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## The New York Times

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Kobe Bryant's Next Step, New Shoes and Moves with Los Angeles Artists

By Adam Popescu



A sort of shrine to Kobe Bryant as part of an event in Los Angeles. Credit: Nike

Los Angeles — Ancient Buddhists believed reincarnation was instantaneous upon death. Jewish texts have long foretold an afterlife of revolving souls. Many Catholics swear by the transformative power of holy water. For sports celebrities, reinvention is much easier. Sometimes all it takes is a shoe launch and presto — the end is a beginning.

Last April, Kobe Bryant, the 38-year-old basketball phenom, retired after two decades with the Los Angeles Lakers. This week he inaugurated another post-basketball venture on the Day of the Dead, calling on two Los Angeles artists to help sell some sneakers — his 12th design that bears his name — the Kobe A.D. (“after death”).

To that effect, on Tuesday, the cavernous [MAMA Gallery](#) in Downtown Los Angeles became a Día de los Muertos celebration, with sugar skulls, marigolds,

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religious candles and numerous photo and jersey effigies of the 6-foot, 6-inch basketball player.



Neon art by Patrick Martinez. Credit: Nike

Mark Machado, the homegrown tattoo and graffiti legend known as [Mister Cartoon](#) (he has tattooed Mr. Bryant) fashioned two pieces: a paleta ice cream cart in black and purple with the initial “K” and a slithering black mamba snake (a nod to Mr. Bryant’s nickname) and a cityscape mural accented in white and yellow gold with another snake, and the sugar skulls the Mexican holiday is famous for.

“We turned off the lights and it was only candlelit lighting, which really made the pieces stand out,” Mister Cartoon said. “It was almost like someone passed away, all those shrines and candles.”

A [neon painting](#) by the other artist, [Patrick Martinez](#) , depicted a psychic’s storefront signage, dotted with palm trees, skulls and “five rings,” the number of

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titles the Lakers won in Mr. Bryant's time. The work, and the two artists of the Los Angeles street scene, were commissioned to blend the city and its golden boy as a homage to his past and future.

"In a lot of visuals it's hard to communicate an idea in simple lines," said Mr. Martinez, 36, who previously worked with Mr. Bryant on a [magazine spread](#) in Paris. "Kobe told me that what he enjoyed about my piece was that it's straightforward and to the point. We were talking about editing and cutting all the fat out and showing the viewer what we want to say with the visual. "

At the event, Mr. Bryant bantered for a few minutes in a Q. and A. wherein he alluded to death — as a metaphor for his playing career. And he touched on the transition that he hopes will mirror the focus that made him a top player.



Mister Cartoon's ice cream cart. Credit: Nike

In an email after the event, Mr. Bryant said "Art is the greatest human connector."

He added that "Hand drawn artwork is most beautiful to me. I love seeing something from afar and thinking it's perfect, but then studying it and finding imperfections throughout. It gives it soul."

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Since his retirement, Mr. Bryant has started a [\\$100 million dollar venture capital fund](#) and founded a hybrid publishing-production house called [Kobe Studios](#), a

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division of his firm Kobe Inc ., created this year. The studio has entered a partnership with Time Inc. to [distribute an animated film](#) based on a [sonnet](#) Mr. Bryant wrote last year to declare his retirement. And he's gone on record recently to say that he nearly missed his final game because [he was busy editing short stories](#).

(Sure, he's had past hiccups creatively, most notably [a failed music career](#), but [that was back in 1998](#).)

According to Molly Carter, Kobe Inc.'s chief marketing officer, the company doesn't have any books slated for publishing yet.

Ms. Carter says that right now the company is largely in the kicking-around-ideas stage.

But in his email, Mr. Bryant spoke of his dream. "If a work of art tells an entire story with one image, one shoe or one frame, and it's able to resonate with just one person," he wrote, "then it's simply a masterpiece."