

Creating Art from a Ride – Mark Bowers’ Drava



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[Rides, Sport](#)

Words by Jeffrey Stern, photos via Mark Bowers

Mark Bowers, the creator of Drava, a visually and artistically represented reaction to Strava is creating art, just by riding his bike. According to Bowers, he thinks of it as his counterbalance to America, or even the world’s current obsession to obtain quantifiable data in nearly every facet of our daily lives. From smartphones to tablets, wearable devices like the Fitbit and Garmin computers, as well as everything in between, Bowers says, “Devices, surveys, assessment, and testing are influencing the way we appreciate the human experience.”

Many cyclists train using complex power meters and computers to analyze their efforts and progress towards a certain goal, often times taking over the experiential part of riding and turning the fun, thing you did as a kid pastime, into a chore and often dreaded. Inevitably, there are riders in our circles of friends who devour and crave this data, and others who prefer the simplicity of the freedom provided by the bike. The term “no garmin, no rules” is often one thrown around, suggesting without the use of technology the true freedom a bicycle provides can shine through.

Constantly, Bowers has questioned the benefit, truth, and application of these measurements that ultimately seem to dehumanize the experience. Through his ride Drava, he’s able to mimic the collection of data obtained with any number of GPS devices, as he explains further, “By using a truly analog method of pencil and paper, I’m creating a physical record of my ride experiences. These drawings are created through the act of riding a bike – bumps, accelerations, braking and flow.”



How does he capture these experience on a ride? He's designed, hand built, 3D printed and laser cut numerous device iterations of Drava, most recently with cardboard, zip ties, rubber bands and coins as his building materials. His latest device, dubbed Drava 2.0, can easily be reproduced and shared he says.





As a kid Bowers frequented the local Wagner Schwinn Bicycle Shop where they knew him by name. It wasn't until he had his first real job in high school that he could afford to buy a real bike; a purple anodized 1993 Trek 7000. He loved the adventure of the ride and was bit first by the mountain biking bug because of the element of nature and his surroundings in Michigan. In his early thirties, he purchased his first road bike because of a move to Chicago, where pavement riding was the easiest option in the big city. He learned to love road riding in his adopted home and has spent time in the saddle for a multitude reasons. "I have ridden for the adventure, training, destinations, competition, mental sanity, daily work commute and the bar...beer is good for you after all," he says with a sly smile.



Post-Ride Brew

A high school art teacher by trade, he uses his job, family and free time as the the framework for his creativity. He cites his inspiration from artists like Jim Dine, James Valerio, Maria Tomasula, and others, but adds that he appreciates anyone who has the passion and desire to create. He often seeks silent time after a long day teaching students, so his paintings reflect his feelings, "I make very small paintings that are obsessive in detail because my art studio is tiny and I seek quiet meditation after a day with high school students, which is also why I seek long solo rides. This is not to say that I don't love teaching, I very much do, but the Drava project relates to my idea that artmaking must find a way to fit into my life or I would be forced to stop making art altogether," which would never happen, he assures me.

Since he rides his bike often during the summers and other school breaks, he thought about how he might record the long hours spent doing one of his favorite activities, but in a 2D art form. When teaching drawing to students, he often stresses the beauty of variation, uniqueness, and relationships of different marks in a drawing, "I feel that a good drawing is not a facsimile of a photograph, but a frozen record of how an image was built line by line, mark by mark." He says this

is very much the same thought pattern with Drava, “bump by bump, acceleration by acceleration,” though.



Des Plaines River Trail Ride

Bowers refers to the 'ride culture shock' he experienced when moving from Michigan to Chicago as the beginnings of Drava. "Biking was an activity that usually took place in the woods with buddies and hairy legs and in the blink of an eye it turned into the 'drop' group road rides of Chicago." These fast paced, often unsafe group rides were filled with new terms that he'd never heard of before; VO2 Max, watts, output, threshold and more. The frequency and sudden change in his cycling environment helped to illuminate the initial idea of Drava in his head.

Once the idea started to come to fruition, he did just like he would do with any of his other art projects and dove straight in. He says there were many details he learned through the initial trial and error phase when trying to find the best materials and tolerance to make a beautiful drawing with Drava, and ultimately settled on the following ten step process:

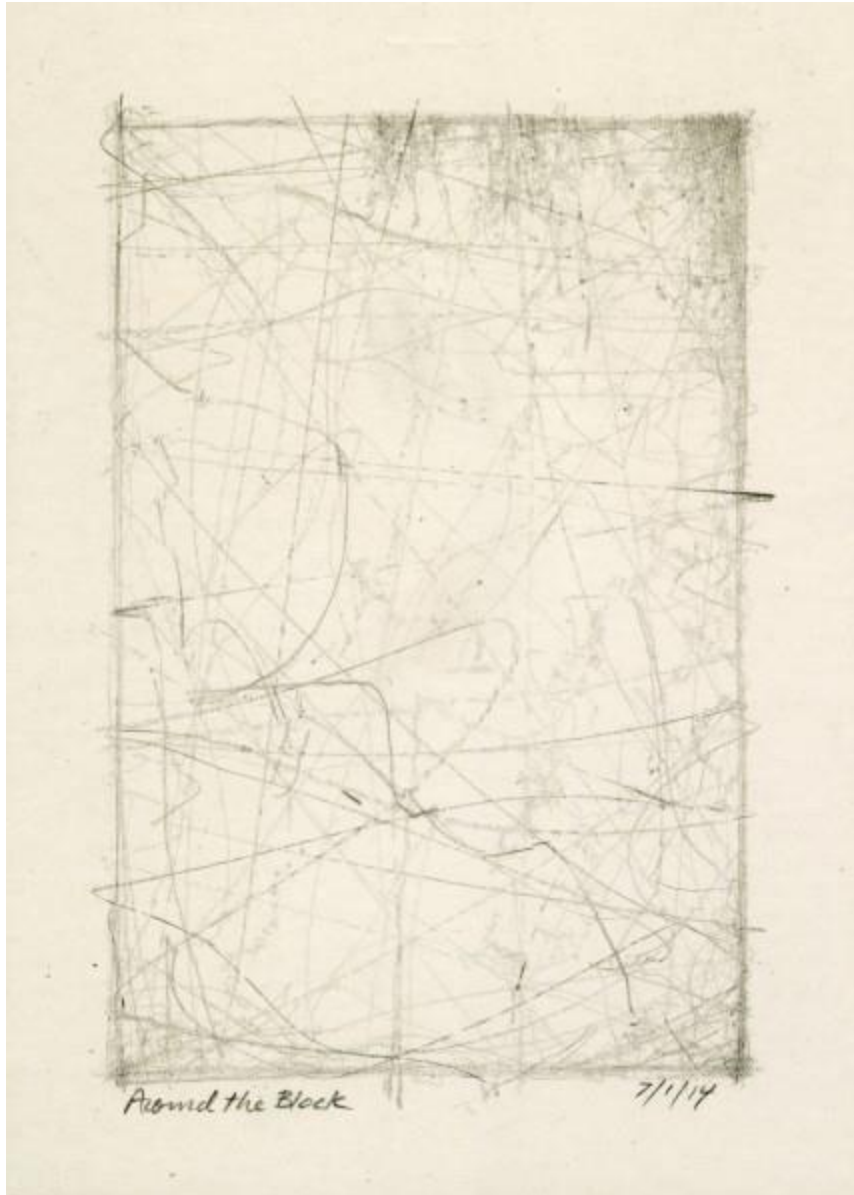
1. Drill a hole in a coin
2. Strip the wood off a selected colored pencil lead

3. Heat the coin with a torch
4. Push the pencil lead through the hot coin hole (Wax in colored pencil lead will melt creating a sturdy union when cooled)
5. Cut the pencil lead to the proper length within the coin
6. Double-side tape the illustration board (paper) to the bottom of the Drava case
7. Place the coin under the thrust bearing
8. Set bearing/coin onto paper
9. Fasten the lid to the bottom Drava case
10. Go on a sweet ride





He's repeated this process dozens of times now and says his favorite piece is Around the Block, "A record of a ride I did with my then 3-year-old son while he was on a Strider bike. I followed him wherever he wanted to ride in our neighborhood. It's a record of a great memory. And might be a true visual representation of a kid's freedom while on a bike...no straight lines." It's these types of rides that he thinks we need more of in our world, complete spontaneity.



Around the Block

Bowers admits that he is a Strava virgin, and can only relate to the San Francisco based company's technology by the segments of some of his favorite trails in Michigan that have been altered by riders making KOM attempts. Although the name Drava appears similar to Strava, he tells us, "I did not directly name Drava in context to Strava; 'va', in its literal Spanish to English translation means; he/she/it goes. Which equates to me as 'moving drawing' or Drava."

At some point, there are limits to the levels of technology we can surround ourselves with and Bowers recognizes that everyone is different when it comes to this topic. His hope is, "That the best technology is used to help humans be more human, experience and improve the world around them in a positive way."

What's a ride anyway if your head is buried in a 2-inch computer screen on your stem or wrist? Not only is it unsafe, but in it's way of quantifying and connecting the ride to segments and numbers, it's actually disconnecting the rider from what Bowers believes is the true purpose of riding in the first place. "Technology, social media, data dependency, and the inability to recognize our reality is influencing our democracy and human experience like never before," he says.

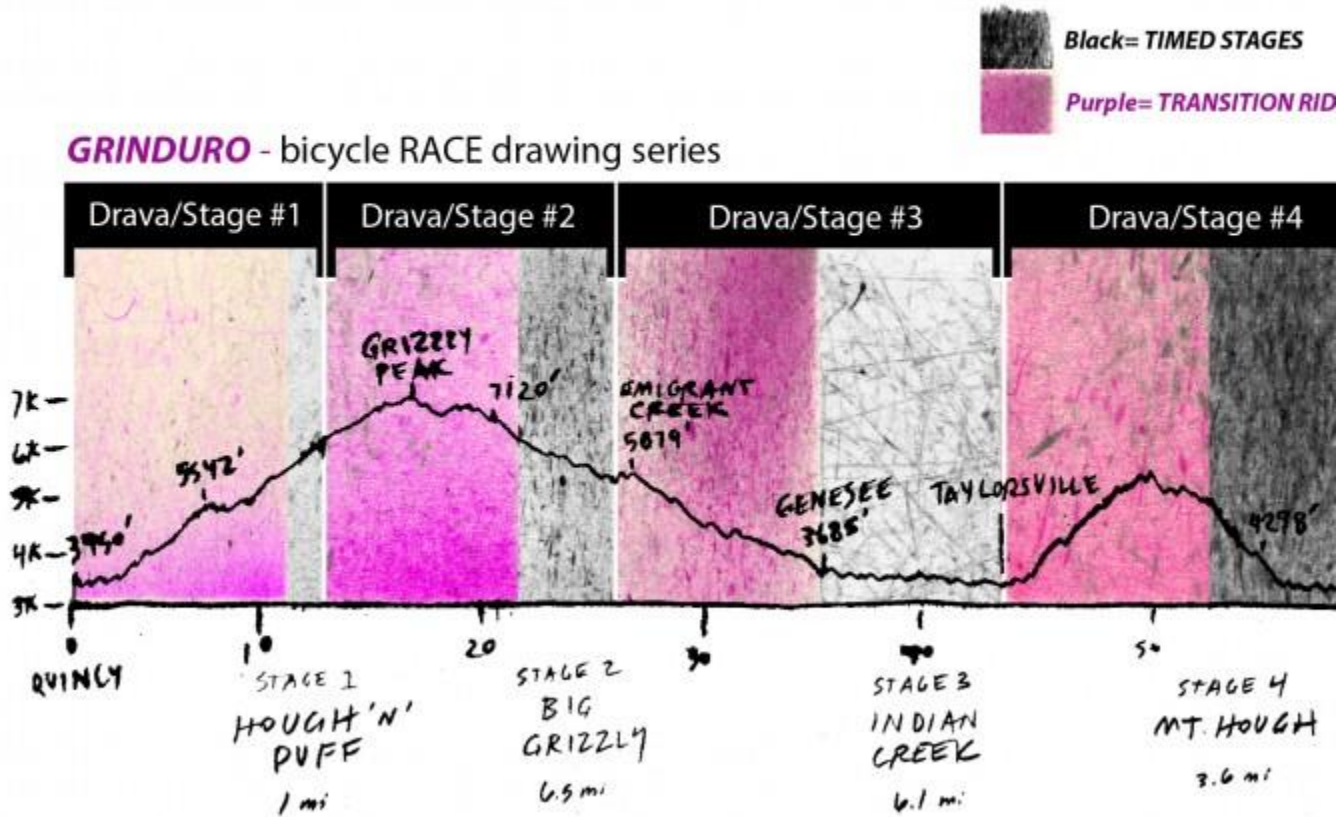
What he enjoys most about the ride resonates with many cyclists, “Getting lost...” he continues, “whether it be in my thoughts, exhaustion, ride flow or location. The best rides are when time loses its grip on the moment. The longer this lasts the more enjoyable the ride.” As a self-proclaimed purest, he lets his body and senses tell him what he needs to know on any given ride, which have yet to fail in yielding that cheek-to-cheek ride ending grin that all cyclists are familiar with.



Commute

What's next for Drava 3.0? Bowers is very interested in the idea of a “sharing economy” where he can post instructions, templates and list the accessories needed so others can create their own Drava devices and artwork from rides. “It's simple to make with some modest bits,” he explains. Another thought that pops into his head as we're nearing the end of our conversation is to use two Drava cases stacked on top of each other to see how two drawings may differ from the same ride. Which, rather perfectly represent his take on every ride, even ones that follow the same route; they're all different based on his level of openness and willing to experience whatever the world, nature and the open road has to throw his way.

"Maybe if we all just rode our bikes with our heads up more, and didn't stare at our digital gadgets as much, we might even wave hello to one another as we pass?" Now that would be something refreshing in this technology driven day and age.



Grinduro stage map

Check out more Mark Bowers' work (cycling related and not) on his [website](#) and follow him on [Instagram](#) to keep up with his daily rides, art inspiration and Drava pieces.

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