

NFL Biennial 2016: Matching teams up with modern artists

Robin Dluze and B. David Zarley break down the upcoming NFL season by pairing each team with a contemporary artist.

ROBIN DLUZEN AND B. DAVID ZARLEY · AUG 30, 2016

As both art critics and sports fans, we are a couple of black sheep, a status we confirm by streaming football games on our phones at art fairs, skipping Sunday gallery soirees in lieu of six-hour stints in front of the TVs at B-Dubs, and zoning out at museum previews as we assess the waiver wires on our fantasy apps. In what has now become a biannual event, B. David Zarley and I take advantage of the rare opportunity to combine our professional lives with our shared hobby in The NFL Biennial. Robin Dluzen will handle the AFC, Zarley the NFC.

NFC East

Philadelphia Eagles + [Damien Hirst](#)

Brash, outspoken, and with perhaps their sharpest edges behind them: this describes both the Eagles and Damien Hirst. Bombastic to near (and sometimes just plain) vulgarity, despised by many and really f----- loved by a few—and more popular for that polarization!—these *enfants terribles* were made for each other.

New York Giants + [Jeanette Hayes](#)

Washington + [Kathryn Andrews](#)

Although she is based in L.A., Kathryn Andrews' work in *Run For President* examined all the trappings of the District: Violence, optics, power and clowns.

Dallas Cowboys + [Jeff Koons](#)

Here's the thing: the Cowboys look at their Jovian, Alpha-plus, hole-in-the-roof-so-God-can-watch-His-team franchise and sincerely see *America's Team*. Koons is so sincere in *his* embrace of the luridly base that he will gladly bankrupt and destroy himself for you. The difference is, Koons is brilliant in his brute earnestness; the Cowboys are just heat, flash and noise.

AFC East

Buffalo Bills + [Alice Neel](#)

Without a winning season since 2004 or a playoff appearance in 16 years, the Bills are the league's underdogs. In the 1940s and '50s, Alice Neel was an underdog, painting intimate portraits during a time when male Abstract Expressionists (think Pollock and de Kooning) were hot stuff. Neel got her recognition late, with a Whitney Museum retrospective at age 74. The Bills' time will come, too.

Miami Dolphins + [Robert Irwin](#)

Around the same time that the 1972 Dolphins were 17–0 in the NFL's only complete perfect season, west coast artist Robert Irwin had mastered the “finish fetish” aesthetic with his light sculptures and installations. Irwin's works are without any trace of the human hand: utter perfection.

New England Patriots + [James Franco](#)

In honor of Brady's suspension, I'm pairing the Pats with another pretty white guy who thinks he can get away with anything: actor-turned-artist James Franco. Recently, Franco copied a seminal body of work by acclaimed conceptual photographer Cindy Sherman, and was widely panned for what many consider to be a sexist ransacking of an important piece of feminist art history.

New York Jets + [Marina Abramović & Ulay](#)

The Jets share MetLife stadium with the New York Giants in a rather harmonious partnership, though an intense rivalry arises when the Jets occasionally face their NFC counterparts. Performance art duo Marina Abramović and Ulay have had a similarly dualistic relationship. In their early days, the two collaborated on groundbreaking works, though Abramović's recent acclaim and fame has Ulay suing her for erasing his authorship of their pieces. It's a tough game.

NFC South

Carolina Panthers + [Carlos Rolón](#)

Brilliant and edgy, entertaining yet political, both Carolina and Carlos Rolon incorporate a sense of stylish flair in their respective works. Sauntering chanticleers, Rolon's melted mirrors and hanging boxing gloves finds a corporeal manifestation in Cam Newton's rakish play.

New Orleans Saints + [Kendell Carter](#)

The Saints, despite the bounty thing, always seem a team of hope; they rose from the cellar and the flood waters, won a Super Bowl, and were pretty cool in doing it. New Orleans-born Kendell Carter also creates work of aspirational beauty, availing himself of street fashion items and nods to hip-hop culture while also striving to be about more than identity or identity politics.

Atlanta Falcons + [AniaJaworska](#)

The Falcons are a frustration, a tease, a team that perpetually looks to be building towards something on paper, but which never manifests on the field. Architect and artist Ania Jaworska too builds beautiful constructs that will never be fully realized; the difference, of course, is Jaworska is exploring our relationship with architecture, while the Falcons are Catherine wheels of 8-8 impotence.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers + [ReneeMcGinnis](#)

Renee McGinnis's post-mortem portraits of sunken ships are loving memorials to the folly of ambition; so, too, does the NFL's March to Dominance resemble, more and more, a funeral motorcade. Plus, like ships, pirates, Florida, depths of the ocean/standings, you get it.

AFC South

Houston Texans + [TonyLewis](#)

The Houston Texans may be the youngest franchise in the league, but their short history already has some pretty great seasons on the books, including a retrospectively inexplicable division championship in 2015. Likewise, Chicagoan Tony Lewis has punctuated his emerging career with exceptional highs, including his selection for the 2014 Whitney Biennial at 28, and his works hammering at auction for \$90K a piece.

Indianapolis Colts + [DamienHirst](#)

Yes more than one team can be Damien Hirst. It's been four years since Peyton Manning was released from the Colts after 13 seasons, but that famous parting of ways is still fresh in our minds amidst all the attention around Manning's final, Super Bowl-winning season. During the same year, Damien Hirst, one of the wealthiest living artists, left powerhouse dealer Larry Gagosian after 17 years. In both cases, the splits signaled a sea change, though, as time has shown, all parties are just fine without each other.

Jacksonville Jaguars + [R. Crumb](#)

The Jaguars have signed on to play a home game every season in London through 2020. Another American export becoming a big deal across the pond is R. Crumb, one of our country's greatest living cartoonists. Crumb's current exhibition at British mega-gallery David Zwirner comes from a book of ink drawings of women, including several images of sports stars, like Serena Williams.

Tennessee Titans + [LucienSmith](#)

The Titans finished the last season at the bottom of the barrel. Who else lost big time in 2015? Art market darling Lucien Smith threw a party for celebrities and real estate moguls to introduce the South Bronx to fancy Manhattanites. Filled with the artist's bullet-riddled, burned-out cars as decor, the event was [reviled throughout the art world as a blatant display of ignorance and poor taste](#). I imagine the Titans will have an easier time living down their losing season than Smith will.

NFC North

Green Bay Packers + [AnnieLeibovitz](#)

At the forefront of their respective fields for seemingly forever, both the Packers and famed portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz are franchises in the best way: consistently good, regularly better than that, and always straightforward.

Chicago Bears + [ErinWashington](#)

The simple uniforms remain, but the Bears seem determined to lean in a more nuanced direction than “linebackers smash!” Chicago-based Erin Washington's most recent work, the chalk paintings of *Useful Knowledge*, similarly contain multitudes in their seemingly simple depictions. And with the Bears losing and Washington's work purposefully unsealed, they are also both bitterly, romantically doomed.

Detroit Lions + [SterlingRuby](#)

Dirty and damn beautiful for it, both Detroit and Sterling Ruby seem to have an affinity for taking the roughest edges of life and mediums and using them to exfoliate society. Ruby's works, in a variety of media, often seem dirty, tattered and torn, but also proud and powerful. It's an image Detroit shares as well.

Minnesota Vikings + [PatrickNagel](#)

Jan. 10, 2016: Noses already turned to roses due to the subzero temperatures, the visages of thousands of Vikings fans turn deathly pale as Blair Walsh misses a chip shot. A purple lipstick wearing fan in the crowd instantly becomes a living Patrick Nagel painting. The look of death lasts long after the winter.

AFC North

Baltimore Ravens + [KikiSmith](#)

With their goth uniforms and the symbolic darkness that comes along with being named after an Edgar Allen Poe poem, the Baltimore Ravens have a kinship with artist Kiki Smith. Death, suffering and mythology all play large roles in Smith's visually intense multimedia practice, with birds figuring prominently—including the raven and its various ominous associations.

Cincinnati Bengals+[JohnBaldessari](#)

The Bengals of the 1980s popularized the no-huddle offense as a strategy throughout the game, and are responsible for the disorienting zone blitz. Conceptual artist John Baldessari likewise has mastered the elements of surprise and confusion. From making intentionally bad photographs to cremating all the paintings he made between 1953 and 1966, Baldessari's challenging of norms set the stage for artists to come, just as the Bengals' contributions still reverberate.

Cleveland Browns +[EllsworthKelly](#)

The Browns's official logo is an orange helmet. One could say it's boring. Or, one could describe it as exquisite in its simplicity, like the work of renowned minimalist Ellsworth Kelly, who died late last year. Hard-edged abstraction and flat, bold colors characterized his oeuvre—and there was plenty of orange in there, too.

Pittsburgh Steelers + [Richard Serra](#)

Ben Roethlisberger is a *beast*, in all the good and bad ways that can be read. If Big Ben were an artwork, he'd be a sculpture by Richard Serra. The American minimalist is responsible for some of the most enormous and macho site-specific steel works in Western art history.

NFC West

Los Angeles Rams + [Amy Adler](#)

From one state to another and back again: the unique photographic process of Amy Adler—starting from a photo, drawing it, then photographing the drawing—mimics the odyssey of the newly returned Rams. In an extra-delicious analogue, her drawings were often destroyed, as were the Rams' bridges back in Missouri when they bailed for the coast.

San Francisco 49ers + [Frida Kahlo](#)

The 49ers and Frida Kahlo: illustrious names in their respective fields, and both defanged, those names are more powerful in the public consciousness than their works. For Kahlo, that's due to the dilution that always comes when an artist becomes a too-simple icon, and most definitely not the fault of her or her art, which will remain incredible forever. For the Niners, it's the result of their recent auguring into the West's basement.

Seattle Seahawks + [Aowen Jin](#)

A large part of the Seattle mythos is how a fan base can bolster a talented defense. British Chinese artist Aowen Jin pulled a similar feat in 2015 with her installation *i18n*, a world of Chinese legend only visible when viewers worked together and used their UV torches to see everything, making the audience, which is so often passive in art, an integral part of the experience.

Arizona Cardinals + [Georgia O'Keeffe](#)

Both this current iteration of the Cards and O'Keeffe have a knack for creating beauty from brutality. O'Keeffe famously turned the savage landscapes of New Mexico into harrowing and dazzling fever dreams, while the Cards have emerged from a miasmic history of failure to become feared contenders.

AFC West

Denver Broncos + [Mark Bradford](#)

What's the art world equivalent of winning the Super Bowl? Getting chosen to represent the United States in the Venice Biennale, one of the largest and most prestigious international art exhibitions. The LA-based multimedia abstractionist Mark Bradford has just been announced as the 2017 representative to the Biennale and, like the Broncos' win, it's been a long time coming, and well-deserved.

Kansas City Chiefs + [Chris Burden](#)

Thanks to a loud and loyal fan base, Arrowhead Stadium is one of the NFL's most difficult places for other teams to play. In honor of the fortitude opposing teams have to muster, the Chiefs are paired with Chris Burden, whose famous performance art works have included such extreme circumstances as being shot in the arm, and crucifying himself on the hood of a Volkswagen.

Oakland Raiders + [Jonathan Meese](#)

This one is for Raider Nation, the most aesthetically frightening fan base in the league. Their over-the-top outlaw culture recalls the work of German artist Jonathan Meese, who's known for outrageous paintings and performances that mingle the political and the mythical, the dark and the absurd.

San Diego Chargers + [Marilyn Minter](#)

Have you ever heard the Chargers' fight song? Written by Captain QB and the Big Boys in 1979, San Diego Super Chargers is a glam, disco anthem, which makes the team a perfect match for Marilyn Minter and her super sexual, often glitter-encrusted photos and paintings of various parts of the human body. Philip Rivers wouldn't approve, but that's hardly the point.