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Shaun Leonardo

The Invisible Man

June 26 – August 7, 2026
Opening Reception: Friday, July 10, 6:00 to 8:00 pm

49 Walker Street
New York, NY 10013

Cristin Tierney Gallery is pleased to present ***The Invisible Man***, a survey exhibition of works by **Shaun Leonardo**. This marks the artist's first solo show with the gallery, and will be on view from Friday, June 26th, through Friday, August 7th. An opening reception will take place on Friday, July 10th, from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. The artist will be present.

Spanning drawing, painting, video, sculpture, and performance, *The Invisible Man* traces Leonardo's longstanding investigations of masculinity, race, memory, and what the body can endure under pressure. The exhibition's title draws on Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), referencing the

experience of being viewed through the lens of racial stereotypes and projection, and therefore being unseen. For Leonardo, this invisibility is both an internalized condition and a social position—one tied to the repeated failures produced by systems of oppression, constructs of masculinity, racial stereotypes, and of institutions that promise belonging while ultimately withholding it.

These subsumed failures surface early in Leonardo's self-imaging. Works such as *Self-Portrait Azua (The Fall 2)* (2010) re-imagines the artist as a defeated warrior, drawing on superhero imagery, religious iconography, and the Dominican landscape of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The figure appears powerful but fallen, monumental yet vulnerable, asking what remains of the hero when there is no one to save.

Leonardo's exploration of collective masculinity informs *The Messengers*, a body of work focused on hands. Earlier paintings from this series depict the hands of figures he identifies as spiritual teachers and sources of wisdom, including Tupac Shakur, Bruce Lee, Héctor Roca, and Brian Tripp. Rendered in sign enamel and pearlescent pigment, these hands suggest work, care, creation, communication, and transmission. Within the framework of *The Invisible Man*, the focus on hands also speaks to partial and selective perception—how Black and brown figures are often seen in fragments rather than as fully visible or accountable selves.

Leonardo extends this idea in his expansion of the series through pencil drawings of the hands of disgraced figures charged with sexual abuse, including Bill Cosby, P. Diddy, R. Kelly, Woody Allen, and Dominique Pelicot. Attentive to the forensic reading of gesture, these works examine how power, control, innocence, and self-justification are performed through the body. The series forms an important counterpoint to the earlier works, asking how influence can become corrupted, and how the public participates in sustaining or excusing it.

Leonardo continues to build on earlier works through his expansion of *We Went Undefeated* (2024), a video installation exploring masculinity, memory, and gendered responsibility. The piece reflects on his experience as captain of the Queens Falcons, a multiracial football team from Queens that won a 1995 championship during a period of heightened racial tension in the United States. In *We Went Undefeated 2* (2026), Leonardo shifts away from the themes of belonging and joy that defined that reigning season, turning instead toward memories of failure. Through slowed and incremental movement, four men—including Leonardo—reflect on their evolving understandings of defeat, from adolescence on the field to their current lives as fathers. Through an Ellisonian lens of invisibility, these identities—athlete, victor, and father—are never fully seen on their own terms, but filtered through limited public narratives of success and failure. In this way, football becomes both memory and metaphor, a site where manhood is learned, performed, and later re-examined.

The Return of El Conquistador (2026), a three-channel video and sound installation, revisits Leonardo's long-running lucha libre persona. First developed through performances in which El Conquistador battled El Hombre Invisible, the work frames invisibility as both a literal opponent and a psychic condition. Revisiting the alter ego more than two decades later, the artist reflects on what it means to inhabit the very figure he once critiqued. The performance confronts obscurity, transformation, and the fine line between role and self.

Failure does not sit at the margins of *The Invisible Man*; it is the core of the exhibition. The fallen hero, the athlete, the fighter, the mentor, and the disgraced icon each reveal a different fracture in the hypermasculine myths and socially imposed standards Leonardo has spent years examining. As identity is constructed through repeated acts of performance, it is also constructed through the moments when those performances falter. Leonardo proposes failure not as an endpoint but as a condition through which visibility, vulnerability, and self-knowledge become possible.

Shaun Leonardo (b. 1979, Queens, NY) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work negotiates societal expectations of manhood, namely definitions surrounding Black and brown masculinities, along with its notions of achievement, collective identity, and experience of failure. Leonardo received his MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and has received support from Creative Capital, Guggenheim Social Practice, Art for Justice, and A Blade of Grass. His work is currently included in the traveling group exhibition *Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, open now at the Perez Art Museum Miami.

Leonardo's work has also been featured at the Guggenheim Museum, the Norton Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the Queens Museum, the High Line, and the New Museum, and profiled in *The New York Times*, *Artnet News*, and *CNN*. His solo exhibition, *The Breath of Empty Space*, was presented at MICA, MASS MoCA, and The Bronx Museum, and his first major public art commission, *Between Four Freedoms*, premiered at Four Freedoms Park Conservancy in 2021. Numerous institutions hold Leonardo's work in their collections, including the Bowdoin Museum of Art, the JP Morgan Chase Corporate Art Collection, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, El Museo del Barrio, the Portland Museum of Art, the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Founded in 2010, Cristin Tierney Gallery is a contemporary art gallery with a deep commitment to the presentation, development, and support of a roster of both established and emerging artists. Our program emphasizes artists engaged with critical theory and art history, with an emphasis on conceptual, video, and performance art. Education and audience engagement are central to our mission. Cristin Tierney Gallery is a member of the ADAA (Art Dealers Association of America).

Image
Shaun Leonardo, *Self-Portrait Azua (The Fall 2)*, 2010. Sign enamel on MDF. 96 x 96 3/4 inches (243.8 x 245.7 cm).

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