

# TITLE MAGAZINE

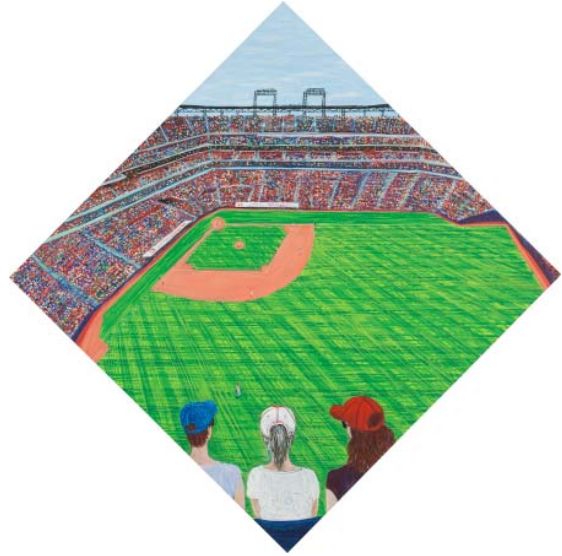
April 5th, 2013

ESSAYS

## Sarah McEneaney at the Ballgame

By JEFFREY BUSSMANN

To call Sarah McEneaney a Philadelphia artist is only half-true. The city and, more specifically, the neighborhood she has called her own for forty years is frequently front and center in her painting. But McEneaney embodies worldliness by equal measure, in practice and subject matter. She bears the standard for Philadelphia when visiting far off places, often literally. In a medium that cannot communicate subtle behavioral traits that may indicate local origin, a visual aid is necessary. For McEneaney, a Phillies cap does the trick. Beyond a literal depiction of fandom and hometown pride, it communicates a lifetime of personal history.



Baseball, 2010, egg tempera on wood, 33 1/2 x 33 1/2 in.

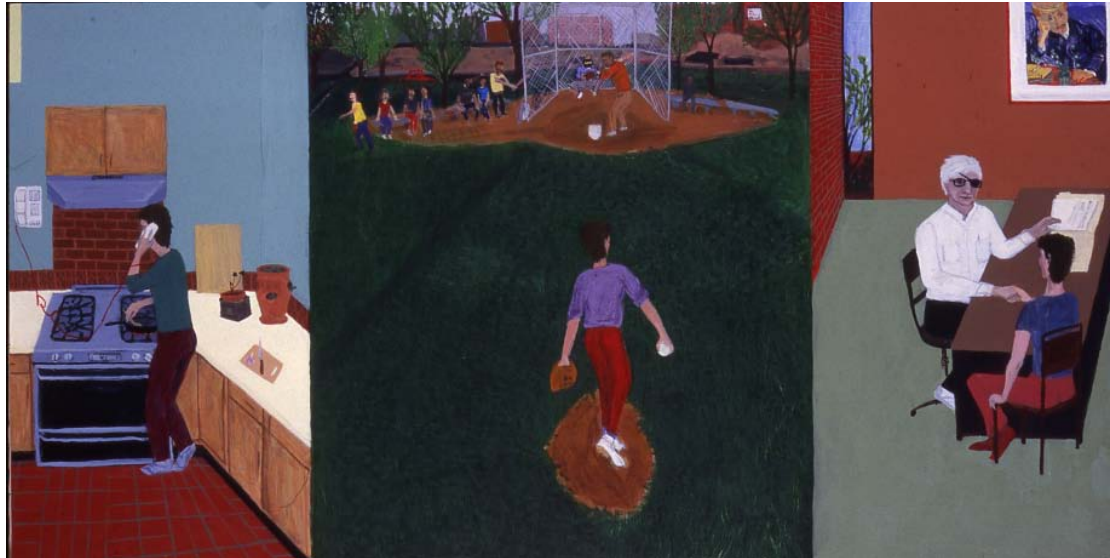
In her essay for ICA's 2004 McEneaney exhibition, curator Ingrid Schaffner wrote: "To say that Sarah McEneaney is a narrative painter immediately begs the question: What story does her work tell? That she paints in a miniaturist style, further demands: And what are the details?" [1] The Phillies cap, one such detail, is an accessory that has appeared in McEneaney's recent work with some regularity. She appreciates baseball caps for their utilitarian purpose, shielding one's face from the sun, as well as what she calls a "quintessential Americanness." They also function as a connector to Philadelphia, whether traveling around the world, as in *Brittany, France* (2011) or sitting in the ballpark and rooting for the home team, as in *Baseball* (2010). In both cases we view her from the back, making the "P" insignia invisible. Knowing that the cap represents the Phillies is a coded detail that adds to the richness of her painted world.

The start of McEneaney's relationship with the Phillies coincided with their historic hot streak in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though not a native of the area, she decided to settle in Philadelphia after finishing at PAFA in 1979 and bought the Callowhill property where she still lives today. She never played a team sport growing up, but it did not stop her from being recruited to a softball team of artists. Her responsibility was twofold: pitcher and equipment manager. Being personally involved with an amateur team reinforced her burgeoning interest in the city's professional club. The Phillies, who had strung together consecutive regular season successes (1st in the National League East from 1976-78)

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Mondays, 1987, acrylic on wood, 13 x 26 inches

followed by postseason failures, were on the cusp of making good on their promise for a run at the championship.

McEneaney's team played in Franklin Square and made nearby Paddy's Pub their post-game watering hole. At that time the regular Paddy's crowd was a steady mix of young artists (the Painted Bride Art Center being just around the corner) and older blue-collar drinkers. It was here in 1980 that she watched the Phillies clinch the NL pennant and triumph in the World Series. She recalls hopping in a car with friends, horn blaring, to circle City Hall after the decisive game six win, as well as turning out for the victory parade. The Phillies charged onward into the 80s with diminishing returns, aside from an unsuccessful return trip to the World Series in 1983. McEneaney remained involved with her softball team for many years until the group eventually dispersed. Like all of her personal activities, softball found its way into her art. In her 1987 triptych *Mondays*, the day the team practiced, McEneaney stands at the mound, arm cocked to deliver a pitch. In the contemporaneous *After Softball*, we see her having just arrived back home, glove still on.



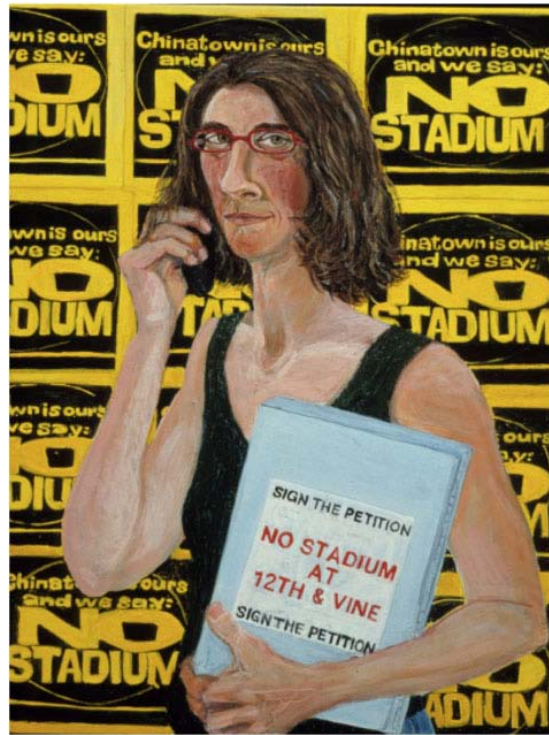
After Softball, 1987, acrylic on wood

Separated by more than two decades, there is a steady through line that links *Mondays* and the later painting *Baseball* (2010). The two scenes convey the same love of being outdoors as do McEneaney's



plenteous scenes of hiking, skiing, or swimming. It may seem that she and her friends are simply spectators watching the game from the right field upper deck. But she has distorted the dimensions of the field, making it appear to be much wider than it actually is. The players are barely-identifiable specks down far below (more on this later). The grandstand looms in the distance like a mountain ridge. Only a slice of the sky peeks through at the top of the diamond-shaped canvas. Citizens Bank Park remains recognizable as a manmade structure, but McEneaney treats it much like the rugged landscapes that she often shows herself traversing. Immersed in a stadium that can seat upwards of 40,000, or at least in her vision of it, she is able to feel as solitary as she is in nature.

Lest anyone think that McEneaney's perception of the Phillies is entirely rosy, she is quick to point out her uneasiness over the tension in major league baseball between athletes who are in it for the love of the game and more avaricious types who gravitate towards its big business potential. The club and Mayor John Street ran afoul of McEneaney in 2000 when a new stadium development plan was announced to replace The Vet. The proposal called for much of Chinatown to be taken over by eminent domain and leveled; her Callowhill neighborhood was to be severely affected too. At the time nobody was organized to fight back, so McEneaney sprung into action mobilizing fellow residents. Together they were ultimately successful in forcing an about face on the plan, driving attention back to South Philadelphia for a new site. Campaigning against the stadium became a regular part of McEneaney's life for a short while, which she portrayed in the painting *No Stadium* (2000).



No Stadium, 2000

But for the potentially negative outcome, the stadium scare was a good learning experience in the art of community organizing and petitioning City Hall. McEneaney subsequently cofounded the Callowhill Neighborhood Association and now serves as its Board President. She has said, "My studio process is a very solitary one, but I think that one of the reasons I have gotten so involved in neighborhood activism is because I want to be connected to the world I live in." [2] McEneaney remains upbeat about an individual ballplayer's capacity to do good deeds for the city. Chase Utley is a current favorite of hers because of his charitable efforts for the SPCA. Paradoxically, she finds it difficult to become too attached to any player because of the ever-present specter of what she calls an "inevitable fall from grace." Case in point: she held Carlos "Chooch" Ruiz in high esteem until the end of last season when he tested positive for PEDs. If anyone, the Phanatic is her evergreen preferred team personality.

Turning back to the depiction of players on the field in Baseball, their anonymity is emblematic of McEneaney's tempered attitude towards the modern game. It could be said that much of the visual art made about sport—from the Classical age through present day—puts hero-worship front and center.





Twilight, 2012, egg tempera on gessoed panel, 20 1/2 x 36 inches (diptych)

Surprisingly, for its status as America's pastime, few examples of art about baseball spring to front of mind. Those that do (cf. Thomas Eakins or Norman Rockwell) are more about the players. In contrast McEneaney shows the spectator experience, as well as the varied personal rituals of a fan, casual as her support might be. She stands miles apart from whatever the outside world's vision of an archetypal "Philadelphia Fan" is but still shares in those daily decisions guided by impulse, like whether to pull on a Phillies hat or a shirt, as she does in *Twilight* (2012).

At the opening of the 2013 Major League Baseball season, general consensus trends towards the Phillies' recent slide being terminal. The dizzying heights of the Charlie Manuel era, which for many rekindled an interest in the team and rallied local morale for a time, are unlikely to return soon. A fallow period of rebuilding is imminent, but the cyclical nature of team performances over time suggests that success will return. Does it mean that we will see fewer Phillies hats, jerseys, and jackets being worn around the city? Perhaps the way to address the question is to consider the comprehensive experience of following a local team. Being a fan stipulates devotion in thick and thin; the victories are sweeter and they ameliorate leaner years. There is also an intrinsic give and take, because where would a professional team be without its fans?

Likewise, Sarah McEneaney is simultaneously a fan and a player in a real life game operating on levels micro to macro. The personal mission of championing Philadelphia will continue to provide autobiographical narrative for her art and be mirrored in her support of the Phillies.

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[1] Ingrid Schaffner, "In The Details," *Sarah McEneaney*, Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, 2004, p. 8.

[2] Interview by Therese Madden, "Sarah McEneaney: Artist & Community Activist," <http://www.whyy.org/widerhorizons/sarahmceaney/index.html>.