

Artists & Galleries / Athletic Art

The Wide World of Sports

FROM THE BASEBALL FIELD TO THE BASKETBALL COURT, PAINTERS DAVE HOBRECHT AND KELLY AKINS SHOWCASE PROMINENT ATHLETES IN THEIR WORK.
By ASHLEY RYAN

Inspiration comes from many places—none better than America’s favorite pastimes. Sports have been an exciting aspect of our culture for more than a century now, with names like Tom Brady, Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth known across the globe. And these prominent athletes, recognized for both their skill and personality, happen to provide the perfect muses for stunningly crafted artworks.

Artists Dave Hobrecht and Kelly Akins take pride in their sports paintings, with canvases that combine action with the magic of creativity for a reimagined look into the wide, wide world of sports.

Memorable Moments in Black and White



Dave Hobrecht (top right) creates sports paintings like “Legends Call” (above), which commemorated Derek Jeter’s retirement by featuring him alongside past Yankees greats.

Using charcoal and pastels to craft stunning action shots of famous sports stars and stadiums, Laguna resident Dave Hobrecht has developed his own signature style with a timeless feel. “People, when they see black-and-white sports art, they know it’s me,” he explains. “... That’s kind of how I stand out.”

It’s been more than a decade since he moved to town and opened up a gallery to showcase his innovative pieces, which often merge generations and locations to produce whimsical settings centered on the world of sports.

But he isn’t new to creating, having taught himself to draw after he was hit



by a car as a teenager. “I was laid up for a while—half body cast, the whole thing,” Hobrecht notes. “I was in a hospital bed for a long time, so the only thing I could access was paper and pencil. I started drawing then ... and I never stopped.”

He has since switched mediums, deciding that pencil has too much of a silvery feel to it and makes it impossible to get one consistent shade. To craft his paintings, Hobrecht now uses charcoal dust, pastel bricks, and black-and-white charcoal pencils. After building his own canvases with smooth wooden planks, hot press watercolor paper and an archival paste, he lays down tones and his first few layers using brushes.

“When you want to pull your subject forward, when you start detailing, you use white and black charcoal pencil just to add some hard lines and some highlights to bring your subject forward,” Hobrecht notes, “and all your blurry, fuzzy stuff goes in the background and now you’ve got that depth of field—a nice 3D look.”

His favorite thing about sports art is the storytelling. Hobrecht’s pieces often feature the biggest names in major league baseball as well as professional basketball

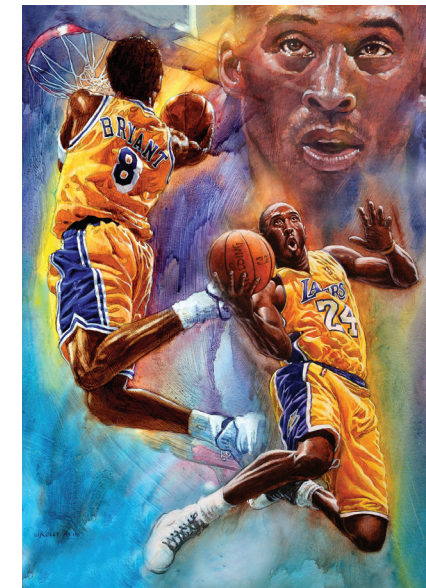
and football, but he has also highlighted hockey, golf, boxing, horse racing, fishing, surfing, tennis and more. And while he has done some very special pieces—including retirement paintings for New York Yankees legends Mariano Rivera and Derek Jeter—what he really loves is creating stories of his own.

“I was able to do that with a piece that ... told a story about how, when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, two other players followed right after him. ... [They were] Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe,” Hobrecht says. “And the three of them would have these dinners with Martin Luther King [Jr.] and those dinners were to talk about segregation and racism in baseball. ... But no one ever took a picture of them having dinner. So I was able to make that up and paint something out of my brain and it was well received.”

When he’s not painting commissions, Hobrecht teaches art classes at Laguna College of Art & Design. He also recently completed his first published work, “The All-Time Dodgers Book,” slated to be released in late October. The book, for which Hobrecht crafted 20 original paintings, was a joint effort with Ned Colletti, a baseball analyst and former general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, who wrote the text detailing the greatest players from the franchise, mixing athletes from Brooklyn and Los Angeles.

“I’m trying to pitch ideas that are both what I want to paint and for business,” he says of the book. “But getting commissions from people—I love it. ... I always say that your home or office is like your safe spot ... and they’re basically inviting me into their home with my art. I think that’s the biggest compliment.”

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Art in Action

It’s been more than 45 years since Kelly Akins started showing his paintings at Sawdust Art Festival, just a couple of years after he graduated from Laguna Beach High School. But, in this case, it’s true that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree: His father, Hal, also exhibited at Sawdust and coached football at the local high school as well. “When I was growing up, I’d copy his stuff,” Akins notes. “... I grew up loving art and sports.”

Although sports art is what Akins has become known for over the years, his talent isn’t limited to the genre, as he also enjoys painting landscapes and other styles of portraits. But the athlete-focused pieces are definitely a passion, as he grew up watching the Rams, Chargers, Dodgers, Angels and Lakers.

“Since I was 3 or 4 years old, I started drawing and never stopped,” he notes. “By the time I was 7 or 8, I was making my own comic books.” After high school, he went on to graduate from ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, then worked as a background painter for television cartoon shows like “Silver Surfer,” “X-Men: The Animated Series” and “Spider-Man” then did illustrations for the NFL, NBA and MLB. Eventually, he started to create his own sports-centric pieces.

“I like to call my art impressionistic realism, because I like to ... make it feel like the painting has motion, but then, when it gets to the portrait part, I like to get pretty realistic



Kelly Akins (above) makes vivid paintings of sports figures using what he calls “impressionistic realism.”

on the faces,” Akins says. In addition to painting players he likes, he seeks out historical sports stars and renowned players from any team, then expresses them in his own style.

Once Akins has picked a subject for his acrylic paintings, he uses pictures to draw out the piece. “I start with a real loose wash—kind of a watercolor technique—and then as the painting goes along, I get tighter and tighter as I get toward the details, toward the face,” he explains. He sometimes does actual watercolor sports art as well. Filled with vibrant color, not only on the subject but in the background as well, his pieces stand out as something special.

Akins says about half of his work is commission-based, and it’s not all focused on famous athletes. A recent piece for a longtime client whose triathlete brother had recently passed away featured a montage of the man swimming, cycling and running.

Although he has since moved to Lake Elsinore—where he has been teaching art at a nearby high school for more than 20 years—Akins was grandfathered into the Sawdust’s shows because of his lengthy history with the festival. He is skipping the Sawdust Winter Fantasy this year, but will return in 2024 and can also be reached directly to dream up a piece of your favorite sports star. ■

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