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FORMER UCONN PLAYERS' DRILLS BECOME A WORK OF ART

By Donna Tommelleo

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STORRS, Conn. -- As members of three straight NCAA championship teams, former Connecticut women's basketball players Morgan Valley and Maria Conlon are used to being watched.

They were just what nationally known video artist Janet Biggs was looking for to complete her newest work, "One-on-One," a piece that deals with the idea of spectatorship.

"I asked them to please be as aggressive as you can be," Biggs said. "They just stepped up to the task like no two players I have ever worked with."

The piece, a continuous loop of hoops with both women locked in a mesmerizing dance for control, opens its 17-day run Wednesday at UConn's Contemporary Art Galleries on the Storrs campus. Viewers enter a small, dark room and encounter larger-than-life images of Conlon and Valley in a one-on-one drill cast on double-sided screen. Conlon has the ball throughout the footage while Valley counters her every move, trying in vain to gain control.

Behind them is footage of an empty 10,000-seat Gampel Pavilion spinning wildly to the frenetic music of Brian Eno's "Third Uncle." For brief interludes, the music cuts out and the visitor hears nothing but the buzzing hum of the gym's fluorescent lights. The drill, meanwhile, never stops. "The main impulse to make this piece was about spectatorship and what it means for both the players and the spectators, and when it borders on voyeurism,

where spectators' roles lie and when they step over them. Especially now when it just happened with spectators," Biggs said referring to the recent brawl between Detroit Pistons' fans and the Indiana Pacers.

Biggs' "One-on-One" is one in a series of pieces that use athletes. She has worked with members of the U.S. synchronized swimming teams, champion high school wrestlers in Georgia, wheel chair athletes and football players. An accomplished equestrian, the 45-year old New York City artist also has concentrated much of her work on horses, a four-legged study in power and control. "Horseback riding was my first experience with power," she said. "You may not be able to make other decisions in your life, but you can make 1,200 pounds go where ever you want it to go." For her latest piece, she specifically wanted to use members of UConn's 2004 national championship team.

"I wanted championship players because there's a level of commitment to the sport that borders on obsession and compulsion and that's important to the work and also because they're incredibly disciplined," Biggs said. Biggs filmed the players in the small gallery room for nearly an hour under the hot lights.

"At first we were trying not to laugh," Conlon said. "It's an unnatural thing but after a few minutes we became pretty competitive. It was actually pretty neat. Once (Biggs) explained it, it was easier." Conlon said it wasn't hard to tap into the competitive streak, a hallmark of her UConn teams.

"We can't even play a game of cards without being competitive and getting into a fight," Conlon explained.

The players switched roles and did other drills, but after viewing all her footage, Biggs chose the clip of Conlon on offense

and Valley as the defender.

"I thought the rhythm between the two of them was so dead on," Biggs explained. "Some of the footage I didn't use was even more intense."

Both players agreed things did get a little feisty. Valley said at one point when she had the ball, Conlon began hitting at her, scratching her arms in the process. That ticked her off.

"So I knocked her into the wall. She started talking trash," Valley said.

Gallery director Barry Rosenberg said he's hopeful that Biggs' piece will bring in new visitors drawn because of the UConn basketball experience.

"Why wouldn't an artist want to use sports? It's become our pop culture," Rosenberg said. "When Andy Warhol painted soup cans he wasn't selling Campbell's soup, he was talking about popular culture and the public. I'm looking to change my demographics as much as I possibly can and if this can do it, Wow! I don't want to preach just to the same choir."

Valley acknowledges she's has a bit of an artistic streak in her. She enjoyed painting with both oils and water colors during her school days in Vermont.

"I used to be a big painter in high school. It gave me peace of mind," Valley said. "I painted just everything, especially a lot of abstract animals."

For Conlon, the experience was unique. Her education never included art classes but she's come away from Biggs' piece with a new appreciation. "When I think of art, I think of getting a box of crayons and piece of paper and drawing," Conlon said. "But you don't realize that every movement of life is art."