

LAS VEGAS SUN

The art in UFC's violence

Fighters, emotion, blood captured in book, exhibit

By *Kristen Peterson*

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Kevin Lynch

Photographer Kevin Lynch's four-year odyssey through the world of mixed martial arts culminated in "Octagon," a limited-edition book with 800 images, including action photos, portraits, and before and after shots.



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"Octagon," by photographer Kevin Lynch, includes essays by art critic Dave Hickey and playwright/director David Mamet..

If You Go

- **What:** “Octagon: The Exhibit”
- **Where:** SoHo Lofts, 900 Las Vegas Blvd. S.
- **When:** Noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday (and through June 21 by appointment)
- **Admission:** Free; 366-9339

The first thing you notice is the blood. The floor looks like a slaughterhouse’s.

The world’s best fighters deliver blows, jabs, kicks. Flesh on flesh. Muscle on muscle. Holding out, trying to win, determined to win.

When casino moguls Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta took over the Ultimate Fighting Championship in 2001, they set about changing the image of the combat sport that combines boxing, wrestling and the martial arts.

As part of that process, they hired Los Angeles photographer Kevin Lynch to take portraits of fighters for marketing purposes. He attended a fight, got hooked and began documenting the culture, having complete access to the fighters, the eight-sided ring and the locker rooms.

The four-year project culminated in “Octagon,” a handmade book with 800 images bound in a seemingly blood-stained cloth cover that merges combat sport with fine art. The book was initiated by the Fertittas, who are serious art collectors, and was inspired by Taschen’s “GOAT,” featuring fighter Muhammad Ali. The 20 1/2-by-26-inch, 400-page book, which is literally the size of a small coffee table, includes essays by art critic Dave Hickey and playwright/director David Mamet.

We see athletes just before they walk to the cage, where they fight in only small gloves and trunks for as long as 15 or 25 minutes with no escape. They emerge from the Octagon lacerated, spliced, bruised, swollen, devastated by their loss, elated by their win. Lynch takes another portrait. The before and after photos are as disturbing and engaging as a triptych of a bloody mat.

“Right before they go out and right when they come back — that’s the truest time to get them, to get the true emotion,” Lynch says. “Most people think the after pictures are so important, but the before pictures are the ones that I find more fascinating. Do they look confident? Are they overly confident? Are they insecure? Are they prepared or unprepared? All of that you can see in their eyes ... that adrenaline is just intense. They’re suppressing all their emotions right then and there because they don’t want to show that they might be scared, or they might show that they might be too overly zealous — then their opponent might take advantage of them. It’s seriously a chess match, more with yourself than the fight.”

If you haven’t seen the photos or can’t afford to pay \$2,500 for a limited-edition book, this weekend is your chance. Michele C. Quinn Fine Art Advisory, in conjunction with the Fertittas’ mixed martial arts company, Zuffa LLC, is hosting “Octagon: The Exhibition,” which features the book and large-scale images from the book. Some of the

work is at Quinn's private gallery space. The rest is on display in large-scale images in a penthouse at SoHo Lofts with a private opening Friday night.

This is only the third showing of the works. The book and photos premiered at Art Basel Miami in November and were exhibited at Hamiltons in London this year. But that's all.

Quinn says the exhibition program is critical to how the work is received. There are journalistic-style photos, beautiful portraits and gruesome battle scenes.

"Some people think the art world can take itself way too seriously," Quinn says. "This kind of shakes it up a little."

But Lorenzo Fertitta's vision was to look at it from a more cultural, artistic perspective, she says. "This is sort of the contemporary battleground."

Through Lynch's work, viewers are enmeshed in UFC culture. The scale and magnitude of the images put it in your face. The thoughtfulness of the portraits creates a connection between viewer and fighter and the fight. One wall installation includes 408 portraits of the fighters. If you didn't understand UFC before, you at least have the bridge via Lynch's works.

Lynch strove to focus on the passion, the devastation, the disappointment and the elation of the sport, as well as the athletic artistry of mixed martial arts.

"The whole idea is not to make the blood the element of focus," he says. "The blood represents a lot of things. It represents the heart, the will; it is also the end product of what they sacrifice themselves with. But you have an opportunity here to be able to take beauty and glorify it in an artistic form without glorifying the violent aspect of it. That's really what I was looking for."

Lynch is known for his conceptual portraiture, including photos of celebrities, fashion models and athletes.

"Octagon," he says, was inspired by his appreciation of Francis Bacon, one of Lynch's favorite painters.

Dana White, president of the UFC, says the fighters "seem pretty comfortable" with the photographs. He touts the universal appeal of Lynch's work: "If you're an art buff, UFC fan or you just like sports photography, this thing's for you."

He adds, "I know what I think of the UFC and what my vision is for it, but I always like to see it through other people's eyes."