



Focus

‘Weird and line-y’

LynLake artist Chuck Ungemach draws strange and intricate worlds

By Zac Farber / zfarber@swjournal.com

In Chuck Ungemach’s fastidiously lined pen-and-ink drawings, bears, sloths, monkeys and blobby purple creatures are given comical costumes and placed in preposterous settings.

Two dogs in hats drive a vintage car indoors. A capybara smokes a pipe while floating on a lake in a pink swim tube. A bionic cat, wearing a collar crammed with colorful toggles and buttons, lounges on the floor of a Victorian era solarium.

Ungemach, who uses the moniker Chuck U, is best known for his work designing beer cans for Northeast’s Indeed Brewing Company. His design for the Midnight Ryder black ale (a mustachioed, monocled dandy riding a monocled grizzly bear) was declared one of the 10 “coolest-looking beers in America” by the website Thrillist.

The LynLake resident will be the featured artist at this year’s Uptown Art Fair (Aug. 2–4) and he has designed a commemorative print for the festival that features a conveyor belt on which framed portraits are manufactured and then immediately destroyed. (The print will double as the label for a hibiscus-infused wheat ale that Indeed is brewing exclusively for the art fair.)

Since his subject matter is composed largely of kooky absurdist non sequiturs, Ungemach said many of his fans assume he is something of an eccentric visionary.

“People meet me and think I’m this person who does all these drugs and that I’m this Alice in Wonderland Mad Hatter type,” he said. “I’m actually not a very whimsical person.”

Ungemach is described by those who know him as quiet, kind, shy and professional. He draws slowly and methodically, focusing on the details of his craft. He likes giving his characters monocles because they add asymmetry and “differentiate the sides of a face.”

When he was growing up in Columbia Heights, Ungemach became obsessed with a children’s television and book series called

Draw Squad. Commander Mark Kistler — a jolly, well-caffeinated man who wore a bandolier stocked with crayons instead of bullets — would give basic drawing lessons on topics like foreshortening, contouring and shading.

“I remember being very intrigued by his instructions about how to draw buildings,” Ungemach said. “It was my first time learning how to make two dimensions become three dimensions with a set of lines.”

Ungemach said his mature style of highly detailed two- and three-point perspective drawings is an evolution of his childhood passions for Dr. Seuss, M.C. Escher and the gritty Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comics drawn by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, which he spent hours studying and tracing.

Today, he describes himself as “a grown man who draws animals with robot parts, hairy worm things, and astronauts for a living” — a nerdy child’s dream job.

“My work is an extremely refined version of stuff I was doing when I was a kid,” he said. “I just want it to look cool, to have some unexpected things.”

‘Hey, look at my portfolio’

As a teenager, Ungemach dabbled in graffiti because, he said, “it was an artsy way to be kind of a badass.” But after he was arrested for the second time, his mother, Sue, put her foot down. “She demanded I channel my art into something less criminal,” Ungemach said.

In 2000, he enrolled in the graphic design program at the Art Institutes, where he first learned how to use a computer. “A lot of my peers were zooming around, checking their email, and I barely knew how to turn it off,” he said.

He quit school in 2002 and soon landed a job at the Hollywood Video near Franklin & Hennepin, now the site of The Lowry.



Slothzilla. Submitted image

He considered becoming a rapper until he realized that his music — “angsty teenage stuff” — wasn’t very good. But he networked with local hip hop acts and got his first paid gigs designing flyers and album covers for bands like Sean Anonymous and the Unknown Prophets. When people affiliated with the Rhymesayers record label came into the Hollywood Video and rented a movie, Ungemach would waive their late fees in exchange for free albums.

As he grew older, he kept working to perfect his art.

“When I was young, I had a really drippy,

sloppy style,” he said, “and then I gradually started adding more and more lines and getting a lot more controlled and doing more dense linework. As I was adding lines, it kept on not feeling done until I had added more lines and more textures and more stippling.”

By his late 20s, Ungemach was working at the Uptown Kinkos and determined to turn his drawings into a career.

Ungemach made a sleek spiral-bound portfolio (“A benefit of working at Kinko’s was I was able to steal a lot of free prints”) and would carry

SEE **UNGEMACH** / PAGE **B4**



Artist Chuck Ungemach poses next to a mural he made to promote Minnesota tourism at the 2018 Super Bowl. He says his work is “an extremely refined version of stuff I was doing when I was a kid.” Submitted image

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it with him wherever he went. “Whoever was on stage at First Ave, I’d go up to them and harass them afterwards: ‘Hey, look at my portfolio,’” he said. “I’d try to get work any way I could.”

Eventually, things began to fall into place. He was asked to draw a few covers for Vita.mn. A music promoter he met at Kinkos invited him to do live painting at a music festival in Harmony Park. People started seeing his art around town and offering him work.

“A bunch of small breaks added up into a large break,” Ungemach said. “It felt like I was pushing a rock uphill my entire 20s and around age 28, I felt like I didn’t have to push as hard.”

A beer career

Ungemach started designing cans for Indeed in 2012, a year after the brewery launched. He ignored the brewery’s first email, but the co-founders tracked him down at the Nomad and persuaded him that they were a legitimate business and not “some basement brewer.”

“Before Indeed, I wasn’t a huge beer guy,” Ungemach said. “I didn’t realize until a couple years in, how big beer culture was to people.”

Ungemach rarely gets to taste the beer before he starts drawing, which caused him consternation when he designed the Midnight Ryder and Day Tripper cans.

“I was really worried they’d be gross,” he said. “Thankfully, they were amazing and everyone loved them.”

He said he loves the freedom the brewery gives him to be creative.

“They give me a rough vibe of what they’re looking for,” he said. “They’ll be like, ‘I don’t know, it’s called Strawberry Fields. Put strawberries on it?’ And that’s like all their direction.”

For a 1990s-themed IPA that came out in September 2018, the brewery put together a mood board with funky letters, wavy patterns, the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air logo and Fruit Stripe’s zebra-striped gum wrappers. Ungemach produced a pink-yellow-and-turquoise design with palm trees, a skateboard and what he called a “Miami Vice-ish vibe.”

Kelly Moritz, the brewery’s marketing director, said that “some of the most fun days of my work career have been getting a Chuck sketch in my inbox.”

“The detail is mind-boggling when you start to zoom in and look at the amount of attention

to detail that he puts into every piece,” she said. After years of struggling, Ungemach, 38, said he is delighted that his “weird and line-y” art has finally brought him financial security.

When he decided in 2008 to quit his full-time job at Copycats Media, a CD and DVD duplication service, he couldn’t afford health insurance. “If I had to go to the doctor, I’d just not pay the bill,”

he said. His credit was destroyed and he said he “accepted the reality that I’d be poor all the time.”

“Within the last two to three years I have slowly gotten out of all those holes,” he said. “I’m not rich by any stretch of the imagination, but not being below zero has been pretty great.”

As far as his illustrations go, he just hopes people will enjoy looking at them.



Nigel. Submitted image



Ungemach designed this beer can with what he calls a “Miami Vice-ish vibe.” Submitted image

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