

# Interview with BRAINSTORM

Jason Snyder and Briana Feola are **Brainstorm**, a design and print house in New Hampshire that specializes in producing top-quality art prints on paper. Jason and Briana are professional screen printers, and we love how



passionate they are about what they do. Brainstorm has built its success on hard work, good luck, powerful relationships, contagious passion, uncompromising diligence, hardcore discipline, practiced craftsmanship and charming good humor.

Since their humble beginnings in a basement studio in 2007, Brainstorm has grown into a serigraphy powerhouse, producing art prints for a variety of venues and customers, including the likes of Billy Name, Urban Outfitters, the MET, Art.com, Hello Polly, The Flood and many more. And they use Jacquard Professional Screen Inks for all their prints!!!

We caught up with Jason and Briana this summer in the midst of a big production run for Urban Outfitters. We asked them about their business, their shop, their story, their aspirations, challenges they've faced over the years and hurdles they've overcome. Really, what we most wanted to know was how they became professional print makers and how someone else (like you) could make that dream into a reality. They had a lot to share. Read on for some seriously interesting reading, some precious insider secrets, and to learn more about Brainstorm and life as a professional print maker.

## 1. How and when were you introduced to screen-printing, and why did it stick? What do you like about screen printing?

**JASON:** I started screen printing my second year of college, 2002. A new adjunct professor had come in from Philadelphia and really gave some new life to the program. I saw how the gigposter printing scene and Etsy/DIY craft scene was really taking off and I got hooked.

**BRIANA:** I made my first edition of screen prints as a senior in high school. I then sold the edition and subsequently the image on T-shirts, throughout the summer. Making money selling something that I created was pretty addicting, and it was definitely career foreshadowing. I loved how tactile it was, how immediate. I also loved how the medium was so accessible. It didn't matter how crummy my setup was, I could create something great that people responded well to.



## 2. Tell us about Brainstorm: what do you do? What makes you different? How have you gotten to where you are now? What are your goals for the future? Is screen printing the coolest way to make a living, or what?



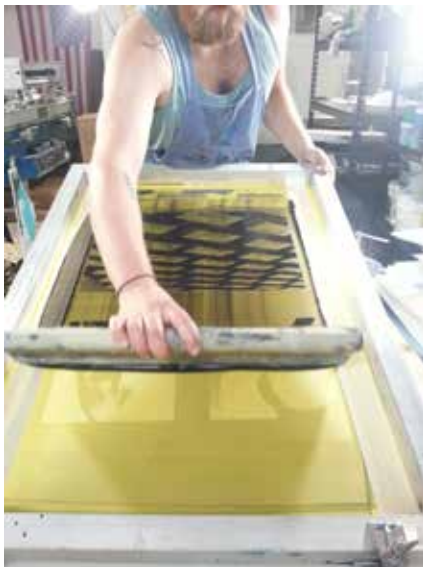
That's a heavy question, ha ha. Brainstorm started out doing anything we could to build our portfolio. We did design work, print work, web work, anything. Of course we loved the idea of just making and selling our own work, but it took a lot of time and energy to finally get to that point. At least it did for us. We got a couple key breaks in the early years. Doing regional craft shows was great for exposure and sales, and the growing Etsy/handmade vibe only added to that success. We got our artwork posted on some now huge design blogs like Design\*Sponge, Oh Joy, and Apartment Therapy, which led to more exposure and sales. After six years we decided to shift from being entirely retail to doing both wholesale and retail. We attended the National Stationery Show in May 2013 and we're now carried in almost 30 retail locations. Moving forward, we think wholesale is a great path for us and we'll be taking our work to the International Gift Fair in coming years. And yes, we'd say screen printing is a great way to make a living. Sometimes we can't believe it's actually happening.

**3. Tell us about your shop: what kind of equipment do you have? How big is your studio space? How many screens do you go through in a month or year? How many people work there? How many days of the week are you actually printing? What does a professional serigraphy shop look like?**

Shop talk—perfect. For printing we have four human arms and one mechanical arm. Our semi automatic American Cameo 38 does most of the work these days since wholesale has ramped up our volume. To be honest, I don't think we would be able to go in this direction without her. Everything else is something you'd find in any print studio, I guess: 40 flat files drawers, drying racks, washout sinks, flat tables, desks, product photography spot, etc. Our studio now is 1,700 sq. feet. It's on the top (5<sup>th</sup>) floor of an old mill in Dover, NH. We have worked in spaces as small as 500 sq. feet, so it's not always the size that matters—it's how you use it. It's hard to keep track of our screen usage. We currently have about 25 screens in the shop and just kind of replace them as they die. We mostly use 25 x 36 with 305 mesh. Briana and myself are currently the only ones running Brainstorm, but we do have plans to grow in the future, now that our studio space can accommodate. Days spent printing depends on a lot of different things: what's in stock and what needs to be re-printed, what new work is coming out, are there any contract projects lined up? Average I'd say the press is running 3 days a week and barely full days at that. Of course I consider my workweek to be 7 days, so keep that in mind. Once our studio is dressed up nice we'll have full blog posts coming so everyone can get a glance inside.



**4. You have had great success finding contracts for fine art prints on paper (with Billy Name and Urban Outfitters, to name a couple). How have you acquired these contracts? How do they find you? What is involved on this, business end of things?**



Both of those actually came through with a little bit of luck and a lot of hard work. The Urban connect happened at a regular ol' craft show. We were out selling work and a buyer came through our booth and picked up some prints. At the time, the buyer did not make herself known to us. It came through in an email a few weeks later that she was there, bought stuff, and thought we would be a good fit for the store. At the time we hadn't done any project that big and did not have our press. We happened to be living in Philadelphia at the time (where Urban Outfitters HQ is), so it was easy to set up a meeting, and we took the plunge. The rest is history. We've worked with Urban on 6 different projects now and they've been really good to us. If I could give readers a take-away from that, it would be that you never know who people are and where projects are coming from, so take all the opportunities you can.

The Billy Name connect came through his rep in NYC, Dagon James. All of the Billy Name projects we work on come through James. James is an artist and publisher who runs Lid Magazine and The Waverly Press. The Name prints that we did were either for the Waverly Press or an art show for Name. James simply reached out to us via email and asked if we were able to print halftones and had any interest in printing work for someone else. There was no mention of Name or the photos that we would be printing. There was a part of me (Jason) that almost didn't respond to the email. However, I said we were willing to do anything we could to make the halftones happen and we told him yes. Once I saw what we were dealing with, there was no way we were letting that project go.



**5. What was it like working with Billy Name? Was this something you or Billy thought about during production?**



(Billy Name was a prominent figure in The Factory during the same time that Andy Warhol was bringing screen printing to the forefront of fine arts.)

We've never worked directly with Billy. In fact, we've never met or spoken to him directly. From what James had told me he's just a cool old dude with a big beard who lives in upstate NY. Being able to work



for him has been a truly flattering honor. To be one step removed from Andy Warhol himself, who many considered to be the most famous American screen printer, is just simply amazing.

**6. What is it like working under contract with the likes of Urban Outfitters? Why do you think a company of that size is interested in hand-made serigraphs?**

I've heard stories of Urban ripping off artists, paying late, and being a six-headed dragon of an employer, but they've always been great to us. Perhaps it's just the wall art/home employees that are great, and we've gotten lucky. When Urban made their first purchase of prints from us they were just starting to carry prints in the 'home' section of their stores. They had a new initiative to work directly with artists as the manufacturers, and we jumped at that opportunity. We were unsure of how it was going to happen but we were motivated to make it work. It was great timing. They carry a wide range of prints now and not all of them are directly made by the artists, nor are they all screen prints. We probably could've just done some licensing deal because they liked the images, but we went for the screen prints. We take much more pride in saying they carry our work because every print has passed through our hands and comes directly from our studio.



**7. Brainstorm is a power duo. What is it like working with your partner? Do the two of you have distinct and different roles in the company? Are there challenges to working and living together? Benefits? How did you get involved—did it start with love, printing, the love of printing...?**



Well, thanks for the compliment! The extremely short version is that we met in college. Briana was working on a project for one of her graphic design classes and we ended up working on it together simultaneously as we were becoming a couple. It was fun and just came naturally. The love of printing was definitely a heavy undertone of the courting process! At the time we definitely didn't think anything like Brainstorm would come of it, but looking back it's pretty easy to see that we would end up like this. Almost seven years later, things are somewhat different. There are roles that each of us play specifically in Brainstorm but they're never set in stone. We gravitate towards what we are most comfortable doing. As we grow and encounter new responsibilities they just find a way to fit. Being a couple in addition to business partners has its challenges, as I'm sure you can imagine. I'm sure a lot of artist/entrepreneurs can agree that there's no real dividing line between your "job" and your "life"—they're one and the same. That blurred line can sometimes cause earthquakes in the studio, but it is by far the most rewarding thing in life to have a partner to share absolutely everything with. We remind ourselves of this often to keep things in check.

**8. What portion of your business involves your own artwork, and what portion is printing other people's designs?**



When we were just starting out with Brainstorm, having no solid direction of what we wanted, we printed other artists' work. I'd say that was the first two years. As time went on and we realized that we were going to focus solely on our own prints and illustration we started to cut out the contract printing jobs, turning almost all of them down. Today, we only have a handful of clients that come to us because we've been working together for years. I'd consider them friends more than clients, actually. To put percentages on it—Brainstorm is 98% our work and 2% contract printing.

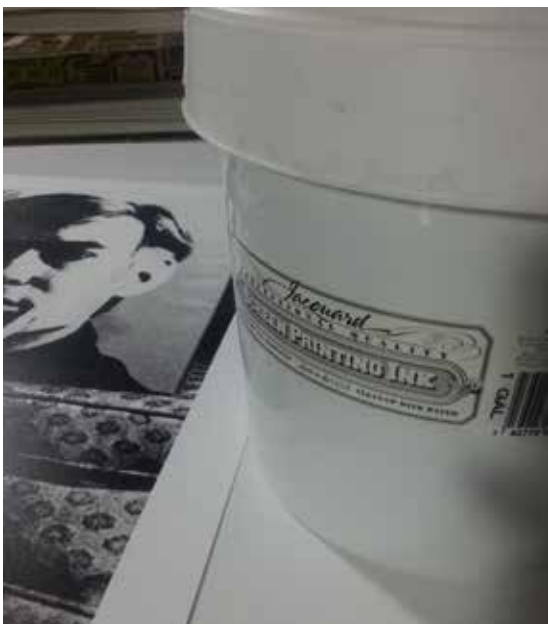


**9. Do you only print on paper? Do you have any experience printing on textiles or other substrates? What are some of the challenges and/or joys of printing on paper?**

As Brainstorm we have only ever printed on paper. Mostly because that's what all of our previous studios were set up for. We had a lot of live/work situations over the years. Anyone who has worked with textiles and solvent-based Plastisol inks will surely attest that they would never live in that kind of shop. We have ideas for textile projects and in our new space it may happen, which is exciting. But paper will always be our first love. Nothing beats a fresh pull of ink over a piece of paper, bold and crisp. Our biggest challenge in the past with printing on paper has definitely been temperature control and keeping the paper from expanding and contracting with the humidity. Luckily we are now in a better environment and that problem thus far seems to be eliminated.



**10. Tell us about materials: what do you look for in a screen printing ink? What do you like about Jacquard's ink? Do you use additives? Do you thin the ink with water? What mesh screens do you use? What durometer squeegee?**



We print exclusively with water based-inks. Never did house paint or oil based or anything crazy. Jacquard has beautiful pigment, allowing us to mix some great personal colors. It also never scuffs or gets chalky when it's dry, which is fantastic. It has a great hand feel on the paper, the best we've ever worked with. The only additives we've ever used are extender and transparent base. Extender is used only when we are in a pinch and transparent base only when the design calls for it. We almost always add water to the ink and or screen while it's on the press. I think it's necessary with the friction of the squeegee/floodbar and length of our typical print runs. We always keep a mister next to the press. We're either printing with 280 or 305 mesh. In addition to providing the fine details that a lot of our prints have, the higher mesh screens just put less ink down on the paper in general, so there's less of an expansion issue for tightly registered prints. Our press has an 80 duro (medium) squeegee on it and we've never changed it since day one. It's actually time for a new one now that I'm thinking about it.

## 11. What are 10 useful tips you've learned over the years that you would share with novice screen printers?

I don't know if we can get 10 solid tips but here are some, in no particular order of importance.

1. Make things yourself. Build your own sink and print tables and drying racks. Spend the money after you've proven that your prints are selling and have flexible cash.
2. Design prints that are forgiving to print. Trying to print a thirsty 12" x 12" block of ink with no dots or texture is going to prove super frustrating. There's a reason why a lot of printers design with that texture-y stuff.
3. Have a solid online presence. You can sell work, get recognized, and grow. But your presence needs to be great. With the power of photos you can make your shitty basement studio the envy of someone else.
4. Do retail shows. Face to face interaction with customers is important and it's great to see responses to your work and get a vibe of what people like. Don't put all your trust in one show—a print may be a best seller at a show and then you might not sell one copy at another. Do many and pool results.
5. Invest in a good quality film printer and exposure unit. Getting films reliably and that are high quality makes life so much easier. And the ability to burn those films on a nice vacuum exposure unit is key. If I could tell myself these tips 6 years ago I'd save myself a lot of frustration.
6. You can make a studio fit in a small space. Get creative with storage. Build up. We've operated Brainstorm in a space that was as little as 500 sq. ft.
7. It might sound silly, but learn how to stretch properly if you are pulling by hand so you can avoid crappy injuries.
8. Do not get a press until you can print by hand with machine-like precision. Otherwise you're cheating.
9. Someone told this to us, but it's great advice. Say yes to things that aren't within reach. You can make it happen.

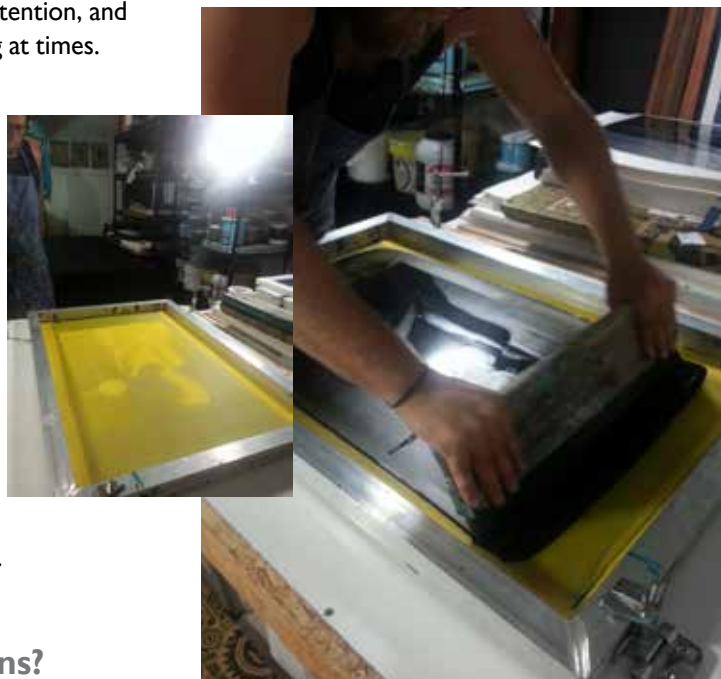
## 12. What are the biggest challenges in your work?

JASON: Turning projects down. The bigger we become, the more opportunities present themselves and I want to say yes to everything. Initially this feels like the best idea, but ultimately something will get rushed or half my attention and become stressful. I'm learning to say Yes to fewer things and giving them 110%.

BRIANA: My biggest challenge is working quickly. Now that our business is growing, time management has become more difficult for me. There are so many tasks that need attention, and making creative time is SO important, but challenging at times.

## 13. What are five things a screen printer should always have in his studio?

1. Print pants (ones for major inky hand wiping) or an apron, if you're fancy
2. Flat files (to help you and your work stay organized)
3. GREAT lighting (so important)
4. Creative space, aside from printing area
5. Fridge for snacks (and beer)



## 14. Do you dabble in any other forms or mediums, besides screen printing?

JASON: All of my work starts out as pen and ink drawing.

BRIANA: Pen and ink and watercolors.

## 15. What is your waste factor for print runs?

We used to have a lot of wasted test prints in the early days. The error factor was much higher. Now that we have been printing together for years, we have almost no problems. There may be wasted ink because the color isn't correct—but that ink is just recycled back into something else down the line. We also use a lot of masking tape, which we are not proud of. You guys should invent washable masking tape.

## 16. What is your background? Education? Did you work in a print shop before you started your own? Did you always want to be a professional screen printer?

JASON: I started in school on a BFA Printmaking track and switched to Art Education with a Printmaking minor. Briana and I were in the Art building together all the time but not necessarily the same classes. I was also 2 years ahead. I pulled my first screen print my second year of college—2002. I never worked in a print shop or anything. I loved making prints and by the time I graduated we were a couple and working on projects together. The job market was pure shit in 2006 so I scraped together what part time things I could and kept making prints on the side. Selling them and having a business was never the goal but it just grew out of a desire to be a practicing artist. I personally loved (and still do) the thought of being a professor of Art at the university level. But I also felt that I wouldn't truly have enough experience to offer if I never went out and proved that I could be a practicing artist. I knew a lot of professors (and students who went straight through to MFA or PhD) to ended up at the front of the classroom without ever really getting out there and doing it. Didn't seem right. Maybe one day I'll end up there. So did I always want to be professional screen printer? No. I wanted to be a practicing artist and screen printing became my favorite medium. One that was a way to make a living by making multiples.

BRIANA: Like Jason, I grew up in New Jersey. I started printing in high school but when you're 18 it's not easy to see the full path ahead. I went to college and studied graphic design. I wasn't fully sure of it but I found myself enjoying the conceptual nature of design. I wasn't keen on spending hours in front of the computer and absolutely hated that so much of 'graphic design' never ended up as anything I could hold in my hand. I had really great professors though, who taught me about professionalism, passion and how to work hard. I spent a lot of time in the printmaking room, which is where I met Jason. I never worked in a print shop.

## 17. Most people think of garment printers when they hear “professional screen printer.” How is what you do different than that?

We tend to identify ourselves as illustrators and printmakers rather than screen printers, because you're right—when you say “screen printer” everyone thinks T-shirts. Saying ‘printmaker’ tends to get people thinking along a fine arts track.

## 18. Are you really able to support yourself by screen printing art prints? How can I do that?

Just under seven years in, I can say yes—we support ourselves. You can do that by setting a goal and working towards it. It's plain and simple. You're going to have to work long, hard days. And nights. But keep in mind there is a clear difference between working long, hard days for a “job” you don't like and working long, hard days for something you love. I'd say being a practicing artist is one of the hardest jobs out there. In the early years we both had jobs in addition to Brainstorm. There were days when we both worked 9-5 for someone else and came home to work from 6-12 on Brainstorm. We're real people with real debt. We don't come from any sort of money, and there were dark days when it didn't always seem possible to live a life of an artist, but hard work really does pay off. We saw this great quote the other day, “The harder you work, the luckier you get.” That rings very true for us and we are grateful.



## 19. Do you do any experimental or alternative processes? Or are most of your prints made from photo stencils?

Currently we don't have any experimental processes. We hand draw almost all of the artwork and scan it, sometimes working some additional magic in Adobe Illustrator. We print out of our Epson film printer and take it to the exposure. It's not very fancy or high tech but it's a system we're comfortable with.

**20. In this digital age, do you find you often have to defend printmaking? If so, what do you say? Or perhaps people are even more interested in hand-made prints now? What is your sense of the general interest in what you do?**

There are a lot of different ways this could be answered. I'll try my best to give our individual perspective on the changing market and our decisions. When we first started, everything was screen printed in limited editions. Over time, as we became interested in the wholesale market and started to gain a following, that perspective changed a bit and now we are screen printing in open editions. Our thought was that if there's such a high demand for our images, why would we stop selling them? We need to make a living. Stores want to carry them. People want to decorate their homes with them and that only makes us feel stronger about what we are doing. Of course we understand the idea behind making limited

edition artwork, but we've grown and changed our views. When Brainstorm really started to become something that we could support ourselves with, we had to adapt. Back in May, 2013, when we did the National Stationery Show in NYC, we introduced digital versions of our work. This was another step for Brainstorm as we became more involved with wholesale and mass-market educational art prints. We've found that a lot of customers don't feel very strongly one way or the other when it comes to digital or screen printed prints. The customers love the image itself and



want to take it home. The fact that they're actually purchasing printed matter and not just posting a digital image of it to Facebook or pinning it on Pinterest is amazing in and of itself. As artists, we should capitalize on that, as printed products are disappearing. We love screen printing and will always continue to do it—but we will also grow in the digital direction, and how exactly that plays out is yet to be determined.

**21. Where do you sell your prints? Is every job done under contract?**

Our prints are currently for sale through our web store on our site, [wearebrainstorm.com](http://wearebrainstorm.com)

Select prints are also available at our 27 retailers across the country. Specific stores and locations can be found on our wholesale page.

**22. Is screen printing hard on your body? What are some occupational hazards?**

Printing large editions (and eventually open editions) is terrible for our bodies (tendonitis, repetitive motion injuries, etc). It was one of the major factors in deciding to just put our printing press on a credit card and deal with it later. I would highly recommend a press to any screen printer who wants to consider making a living from prints, but the press is dangerous, too. It's heavy to move with and can crush you if it comes down on you. There are very minimal safety precautions on it since it's refurbished from the late 80's. But we love it.



### 23. What are you excited about? Do you have any big jobs coming up?

We are really excited for the holidays this year for our business. A very popular online retailer will be releasing awesome products with our illustrations. We are working on releasing some new prints and keeping our retailers happy and stocked. Our holiday catalog is being worked on and we are looking forward to the National Stationery Show in 2014. We are excited to potentially hire someone this year, too!

### 24. What is your favorite part of the process?

We'd say after all the work that goes into making a print, the best part is still that first pull of that final color. When you lift the very first completed new print off the press bed and hold it up, completed. That feeling never, ever gets old.

### 25. Have you ever had any total disasters?

**Tell us some horror stories.**

Of course we've had total disasters. Imperfection is human. One of our "favorite" horror stories is when we were hired by Rowan University (our alma matter) to produce a limited edition poster for a Jazz event they were holding. Jazz and the music program at Rowan is a big deal and this particular show was a tribute to Duke Ellington—a jazz legend. It was a large 22" x 30" poster, 4 colors, full bleed. The thing was beautiful. We both worked on it with 2 faculty members getting the design and copy approved. We were designing the poster in November of 2008 and the actual show was coming up in February. It wasn't until after the poster was produced, personally handed out to University administration, and hanging in the concert center that someone realized the concert date said 2008 when it should have said 2009. Everyone was so consumed with the design and the show that nobody caught the fact that the year was going to change to 2009. The faculty even hired a professional editor to review the copy! The posters had to be collected and they ended up with some 11" x 17" digital junky poster that someone else made to advertise the show. If January is in between your deadline and the actual event, check your dates!



### 26. What was your favorite job to date?

**JASON:** I'd say having a strong relationship with our retailers is my favorite ongoing job. That allows us to keep making!

**BRIANA:** I don't have a favorite job per se, because they've all been pretty fantastic in getting us to where we are today. This year is definitely my favorite. It is and will be one hell of a year for us.

### Learn more about Brainstorm

**Brainstorm's website** - [www.wearebrainstorm.com](http://www.wearebrainstorm.com)

#### Brainstorm's blogs:

Brainstorm's blog - [wearebrainstorm.tumblr.com](http://wearebrainstorm.tumblr.com)

Jason's blog - [jasonsyder.tumblr.com](http://jasonsyder.tumblr.com)

Briana's blog - [brianafeola.tumblr.com](http://brianafeola.tumblr.com)