



The Iceman sweateth: Chuck Liddell, objet d'art.

Blood sport

Kevin Lynch's *Octagon* knocks down wall between UFC and fine art world

BY JARRET KEENE

HIGH ABOVE DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS, inside a penthouse suite of SoHo Lofts, images of Ultimate Fighting Championship warriors stand ready to open a can of aesthetic whup-ass on anyone who doesn't consider such a violent and demanding sport to merit the sophisticated touch of a true artist. Dare to step into the *Octagon*, and any prejudice you may possess will be beaten out of you with a series of powerful shots by Kevin Lynch, a commercial photographer (best known for shooting celebs) who spent the last five years documenting the physical and psychological pain endured and dished out by the likes of Chuck Liddell, Randy Couture and Tito Ortiz, to name a few UFC superstars.

Bruised, battered, bloody — but never broken — these modern gladiators are captured and chronicled in every conceivable way (portraits, before-and-after-the-bout studies, movements against a black background, action shots) and from every conceivable angle (such as the image in which Lynch positions himself directly above a combatant sitting in his corner, prepping for the next round). One of the most powerful images doesn't even include a UFC fighter. Instead, a mat saturated with the blood of eight bouts is presented as a triptych, the blood symbolizing the sacrifice these athletes make in order to reach the pinnacle of their tough profession.

"It's abstract," says Lynch of this image during a recent interview in SoHo. "This represents to me, in an abstract way, the sport. It's not about glorifying violence or depicting blood, but about understanding that you have to be real with what is happening in there. This helps you get the blood

right out of the way and to get beyond it, so that you're able to see the finesse and conditioning and discipline that makes these guys such incredible athletes. Foremost, this is an effort to bridge the worlds of sports, UFC fighting and fine art. The actual combat is really more like a chess match."

Despite his understanding of the psychological qualities of UFC bouts, he admits the influence of Francis Bacon, a painter known for his haunting and grotesque imagery. But for Lynch, it's Bacon's human forms and figurative lines that resonate in his mind.

"The way in which he investigated male anatomy more than any other artist is just really fascinating to me," he says.

Photos included in the exhibit form the backbone of the limited-edition book, also called *Octagon* and priced at \$2,500. There's a reason for that cost. At 400 pages, with more than 800 color and black-and-white images, this massive tome was handmade by Italian craftsmen and boasts coffee table-busting 25-inch-by-25-inch dimensions. Making it more attractive, *Octagon* includes a foreword by screenwriter and Pulitzer-winning dramatist David Mamet and an essay by MacArthur Fellowship recipient and eminent art critic (and Las Vegas) Dave Hickey. However, if you're hesitant to commit to such a lavish volume, you may want to make an appointment to view the SoHo exhibit and absorb the impact of Lynch's images firsthand.

"The idea was to document the sport by employing a fine-art perspective," Lynch says. "And not from an historical angle, but from an aesthetic one, because when you emphasize the historical you sometimes lose a bit of the aesthetics. I just really wanted to reflect the passion and dedication of the fighters, while at the same time acknowledging the vicarious enjoyment of the average UFC fan."

For Lynch, the power of photography lies in stopping a moment in time and preserving the very essence of that moment. He sees Taschen's *Goat*, a giant book of Muhammad Ali images, as the greatest of all sports photography books.

"The reason it's so successful is that makes you go back in time," he says. "Today I look at these images, and my childhood is relived. Hopefully, these images I've done will provide the same kind of memories for others."

Octagon is the first UFC photo book and exhibit of its kind. Lynch insisted on before and after shots of individual fighters, because he says it's in these moments — particularly in the before shots — and in those seconds before they enter the ring that you see a truth in their eyes: whether or not they have the confidence to win.

"You're really fighting against yourself more than anything," Lynch says of the combatants. "And you're being honored by your opponent while you're in there."

Lynch also admires how UFC manages to appeal to different cultures and classes. From construction workers to CEOs, the sport has managed to reach just about everywhere.

"I'm bumping into fans all the time. And that's the real phenomenon of UFC — the way it permeates every crack of society and draws in people who wouldn't normally attend a sporting event."

Gazing into the brutal yet balletic world of *Octagon*, one senses that the fine-art treatment is only valid approach to documenting UFC. Indeed, Lynch has landed on something that speaks across many categories and should shake up the art world in positive fashion. The way *Octagon* is exhibited — in a living environment rather than hanging on sterile gallery walls — further confirms this impulse to reach out in new ways.

"It's often difficult to relate well to things in a gallery," Lynch says. "It was [curator] Michele Quinn who hit on this idea of displaying these as individual pieces."

Still, a comfy penthouse feels a long way from any UFC bout.

"There were some tense moments in the ring. I've never been hit, but my camera has."

Octagon: The Exhibit
Through June 21 (by appointment)
SoHo Lofts
900 Las Vegas Blvd. S.
366-9339
Free