

Ben Stone

SPORTS!

September 23 to December 17, 2023

(northern)
WESTERN EXHIBITIONS

Sports!

By Abraham Ritchie

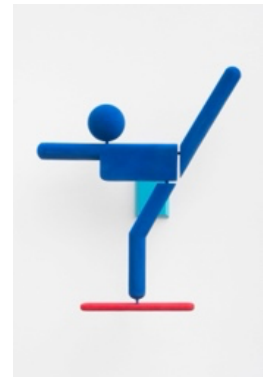


The reviews are nice, muses Ben Stone, but being proclaimed the official sculptor of 670 The Score, a Chicago sports radio station, "feels so much more on target for what my interests are." That theme comes up repeatedly in our conversation, the desire to make art that would resonate with the everyday experience of people who live their lives going to baseball games or watching the weather forecast. Stone explains, "there's some kind of connection to a general, less arty way of thinking maybe that sometimes intrigues me with those specific [artistic] choices." Stone describes this as making artworks that communicate immediately, but also have a "built in failure [within] the objects." A connection in Stone's art to more popularly shared, recognized, and reproduced forms—particularly sports photography and souvenirs—is obviously there. But through the artwork that Stone makes these common touch points amplify, distort, bend and break, becoming simultaneously familiar and uncanny. Stone is one of the few artists who continually take sports as subject matter, exposing and exploring a shared language that is widely spoken and understood, but largely ignored in the rarified art world.



Taking these common shared images seriously reveals our own presumptions and our assigned values. In *Mary Lou*, (1999) the figure of Mary Lou Retton is decontextualized from its source on the Wheaties box (notably the first feature of a female athlete on the front of the box) the image and pose become strange and take on new readings. Arms raised in victory, Retton ironically sinks into the floor above her waist, immobilized forever after a winning gymnastics routine. Extrapolated from the other associations of the original source on the “Breakfast of Champions” box, Retton is reduced to simply a concept: winning.

Based on large-scale banners meant to be seen from a distance, Stone’s *Danny Volleyball* (2016) similarly reads as “volleyball” from a distance too. But on approaching and looking more closely, one cannot help but notice the anatomical incongruity of the figure that may have been missed when further away: the figure’s head has somehow completely detached from the body and is now impossibly on the other side of the left arm reaching up for the volleyball. On the other hand, *Danny Karate* (2016) is only legible through its title for which specific sport it is supposed to be representing. The figure has a leg kicked high over head and could easily be called *Danny Gymnastics* or *Danny Ballet*. At what point and why do we assume we actually know what these figures represent?



The ongoing frequency with which Stone uses sport as subject matter points to the tacitly accepted truth that sports operate as a kind of lingua franca for nearly everyone in the world—the universal knowledge of who Michael Jordan is, or perhaps more currently, Lionel Messi. Intertwining with our own personal lives over the years, sports becomes not only a way of communicating but also remembering. As Stone says “the majesty of baseball is rooted in some kind of sentimentality.” Likewise, Stone’s artwork has personal memories embedded in them as well and the pieces often act as self-portraits, if not immediately overt ones. *Blue Meanies* (2010), while depicting an infamous 2002 incident when a father and son duo jumped a short fence at then-Comiskey Park during a White Sox-Royals game and assaulted the Kansas City first base coach, also references Stone’s own dynamic with his father. While using some “pretty poor photos” as the source images for the sculpture, Stone inadvertently ended up carving the first base coach as looking like his own father as a kind of artistic Freudian slip. *The Ghost of Harry Caray* (1998) records an event the artist created to memorialize the then-recently passed Cubs announcer, but also relates to Stone’s desire to believe that the spirit of his deceased mother is watching over him. Sports become at once both universal and intensely personal.

From the bleachers to the box seats; the fans, to players, to coaches; from friendly rivalries to open assaults; sports encapsulate the wealth, power, and emotions that run through society. New stadiums are built, often with taxpayer help, while homelessness remains a major problem. Owners of teams build unbelievable wealth while income for the majority of the fans has remained largely stagnant over the years. Sports can pull us apart and bring us back together again. It can be a prism to view society, which Stone understands and pitches back to us.

Images, all Ben Stone:

Official Sculptor of the Score

2016

engraved plate, snapshots on plaque

9h x 12w in

BS2016_003

Mary Lou

1999

Painted cast fiberglass

28h x 30w x 9d in

71.12h x 76.20w x 22.86d cm

BS1999_001

Collection of Ryan Kortman

Danny Karate

2016

Rayon fiber and enamel paint on wood, steel, hardware

25 ½h x 21w x 8d in

BS2016_006

Blue Meanies (detail)

2010

ballpoint pen on resin-coated enamel-painted polystyrene and wood

Two parts

large base: 58 tall x 87 long x 45 inches wide

small base: 40 tall x 60 long x 39 inches wide

BS2010_004

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