

# Celebrities In Salt

## Artist Sprinkles Imagination Into His Detailed Portraits



BRIAN OWENS, 24, of West Hartford, is an artist who has received a lot of attention recently for his salt portraits, particularly one of Morgan Freeman. He also likes to use chocolate, incense and pumpkins in his art. His most recent salt rendering of a lion took him eight hours to produce. ( Patrick Raycraft | [praycraft@courant.com](mailto:praycraft@courant.com))

By **KRISTIN STOLLER** [kstoller@courant.com](mailto:kstoller@courant.com)

WEST HARTFORD — Using just a playing card, a small paintbrush and his finger, Brian Owens painstakingly creates detailed portraits from tiny grains of salt.

From his plastic, white salt shaker comes images of rapper-singer Drake, Batman's Joker, and, most recently, actor Morgan Freeman. Since he started his creations in December, Owens, 24, of West Hartford, has gained more than 1 million views on Reddit and appeared in a national report on ABC News.

An engineer by day, Owens said art has always been his passion.

“It started in kindergarten,” he said. “I'd draw dolphins for my friends at school and they told me I was good so I kept doing it. Whether I was or not, I got the positive reinforcement. It's been a lifelong pleasure.”

Owens, a Simsbury native, said he took art classes at Simsbury High School and continued to do art on the side throughout college, mainly pencil drawings. He didn't venture into salt until December.

He said his inspiration came from barber and artist Rob Ferrel, who posts his creative portraits on Instagram, many of which include salt. Though he picked up some basic skills from his art classes, Owens said, he taught himself how to create the salt portraits.

“It's a pretty simple concept,” he said. “It's just whether or not you have the patience and salt to do it. It's a very lively medium.”

Since December, he's completed three celebrity portraits, a lion portrait and a skull portrait, and has attempted another.

“I started on Angelina Jolie, but I was about four or five hours into it and I was tweaking a section of her hair and stood back and realized I had brushed my sleeve through her face,” Owens said. “So that was that.”

The portraits can take about 10 hours to complete, although Freeman's took 14 hours, he said.

First, A Shaker

Owens said he does all of his work on a square, black folding table that he found in the back of his closet. Most of the time, he said, he will use a reference photo as a guide,

choosing people that inspire him and animals that catch his eye. He said he tries to select a subject that is easily recognizable.

He starts by covering most of the table in a light dusting of salt, then uses a playing card from a miniature card deck to shape the outer edges, without folding the card. Though he's not necessarily superstitious, Owens said he does think about what type of card to choose before beginning.

“I guess it's sort of like a Zen thing,” he said.

For example, in his latest lion portrait, he said he used the king of hearts, representing the Lion King or the king of the jungle.

Generally, the portraits are very ugly early on, he said, and it's not until about halfway in that the subject really starts taking shape.

“I take one edge [of the card] and drag it along the side slowly so I get a rough shape and a flat outline.” Owens said. “I use the side of the card to sweep up the excess salt and push it onto the floor to vacuum up later.”

In this beginning stage, he said he uses less than a fifth of his salt shaker. He said he will then work with his most-used tool, the small paintbrush, to create the fine details, such as eyes.

To figure out where he wants the brightest whites to appear, he looks at it through the eyes of an engineer, pouring more salt where the portrait should be the most luminous.

“If you think of salt as pixels, if you have a lot of pixels populated in one area, it's going to be a very white surface that's going through,” he said.

He said he uses 80 percent to 95 percent of the salt in the shaker when his portraits are complete. If he pours too much salt, he will lick his finger and dab at the salt to remove it.

“It works really well,” he said. “The only negative to that is if I use the same finger more than once ... I'll have to taste the salt and I'll have to run and get a drink of

water.”

Bending over a table for four or more hours at a time also takes a toll on Owens' back. He said he is usually sore for the next day or two after a portrait is complete.

After he's completed a portrait, he sweeps up the salt and pours it back into his salt shaker to be used in his next creation. He said he hasn't figured out how to preserve his creations and hasn't reached the level where he wants to keep them.

Matt Wood, Owens' roommate, said he loves to see the progression of Owens' portraits.

The salt portraits are never messy, and the pair have managed to move the table when guests come over without disturbing unfinished creations, Wood said.

“When Brian found the table and he started playing around with this medium, I thought it was brilliant,” he said. “Everything really stands out with the contrast of the white and the black. It was a really creative use of materials.”

## Runaway Post

Owens posts pictures and videos of his art on his Instagram page, but it was on Reddit where he got the most attention.

He first posted a picture of his skull portrait, which many commenters thought he had faked through a clever use of Photoshop. Owens said he “had to stand up” for himself, and posted pictures and videos he had taken of himself during the creative process.

That's when things completely turned around, he said. He posted his portrait of Drake which received more than 1 million views on the first day, he said. The British newspaper the Mirror then picked up the photo for its website, he said.

And after he posted his portrait of Freeman, he was contacted about appearing on ABC News.

“I would love for it to be more than a hobby some day and the sooner the better,” Owens said. “I would love to become an independent artist one day where I don't need

my day job.”

In addition to salt, Owens said, he's made artistic creations out of incense, pumpkins and chocolate.

The inception of the chocolate portraits occurred when Owens was home for the holidays last year, eating ice cream with “chocolate crunchies.”

“I was pushing it around on my plate and I started making different designs,” he said. “I pulled a mirror out when everyone was away from the table and started doing a self-portrait. Four hours later, I completed it.”

Owens said he's always found that it doesn't matter what an artist's medium of choice is, as long as they can achieve a certain likeness.

Aspiring artists don't need to play by the rules, and they don't need to go by the books, he said.

“I see it as a challenge and that's what it means to me. I get a lot of responses like, ‘Why are you doing this? It's not permanent, you can wipe it off,’ ” Owen said. “That's not really the point. The point is the process.”

[◀ PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

Article 19 of 85

[NEXT ARTICLE ▶](#)