



Taking it to the Streets

Mural artist Maser paints wide swath of Arkansas

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
February 8, 2015*

FAYETTEVILLE - The official word is that, when entrepreneur Steve Clark brought the hulking, ginger-haired thirtysomething artist known as "Maser" to Fort Smith to splash a swirling mural across the front of Boardertown Skate Park, Maser was enchanted with the area and decided to spend the next few years in Fayetteville.

The semi-official truth is that Maser (who doesn't want his name, age or image to be published, because he is "a private person") likes Fayetteville in part because it's free of the distracting "pub culture" offered by his hometown of Dublin.

"In Dublin, we take our careers very seriously, but we take drinking and socializing as just as important," he says. On a cold afternoon Maser sits at a folding table in his studio, just off the Fayetteville square. There's a sewing machine in the corner where his girlfriend, Louisa Moran, also from Dublin, stitches together large canvas pieces that Maser designs. There's a bulletin board tacked with clips from vintage body-building magazines and a work table spread with his latest canvas piece. There's little else.

Maser was recently in Dublin for a video shoot for U2's song "Cedarwood Road." In December, U2 released *Films of Innocence*, 11 music videos from its latest album that, according to the band's news release, were made by "the world's most acclaimed visual urban artists." Maser says he thinks U2 places him among these artists because he used to graffiti Windmill Lane Studios where U2 once recorded and, because about a year ago, he did a piece for the Little Museum of Dublin's U2 memorabilia show. 2014 was a productive year for Maser. He made art in six countries and completed one of his most impressive pieces to date, covering a derelict motel in Las Vegas with bold, cheerful patterns. He works big commission gigs (by press time, he will have just returned from Australia, where he painted a shipping-container centerpiece for Sydney Festival) and expense-only gigs, such as street-art conferences with communal housing. These disparities make sense because, before Maser was an internationally recognized muralist, he was a teenage "tagger," illicitly spray-painting his pseudonym ("Maser") around Irish cities in stylized letters. In his 20s, Maser traded tagging for murals, but he made his name in Dublin with stickers. In 2005, he plastered the city - at 530,000 people, just over 2 ½ times the size of Little Rock - with an estimated 10,000 stickers reading "Maser loves you."

"When I was 17, I was like, 'Dublin's such a dump, I can't wait to leave,'" he says. "But the more I traveled in Europe painting, I got really homesick ... so I came back and started writing this love message to Dublin."

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Maser grew up somewhere between middle- and working-class, studied graphic design in college and spent his summers working at a skateboard shop. Eventually he founded *KrookedType*, a design and marketing collective that pooled the skills of creative friends to land corporate contracts, such as the Irish campaigns for Nike and Adidas.

In 2007, Maser met a high-profile street artist from Pennsylvania named Steve Powers, who uses the tag "ESPO" and spent a year in Ireland on a Fulbright fellowship, creating public art with teenagers. "He was using sign-writing styles to communicate

messages, and I was doing the same sort of thing, but on a lower, worse degree ... so he schooled me, and I helped him on his walls," Maser says.

The combination of Powers' influence, the 2008 recession and Maser's fondness for Irish folk singer Damien Dempsey led to Maser's most ambitious project thus far. "His [Dempsey's] lyrics ... they're messages of hope really, while still talking of social injustice ... so I just proposed to him taking his words and transcribing them onto walls," Maser says.

That project, They Are Us, consisted of 24 Dempsey-inspired murals, including an eight-story piece on the side of an abandoned, low-income apartment building and a piece inside a juvenile detention facility. It culminated in an exhibit where photographs, prints and originals were sold, raising \$30,000 toward a mobile medical unit to serve Dublin's homeless.

A few years later, that project inspired an Arkansas businessman to send Maser a long email. The message rambled idealistically about an international worldview and connectivity. Maser responded with a single line: "You have my attention."

AN ARKANSAS PATRON

Currently Clark, 50, the industrialist who founded the Fort Smith transportation company ProPak Logistics, pays the rent on Maser's studio. He pays the salary for Maser's manager, Claire Kolberg. "I probably am a patron, but it goes back to an educational initiative in my mind," Clark says.

In Clark's office atop a Fort Smith bank, there is a photo of him and 17-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai at a meeting in New York. Clark is half of the team behind Noble Impact, a high school entrepreneurial program. To teach his son business skills, Clark built an indoor skate park for 19-year-old Andy and his friends to run.

"It became a conversation about art," Clark says. "How do we begin introducing art where they [the skaters] are, as opposed to trying to create some high-brow relationship? ... Well, the quickest way would probably be murals, street art, so instead of graffiti in the sense that it's a detriment to our society, how do you view it ... as a link to a higher appreciation?"

He first heard of Maser through an Irish friend in Arkansas. In his email, Clark offered to bring Maser to Fort Smith, if Maser would paint Boardertown. Maser countered. He would come if Clark would pay for his friend, a videographer, to document the process

and if Clark would rent them a car so they could drive to South by Southwest music and film festival in Austin, Texas.

Clark and Maser bonded immediately. "In life, you meet people who have talent but not necessarily the desire or ambition, or you'll meet somebody with the desire and ambition but not the talent to match. So when you meet someone where their talent matches their desire and ambition, that's something really special," Clark says.

On that first visit to Arkansas in March 2012, Maser stayed a week. Six months later, Clark set Maser up in his Fayetteville studio, where the artist spent two months creating gallery pieces for a weekend exhibit. After visiting Maser in Dublin in spring 2013, Clark decided to help Maser make his name in America. He sent Maser to Cincinnati to paint a mural on a residential building in conjunction with AGAR, an events company Clark works with. Then he sent Maser to Chicago to paint a collaborative mural with 21-year-old poet Malcolm London, another creator who enjoys Clark's moral and financial support. (Clark contacted London after watching the poet's TED talk online.) In September 2013, Clark brought Maser back to Arkansas, underwriting a 104-foot Maser mural at The Jones Center, a nonprofit sports and education facility in Springdale.

"At some point I said, everything goes through New York ... why don't we think about what he wants his career to be? So we kind of game-planned," Clark says.

But Maser didn't want the crowds and nightlife of New York. He was drawn to Fayetteville, which he describes as "a young, hippie community," a place he thought he could concentrate. In February 2014, Maser and Moran crossed the Atlantic, this time on artist visas that would let them stay in the United States for three years. Clark was glad that his friend wanted to be nearby.

"But it also comes down to the unexpected surprise," Clark says. "You've got a world-renowned street artist living in Fayetteville."

SIGN OF THE TIMES

Not far from Maser's workspace, in front of Walton Arts Center's Nadine Baum Studios, there's a roughly 25-foot-tall, 14-foot-wide plywood structure featuring bright colors, diagonal lines, clean shapes and sharp angles. Called Under the Stars, it was designed by Maser, funded by Clark and built in May by volunteers. Since then, it has served as the backdrop for many photo shoots, professional and impromptu, and as an unexpected jungle gym for children and university students. "I just wanted to create a

platform that people can perform on, since their [Walton Center's] whole gig is performing arts," Maser says.

Political science student Kathleen Doody, 35, lives in a nearby apartment. "As a piece of art, it's not something that I normally would have gravitated toward, but I like that people interact with it," she says.

Reception to another piece, this one in downtown Fort Smith, has been less straightforward.

'A GAY OBAMA'

Maser learned of Gen. William Darby, a pioneering Army Ranger, at the Fort Smith Museum of History. The artist reached out to Fort Smith's Central Business Improvement District, which Clark is a part of, about painting a mural of Darby, and the group helped him select a site. "You can see an Army supply store, and I just thought it was kind of fitting. I think it was actually on the side of a gay club," Maser says.

It took Maser only a few hours to spray-paint a man in profile in bright green, blue, orange and white on the side of Club Kinkead. Matt Reid, 48, manages Kinkead. "They should have done something more with it, like an American flag, maybe some battle scenes," he says.

Some people think the image resembles President Barack Obama and Reid says a few of Kinkead's patrons have misinterpreted the mural as a political statement. Terry Baumeister, who owns the Army Surplus store next to Kinkead, says she takes phone calls from locals who want to know why "Obama" is painted on the side of "her" building. She has called the city more than once to request the addition of Darby's name.

"Why won't they put who it is?" she says. "Everyone thinks it's a gay Obama."

On the other side of the surplus shop, Michelle Bell, 43, mixes drinks at an Irish bar. Someone told her who the mural depicts, but she can't remember. "It looks like Obama," she says.

Her customer, Sara Mason, 32, thinks maybe it's David Bowie. "It's cool. In Fort Smith we don't have a lot of stuff like that," Mason says.

THE STREET AND BEYOND

Clark has heard the Obama comments but doesn't pay much attention. "People joke about it," he says. He subscribes to underground art magazines, a result of the influences of his son and Maser.

"I don't want them [street artists] to paint on my building, but what if there were a district in town where people could have that form of expression?" he says. "I don't advocate breaking of any law."

Many artists who now have institutional support, such as Barry "Twist" Mc-Gee, Banksy and Caledonia "Swoon" Curry, made their reputations through illicit street art. They cite different reasons for continuing unsanctioned work, though they no longer need exposure. Among them: contributing to their neighborhood (Curry), reclaiming the public sphere from corporate advertisements (McGee) and creating for the sake of art rather than profit (Banksy).

Maser wants his art to engage the public, but he isn't trying to negotiate ownership of space. Ironically, the Jones Center has an up-to-\$20,000 vandalism-insurance policy on the mural created by the former tagger. Maser says that for years now, he has worked only on sanctioned projects. "I'm not doing this to fight the system Not having a 9-to-5, that act is rebellious in its own way. That is a statement."

Maser's goal for 2015 is actually to get off the street - to land more gallery shows and indoor installations. Clark has different plans. He mentions establishing a residency program to bring more muralists to Arkansas. "All of the top writers have worked in Cincinnati. You can take tours. Banksy's been there, everyone has been there. ... To be able to create an environment where we invite the best and brightest, which encourage our natural local talent to raise their game ... to me, that's the role," he says.