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Muse to Muse: 10 Superstar Athletes and Creative Visionaries Tell VF About Their Mutual Admiration

Whether in the arena or at the studio, these duos share a reverence for discipline and physicality. Nate Freeman explores the symbiotic and sometimes creative relationships between these masters of craft.

By Nate Freeman
Photographer Joshua Woods
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CARMELO ANTHONY AND RASHID JOHNSON No artist alive is more embedded in the NBA than Rashid Johnson. In December the Guggenheim honored Johnson at its annual gala—but also honored the league's commissioner, Adam

Silver, with several star players in attendance. Carmelo Anthony, a hero to Knicks fans during his years playing at the Garden, also became a major New York collector. Years after connecting with Johnson early in his art-buying journey, Anthony stopped by Johnson's Bushwick studio to check out some new work and shoot hoops.

The interplay of art and sport has been around since, well, the advent of art, and sport. Cylinder seals from the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia, circa 2200 BC, depict, over and over again, men wrestling. Thousands of years later, the sculptures and marble reliefs in ancient Greece and Rome showed the demigods of the discus. Bruegel finished the magisterial *Children's Games* in 1560, and by the 1700s, George Stubbs was painting racehorses at Newmarket.

And yet when a young Matthew Barney opened his first solo show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in SoHo in 1991, the concept felt new again. Barney, a former high school football star who continued to play at Yale, muscled his way up and down the white cube, filming his body as he contorted himself; he bolted meat-claw hooks into the walls while strapped naked into an excruciating harness. It was art as sport, pure athletic display, and Barney was open about the fact that his primary inspiration came not from the conceptualists but from Jim Otto, the Hall of Fame center for the Oakland Raiders.



BILL BRADLEY AND ALEX KATZ In 1964, Alex Katz was a 37-year-old painter hitting his stride, with new work included in an epochal group show at the Museum of Modern Art. That same year, across the Hudson, Bill Bradley was reigning as the most famous young

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athlete in America, breaking records on the basketball team at Princeton. Through the decades, with Bradley serving as a US senator from New Jersey and Katz defining a new aesthetic of portraiture, they became friends, and are pictured here at Katz's SoHo studio.

Fast-forward to two years ago, when Barney released *Drawing Restraint 28*, a film of artist Alex Katz not just as a painter but as an athlete. In the three-channel video, Katz, 98, uses his physical body in a concrete space, his outstretched, powerful arms punching up to certain parts of the canvas, his brush-stuck fingers making a detailed hot orange depiction of a road near his house in Maine. The nonagenarian in a studio gridiron is fighting a physical battle. Painting is a sport to be won.

Katz, a lifelong NBA fan, joins Bill Bradley, the former star of the Princeton basketball team and a two-time NBA champion with the New York Knicks, in a portrait by Joshua Woods. Bradley was performing miracles on the court in central Jersey back in the 1960s, right around when Katz was first making a name for himself in Greenwich Village. They both went on to illustrious career heights afterward: the Senate for Bradley, the Guggenheim for Katz.



NATHANIEL MARY QUINN AND MISTY COPELAND There's perhaps no better painter of the body in motion right now than Nathaniel Mary Quinn. So it's natural that the nation's foremost ballet artist, Misty Copeland, is drawn to his works and installed one work on paper in her Upper West Side apartment. Quinn is a fan of Copeland as well, and on a recent visit to his Bedford-Stuyvesant studio, he picked up some brushes as she began a spontaneous dance.

Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier spent time with the New York Liberty as part of her commission for the WNBA team's home at Barclays Center, getting to know players and their friends and family, photographing all of them for the project. Frazier worked especially closely with Betnijah Laney-Hamilton, creating a photo-based artwork that features Laney-Hamilton's mother, exploring the origin of her portmanteau first name.



AMAR'E STOUDEMIRE AND ROB PRUITT When Amar'e Stoudemire first started collecting art, he was drawn to painter Rob Pruitt's unapologetically glittery visions. So Stoudemire did what he would do for anyone he admired: He invited Pruitt to watch him at work, courtside at a Knicks game. "After the game we became friends. He invited my family over to the studio. We painted, we talked, we had coffee," the athlete said in 2016. Since that first visit to the studio, Stoudemire has acquired several of Pruitt's paintings of pandas, some of which were gifts from the artist, and returned for a friendly game of chess.

Amar'e Stoudemire's sense of style both on and off the court made him a natural fit to explore the contemporary-art world while playing for the Knicks. One of the first studios he visited was that of Rob Pruitt, known for his Day-Glo depictions of panda bears and glitter-tinged paintings of polar bears, as well as his yearslong mission to paint a portrait of President Barack Obama every day during his two terms.

Rashid Johnson is also a sports mega-fan, still loyal to his hometown teams in Chicago, but he's found some new love for the New York Mets through his collaborative projects with the team owner, mega-collector Steve Cohen. Early in his

career, Johnson struck up a friendship with Carmelo Anthony, around the time that Melo started visiting galleries on his days off from playing. The former Knick now occupies a home chock-full of masterworks.



BETNIJAH LANEY-HAMILTON AND LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER When the conceptual photo-based artist met the starting forward for the New York Liberty, they clicked immediately, and LaToya Ruby Frazier soon was interviewing Betnijah Laney-Hamilton's family for a series of works. According to the hoopster, there's plenty of overlap between their respective skill sets. "She's someone who's very passionate about their craft, which is in line with who we are as professional athletes," Laney-Hamilton said. "We're not artists per se, but we exhibit a lot of qualities that people can draw inspiration from." They posed together at Gladstone Gallery in New York's Chelsea.

Misty Copeland's been spending a lot of time at The Met, where she served on the host committee of this year's Met Gala—but she's also been spending a lot of time in artist studios and keeps certain friends installed in pride of place in her Upper West Side home. She's especially fond of Nathaniel Mary Quinn, whose work mirrors the physical poetry she perfected at the American Ballet Theatre, an attentiveness to the human body in all its forms and permutations.

And speaking of The Met, walk into the Roman sculpture wing and you'll see the marble statue of the Stephanos Athlete, one of the most famous depictions of a person of sports, featured prominently in America's art museum for more than 60 years, a sculpture that was the height of art-collecting chic among the Roman upper classes. It still holds an immense power, the artwork. When artists choose to depict the world of sports, it's for one reason: Game recognizes game.

Fashion editors, Khalilah Beavers (Anthony), Karla Welch (Copeland); hair products by Oribe (Anthony, Johnson), Curl Queen (Copeland); grooming products by Orveda (Anthony, Johnson); hair, Jenny Sauce (Anthony, Johnson), Nai'vasha (Copeland); makeup, Victor Heno (Copeland); grooming, Jenny Sauce (Anthony, Johnson). Produced on location by Halle Chapman-Taylor. Artworks: *Seascape Snafu: 2026* © Rashid Johnson; courtesy of the artist. *Lillies*: © Alex Katz/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy of the artist. *White Spectral Portal & Black Spectral Portal* and *Chess Set for Eve Babitz and Marcel Duchamp*: courtesy of Rob Pruitt and 303 Gallery. *Yolanda Laney, Karis Melo Laney, Betnijah Laney-Hamilton, and Jessie Joy Laney, Brooklyn, New York*, from the series *The Liberty Portraits: A Monument to the 2024 Champions (2024–2025)*: © LaToya Ruby Frazier; courtesy of the artist. For details, go to [VF.com/credits](https://www.vanityfair.com/credits).