but she is a beneficiary of those pioneering days of U.S. soccer. She did pre-Olympic training before giving the sport up for art school and now can't quite believe where soccer and art have taken her.

"Being in a show with Andy Warhol is really crazy," said Cortright, suitably dressed in a white Adidas t-shirt and trousers as she wanders through the exhibit.

For the World Cup, both she and Sirmans admit they will be totally consumed by the month of matches and Sirmans has made sure the games will be showing at LACMA's outdoor screens and in

the bar.

"Hopefully, it triggers a celebratory mode around here, as much of the world will be in celebratory mode as well," said Sirmans. "Me personally, I know I'll be in front of the television for every game."

"Futbol: The Beautiful Game" opens February 2 and ends July 20, one week after the world crowns its new champion in the Maracana.

(Editing by Ed Osmond)