



Russ "Lurk" Morland • David Morrison photo

LURKING ABOVE GROUND AT THE ELECTRIC UMBRELLA

by David Morrison

When not writing I earn my kibble working at a downtown Nanaimo store that this year celebrates 24 years in business. Our uniqueness, stock range and service ensure we receive regular compliments, but it's amazing how many impressed born-and-bred customers had no idea we existed when dropping by. The usual explanation is that they do not shop downtown. This is an unfortunate consequence of both the (long-since unwarranted) lingering impression of downtown's 'difficult' past, and the retail dominance of half a dozen malls and other retail complexes disproportionately servicing a population of less than 85,000.

As someone who spends 32 hours per week working in its heart I can tell you, firstly, that downtown Nanaimo is certainly not the perceived lawless no-go zone where maniacs roam the streets in packs. No, it is instead a friendly and colourful part of the city in which a determined community of largely independent businesses trades against difficult odds. They are thoroughly deserving of your patronage, so starting with

this look at an inventive business model, as a 'downtowner' I'm proud to present an occasional series of articles about some of downtown Nanaimo's more fascinating stores, and the young entrepreneurs behind them.

On December 1, The Electric Umbrella celebrates one year in business. I first entered this combined tattoo studio and art gallery shortly after its opening, to encounter owner Russ 'Lurk' Morland's incredible paintings. Odd, humorous, utterly compelling and curiously beautiful, Morland's art is populated by strange characters whose origins date to a former employ, generating his nom de guerre in the process.

"I was working at a skate shop and having a few art shows there," he explains. "We used to get a lot of interesting people in that I jokingly referred to as 'the Lurkers.' I started to paint little caricatures of some of them that had speech bubbles saying, 'Lurk.' Eventually I stopped signing my paintings as Russ and started signing them as 'Lurk,' because people were not referring to my name as much as Lurk, just because of those speech bubbles!"

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Morland moved to Nanaimo in 2000, relocating from the small northeastern English town of Spennymoor. In 2003 he became an apprentice tattoo artist. Morland had studied art in England for several years, including graphic design, art history, art and design, life studies, photography and fine art. It was when studying the Cubism Movement that his style began to emerge.

"I started looking at Picasso, Matisse, stuff like that," he says. "I thought it smarter to go to the source, what Picasso was influenced by. He was really into African art and masks and Aboriginal art, so from there I started to develop my style a bit more. When I moved here, that's when it really changed. I began to be inspired by the local Native art – Coast Salish and Haida art – and, for sure, I was influenced by the tattooing. When you tattoo, you have to learn many different styles, so that really polished and honed my skills as an artist. Obviously, my style is very much influenced by graffiti and street art as well – the underground, and what we call 'lowbrow' art." (Also known as 'pop surrealism,' the modestly dubbed lowbrow art movement is a product of late-70s Los Angeles, influenced by comics, punk rock and various subcultures).

"The whole point of my paintings," Morland continues, "as there's supposed to be a black humour in them, is for you to look at them and continue the stories in your head. There's nothing really profound about my paintings; they're not going to change the way you think about life, but they are supposed to be accessible in that lowbrow category."

One aspect of the 36-year old Morland's work I personally appreciate is that it absolutely pulsates with life. He uses a lot of vivid primary colours, which he reveals an evolution in his style borne of particular influences: "Recently it's been getting

even more vivid, as I've been influenced by 50s and 60s animation styles, especially the backgrounds, like the classic Looney Tunes, the Pink Panther, anything like that – you know, that really flat style that looks like gouache. I actually started painting in gouache to try and emulate that, and that paint, an opaque watercolour, is by its nature extremely vivid."

Another interest of Morland's, one to which he applies his considerable artistic prowess, is skateboarding. "I have been, and still am, heavily involved in the skateboard industry," he says. His artwork graces skateboards on display in the The Electric Umbrella. He holds the position of Artistic Director for the Vancouver Island company, Instrumental Skateboards, and as a member of the Nanaimo Skatepark Association Morland combined his art and chief passion as co-organizer of the acclaimed first annual Paint and Skate event, held in downtown Nanaimo's Diana Krall Plaza in August 2011.

What was once a health and wellness centre, but is now The Electric Umbrella, came into being at a crossroads in Morland's professional life. "Everybody wants to do their own thing," he says. "After working (as a tattoo artist) where I had been for eight years I was getting a little jaded, and I wanted to concentrate on my painting more. I was at a stage where I could just paint and get by, so started looking for a studio space. I decided the best way forward was to consolidate everything I do, and wanted to do – graphic design, tattooing, a gallery space, and a studio to paint out of – all under one umbrella. Ta-da! So, that was the idea for The Electric Umbrella!"

As a gallery, The Electric Umbrella is providing talented young local artists, working in all mediums, with their first opportunities to display their creations in

public. "I've had shows every month, and it's gone amazingly well," says Morland with understandable pride. "There have been artists from Victoria and Vancouver, but mainly Nanaimo, and it's been very successful. I'm actually fully booked until 2014, and even if there are a couple of cancellations there is a list of people waiting. There may even be a couple of artists from the States coming up, including an old school professional skateboarder called Lance Mountain. If he comes, people will come from all over to see his stuff. Fingers crossed!"

The current show at The Electric Umbrella, running from October 27 for one month is "Maps & Paper Trails," featuring the art of Nanaimo's Melanie Godel, then preparations start in earnest for the one-year celebrations. Although details are to be confirmed as we go to press, the anniversary will likely be marked by a party with bands and DJs, as well as a special Lurk art show that will run until February.

As he reaches this first milestone of his business venture, I'm delighted at Morland's success. As an ardent supporter of the local arts scene and a man bringing a unique cultural flavour to Nanaimo, he fully deserves it. Besides, he sees downtown as the place to be, saying, "I am a diehard supporter of downtown Nanaimo, and if it came to it I would go down with the ship!" It surely won't come to it, but if it did I'd be clinging to the mast right next to him. ~

The Electric Umbrella is located at 321 Wesley St. and open Wednesday to Sunday (Wed 12:00-6:00; Thu-Sun 12:00-8:00). For further information, please visit www.electricumbrellatattoo.ca and www.facebook.com/theelectricumbrella or telephone Russ 'Lurk' Morland on (250) 591-5590 during the above trading hours.