

Local Student creates Personalized Map Art

By Katie Clark

For many artists, pen and paper are used for designing, creating and producing their artwork.

Reid Brown follows a different roadmap to create his pieces.

He is a musician, environmental scientist and world traveler. A typical student who spends his spare time hanging out with friends, playing music and talking with his girlfriend. The 21-year-old is a senior at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studying environmental science and statistics.

Brown is in the business of creating original cartographic prints, he said, flashing a shy smile in a bustling bagel shop. Artwork that is a tangible embodiment of who he is and where he's been.

His maps range from an overlay of a city's layout to a series of railways through any town that a commissioner desires. The maps are pasted over a white background with the city name, country and coordinates.

"Basically they're black and white," Brown said. "That's the art style, so it's minimalist. It's just to show a city or town's character through its streetscape."

While studying environmental science, Brown learned how to use a program called ArcGIS, an information system that works with maps and geospatial material. He uses the software to find and edit portions of maps for his posters before personalizing them in photoshop.

"It's maps by geospatial data," Brown said about the program. "It's an application of stuff I learned. Kinda nerdy, but it's really cool."

Philip McDaniel, GIS and subject librarian in Davis Library, commented on what the GIS system can do and how Brown uses the software.

"At its most basic, it is a piece of software to make maps," McDaniel said. The GIS system can be used to show locations, analyze and understand relationships between features.

McDaniel said that other students and professionals use the program for fine arts studies but not for on-the-side side businesses.

Brown calls his art business a “side hustle.” He does not acquire much profit from his art but continues to make and sell pieces for friends, family and any fellow students and community members who commission him.

Brown said that other companies who make cartographic pieces may have maps that are more detailed, but they are much less personal.

“I have to have a whole conversation with someone asking, ‘What do you want? Does this look good to you?’” Brown said, focusing his attention on passersby outside the glass windows. Other companies sell pieces in a more streamlined fashion but Brown claims they charge almost five times as much as he does.

“I sell them for like \$15 to \$25 each,” Brown said. “I probably should charge more, but I don’t want to gouge anyone.”

Elias Tymas, a sophomore at UNC, saw the artwork and immediately took a liking to it.

“My dad was an artist, so I have an appreciation for art,” Tymas said. “The art is so cool, and the fact that you can choose your own town is awesome. It shows that the person is talented.”

Tymas stated that he would pay \$20 for a student-produced piece like Brown’s.

Though Brown does not foresee his artwork providing a steady income, he does have plans to continue the business. His goals include creating a website, designing streetwear and selling his cartography in businesses at UNC.

“I don’t see it getting crazy big,” Brown said. “The eventual goal is to get them in the student stores.” He believes that selling his artwork in places such as the UNC Student Stores would provide more visibility for his work.

For now, Brown plans to sell his art around campus and would like to set up tables in the Union on UNC’s campus. “I can ask students, ‘Hey, you wanna support me?’”

Brown does not call himself an artist, and said he never spent much time doing arts and crafts as a kid. The map art began during his world travels while working in China.

“This past summer I got to go to China and work in a research lab,” he said. “In the period between school and going to China, I was like, ‘I’m gonna set this little challenge for myself.’ I wasn’t sure what it was at the time.”

While in China, Brown learned that Chinese culture is largely involved with gift-giving. This inspired him to create gifts for those he met, so he designed cartographic maps for each of his mentors. The pieces encompassed portions of towns from Kai Fung, China, to Nigeria and Ghana.

The artwork is also a way for Brown to face certain fears and to challenge himself as a person. He is nervous about his inability to follow through with certain projects in his life, and perhaps these maps can help lead him to a place of confidence.

“I don’t want to be too serious about something and not have it work out,” Brown said. “I see this as a continuation of things I’m into. I’m competitive against myself because I like studying a goal and then realizing it. This artwork was one of the first times I really committed to something that big.”

His favorite piece is a map of Chapel Hill. The image shows a black outline of roads and buildings in town laid over a white background. The words "Chapel Hill " are typed neatly below the map and a black frame holds the piece in place on his bedroom wall. It was one of his earlier pieces and presented many challenges.

“The biggest hurdle was getting it to print,” he said, recalling the few weeks of planning, editing and trial and error that went into production. “The first piece looked terrible, it was on copier paper. It’s just been getting better every time. Nothing is ever as easy as it seems. There’s a lesson in that.”

Kat Doan purchased a map of Jinan, China, as a gift from Reid last year. She saw the artwork on Brown’s Instagram and thought that it was unique.

“I try to support local artists so I insisted on paying for his work,” Doan said. “The price was very fair, in my opinion. He kept me really involved in the decision-making and the recipient and I are really happy with how it turned out!”

Brown likes to teach himself new skills and said that others should try this, too.

“I think everyone has something they’re into. If they haven’t found it yet, they’ll find it eventually.”

If you are interested in Reid Brown’s art, you can contact him at reid98@live.unc.edu or by phone at 336-847-9484.