

# American block print artist captures the essence of Shanghai neighborhoods



Brown with his illustration "The View From Here," which captures what he sees from his balcony. — Lu Feiran



The original photo of "Jianbing Corner" — Nicholas Brown



Lu Feiran

**B**lack and white. Concise lines. Shops, lanes and people. Bustling streets. American-born artist Nicholas Brown uses linoleum block prints, paintings, sketches and photos to capture the essence of life in Shanghai.

Brown, who has been in Shanghai on and off since 2012, lives with partner Jessica Gleeson in a modern apartment building. The scenes below his balcony of old lanes and narrow red-brick streets inspired his "Shanghai Corners" and "Apartments" linocut series, which encompass some 65 pieces.

"I'd like to choose images for my works that people recognize and that people have memories of," he said, citing the example of Cité Bourgogne lane in Huangpu District, where an archway blends Chinese and French architectural styles. "I love it."

Both his series are based on photos Brown takes around the city. The "Shanghai Corners" series features street views that catch his attention - a distinctive shop logo, a sealed-off lane awaiting demolition, a person who somehow stands out.

"Everybody has their favorite Shanghai corner," he said. "These illustrations are often done as commissions for people who are leaving Shanghai and want to capture the view of a favorite spot in a unique way."

Some of his works capture people he meets on his travels around the city. One work features an old lady standing at the door of her home.

"I was taking pictures and there she was," Brown said. "She didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Chinese, but somehow she invited me through her house to show me the courtyard out back. It was beautiful."

His "Apartments" series captures views of the ubiquitous six-story, walk-up apartments so common in the city for the last few decades. The images contain very iconic sights, such as laundry poles jutting out from windows, air-conditioner units hanging on outside walls and tangles of electrical wires.

Brown said that his goal is to capture and combine the interesting features



**A book on shikumen buildings in Shanghai is Brown's treasure. He followed the guidelines and maps in the book to find many places that later were featured in his works. — Xu Qing**

of architecture with the lives of local residents.

Brown spends a lot of time walking and exploring around the city to take the photos that are the starting point of his artwork. The most challenging part of a creation is probably selecting the best picture to work from.

"Sometimes the image isn't quite interesting enough, or it's hard to find one that has enough visual texture going on," he said. "And actually, the more time passes, the harder it is to find those."

Linocut printing especially appeals to Brown because of its simplicity and the ease of making as many prints as needed once a block is done.

"I like just doing black and white," he said. "Some woodblock artists will make the ink lighter in some areas with two different colors. But I don't like the complexity of that. I like just to see the shapes and the lines."

Graduated in 1990 from the University of Washington in Seattle with a major in painting, Brown held nine solo or two-person shows around the United States before he moved to Shanghai. His works are also exhibited in seven museums or galleries, both in the US and China.

Moving to China was a turning point in his life, he said.

Brown first landed in the city 20 years