

The vast majority of professional athletes are artisans. They apply a set of acquired skills to a craft. Many are specialists, valued by their teams for one particular skill, like Daniel Gibson's shooting or Ben Wallace's interior defense. In this excellent piece from Erik Cassano, he says that LeBron is an artist. If that if you believe that art can exist anywhere, that it isn't limited by medium or venue or interpretation, you can see the validity in that statement.



Nearly 15 years ago, the poet Donald Hall contributed his recollections of the national pastime to Ken Burns' PBS series, &quot;Baseball.&quot;

He told Burns there is a moment in the game that he treasures -- the split second pause after the pitcher has rested into the set position, right before he explodes toward the plate. At that moment, everyone on the field freezes. The batter tightens his knuckles around the bat, the baserunners' leg muscles coil, readying him to pounce one way or the other, the crowd tenses in a single held breath.

At that moment, Hall said, anything can happen.

I have my own moment like that. It's on the basketball court, when LeBron James has the ball, crouched over, above the free throw line, eyeing the court from sideline to sideline.

At that moment, LeBron holds the world surrounding him in the palm of his hand.

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acquired skills to a craft. Many are specialists, valued by their teams for one particular skill, like Daniel Gibson's shooting or Ben Wallace's interior defense.

But LeBron, as we have seen over the past five years, has risen far beyond that definition of a professional athlete. He is one of the rarest of individuals in sports -- a man who can re-shape a game to his will. He doesn't fit within the game. He shapes it, defines it, gives it meaning.

LeBron is an artist. If you believe that art can exist anywhere, that it isn't limited by medium or venue or interpretation, you can see the validity in that statement.

An artist is, in essence, a creator. Someone who has a vision, and then turns that vision into something tangible. Of course, LeBron doesn't work with a blank canvas, block of marble or brick of freshly-cut clay. He works within the 94 feet of a basketball court. Which perhaps makes his work all the more impressive.

LeBron doesn't just manipulate paintbrush and oil, or hammer and chisel. He manipulates the living, breathing, three-dimensional space of a basketball game. He manipulates space that includes nine other players -- five of which are trying to stop him -- three referees and up to 20,000 screaming fans.

And yet, through all that, through the double teams and cheap shots, non-calls and heckling fans, he can make his vision a reality.

And that, I'm convinced, is what LeBron sees when he is clutching the ball between the circles with the shot clock ticking away. He doesn't just see the man guarding him, the forward rushing over to double team or the teammate cutting to the basket. He isn't even focused solely on the basket, as his idol Michael Jordan so often was.

LeBron sees his vision of what the play, and the game, should be. An entire vision that encompasses everything around him, from the onrushing defender to Wally Szczerbiak

camped out in the corner 40 feet away. What the defense gives him, what his teammates show him, these are the tools he will use to create.

And when he does create, it will be in the span of seconds, with brushstrokes that are startling in their raw power.

It's altogether appropriate that LeBron creates his art in Cleveland, a city with a gruff, blue-collar exterior but a largely-unnoticed appreciation for the fine arts that is long-standing and deeply-rooted.

We don't have a basketball reference point for a player the caliber of LeBron in Cleveland. We never had a Jordan or Magic or Doctor J in eras previous to show us the true meaning of greatness on the hardwood. But we're far from confounded when it comes to appreciating the greatness of a master at work.

Whether you are a regular visitor to the Cleveland Museum of Art, or scratch your head every time you walk past Claes Oldenburg's Free Stamp downtown, if you tense in anticipation every time LeBron holds the basketball, feeling a sense of the very real possibility that something is about to happen that you have never seen before, you get art. You understand, at least on some level, that LeBron's talent and mastery go deeper than clutch shooting and windmill dunks.

LeBron is more than a great basketball player or a meal ticket to a championship. To define him as simply that is to sell yourself short and insult his talent. Even calling him a business mogul or global icon isn't going far enough.

If LeBron's true greatness can ever be accurately defined, you won't find it on a 20-story billboard in Times Square, as he's hanging out with Jay-Z or even when he's hoisting a trophy. It will most likely be in that moment of pure anticipation of his next creation, when Wise                      LeBron, Kid LeBron, Business LeBron and Athlete  
LeBron  
give way to Artist  
LeBron  
, the man who knows no boundaries.