

## Art | Basel



# Let's get physical! How contemporary artists have embraced athleticism

The upcoming Paris Olympic Games have triggered a renewed interest in practices that explore the highs and lows of sports

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From sculptures of swollen biceps to paintings of twirling gymnasts, depicting the body's physicality has seduced artists for the longest of times. Take *Discobolus*, the grand statue of a disc-thrower by the Greek sculptor Myron, made in the fifth century BC. Each element – from the figure's raised back arm to his twisted torso – is an expression of pure athleticism. Art like this, of the so-called ideal physical form, rippled through the classical period and has influenced art made in the two millennia since.

Thankfully, our definitions of an athletic body have expanded, and so too have our critical responses to art depicting them. Across mediums and continents, contemporary artists continue to find new ways of expressing movement and sport, which, with the 2024 Paris Olympics around the corner, feel all the more resonant today.

Of course, there is a dark side to athletics, and there is perhaps no contemporary artist critiquing professional sports as Matthew Barney has. In much of Barney's performance and installation work, physical effort is front and center, often deployed as commentary on machismo culture. His early 'Drawing Restraint' series, which he began in 1987 while an art student at Yale, were inspired by resistance training. But his most iconic contribution to art about sports is *Secondary* (2023), a five-channel video installation made in response to the 1978 football game that left Darryl Stingley, a wide receiver for the New England Patriots, paralyzed after a hit from Jack Tatum, a defensive back for the Oakland Raiders. (*Secondary* is on view this summer at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris, through September 8.) When the incident happened, Barney himself was a high school football player. The violence, risk, and life-changing consequences of that one game – and its infinite replays on television – left a lasting mark on the American artist.



Matthew Barney, *Secondary*, 2023. Five-channel video installation with sound, [production still]. Running time: 1:00:00 hour. © Matthew Barney.