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Controversy Boils Over Italian Soccer League's Anti-Racism Campaign Featuring Apes

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A campaign launched this week to fight racism against Black players in soccer stadiums in Italy royally backfired as it presented controversial images of primates to advance its message of tolerance.

On Monday, December 16, the elite soccer league Serie A launched an anti-racism campaign with three paintings of apes commissioned from the Italian artist Simone Fugazzotto. The paintings were installed at the entrance of the league's main hall in Milan.

"With this trio of paintings I would like to show that we are all the same race," Fugazzotto said at the campaign's launch event on Monday. The trio of paintings, he added, represents a blue-eyed "western monkey, an asian monkey and a black monkey."

"I use monkeys as a metaphor for human beings because the color of our skin is not important," the artist explained.

"Simone created these works some months ago," Serie A's CEO Luigi De Siervo, added. "We want to fight any form of prejudice and we know racism is an endemic and complex problem."

But the backlash was quick to follow.

"Once again Italian football leaves the world speechless," tweeted Fare, an organization that fights discrimination in Italian soccer. "In a country in which the authorities fail to deal with racism week after week Serie A have launched a campaign that looks like a sick joke."

"These creations are an outrage, they will be counter-productive and continue the dehumanization of people of African heritage," the group went on to say.

Kick It Out, another Italian anti-discrimination group, called the artwork "completely inappropriate" and said that it "undermines any positive intent and will be counter-productive."

Among the critics were also prominent soccer teams in the country. "We strongly disagree with the use of monkeys as images in the fight against racism and were surprised by the total lack of consultation," the AC Milan team tweeted.

The AS Roma team tweeted, "We understand that the league wants to tackle racism but we don't believe this is the right way to do it."

Racism against Black soccer players in Italy is not limited to racial slurs at stadiums. A leading TV pundit was fired in September for saying on the air that the only way to stop Romelu Lukaku, a Belgian forward who plays for the team Inter Milan, was to give him "10 bananas to eat."

The Italian newspaper Corriere dello Sport was widely criticized after printing the headline "Black Friday" with a cover photo of Lukaku and the English defender Chris Smalling, who plays for Roma. "You guys keep fuelling the negativity and the racism issue," Lukaku said in response to the headline.

In an email interview with Hyperallergic, Fugazzotto explained that primates have been his main subject matter since 2013.

"I'm surprised by the people's reaction to this campaign," he wrote. "The project was presented seven months ago during the Italian cup finals on TV and in leading sports outlets and nothing (literally nothing) happened."

"The message for me was clear: if we cannot stop stupid fans from screaming 'monkey' at black people, I will try to reverse the concept by saying that everyone is an ape," the artist explained.

Fugazzotto said that he has been facing an avalanche of personal attacks against him on social media and on his website, but that he has also received some messages of support.

"They say I'm racist, meh," he wrote. "I don't feel the project is insensitive. It's a new way of saying an old and important concept, that everyone is the same."

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