

Dunedin native whisks in from NYC for hometown project

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DUNEDIN — Like her name, Storm Ritter is a force of energy, leaping enthusiastically from art project to art project, ever seeking new ways to express herself.

Her latest artistic effort is a colorful impressionistic mural that fills the 60-foot-wide eastern exterior wall of one of Dunedin's go-to destinations, the Blur Nightclub on Main Street, a show bar that offers live entertainment, ranging from drag queen bingo to burlesque, karaoke and live music.

Longtime friends Kathy Carlson and Virgil Kelly, owners of the Blur, had previously invited her to paint a wall inside the nightclub using her so-called Cool People concept. They liked it so much, they asked her to create a mural on the outside of their building.

"We just love it. It's so different, it's colorful and it's beautiful. Our customers love it, too, even if one said they thought it looked alien," said Carlson, who now wants Ritter to paint some Cool People on her house.

Ritter said the mural is like an impressionistic fine art painting.

“I combined the Cool People with the Age of Aquarius theme of the earth, the sun, the star, and the moon anchoring each of four panels. I wanted to create a journey into the divine, something people could keep looking at and finding something new to relate to,” said Ritter. “I wanted something magical.”



Storm Ritter's murals often incorporate celestial imagery. Her latest artistic effort is a colorful impressionistic mural that fills the 60-foot-wide eastern exterior wall of one of the Blur Nightclub.

She created the mural while standing on a platform that she could move along the building wall. Mockups of the final design were posted in the Blur parking lot so that people could see what it would eventually look like.

Taking a little more than a month to create, Ritter said it has led to new art commissions, including painting some of her Cool People on area homes.

“The response has been fantastic,” she said. “It was so fun to do. In one panel, I made a little nod to the Blue Oasis, which was what the bar used to be called when it opened just after Prohibition. There is a little number there that was the phone number people used to call up the operator.”

Ritter said her artistic style is “hippy-dippy, but modern,” and very much her own. She uses surrealism and expressionism’s flattened shapes, vivid hues and distorted forms to infuse her concepts with emotion and perceived reality.

“I use music to fuel my emotions. In fact, I can’t paint without having music on, whether it is something from the 20s or the 80s,” Ritter said. “My art has always been very surreal, very absurd, even mystical. It’s where my soul is at.”

She maintains a studio in both Dunedin and New York’s City’s West Village where she is constantly creating new works of art.

“I paint every day — I wake up and paint — but I’m business-minded, too,” Ritter said. “It’s kind of a right-brain, left-brain thing. It just works.”

Wherever she paints, her cat, Velvet, a Russian Blue kitten she got from the SPCA seven years ago, is always there to supervise her latest art creation.

“Velvet is the best. She’s the coolest cat, like my shadow. I take her every day to the studio, and she worked as a sales associate and even has her own Instagram account. In my studio, she sits next to me constantly, watching me paint. She goes everywhere with me,” Ritter said.

She also has learned to tolerate Ritter's fascination with fashion, somewhat stoically wearing clothes that Storm designs for her.

Until 2020, Ritter operated a store in Greenwich Village where she created and sold signature clothing featuring textile designs based on her painting.

With the onset of Covid, she closed the store and switched to ecommerce and showing her work in gallery exhibits, including a solo show that remained open for more than a month.

Her artistic credits also include a costuming assignment for the "Mean Girls" show on Broadway, working on scenes and costumes for "Saturday Night Live," and designing for several Netflix shows that have yet to be released.

She still designs and makes one-of-a-kind, hand-made clothing for private clients.

"Everything is hand-signed and has a story," Ritter said.

Currently, she is focused on further developing her "Realm of the Cool People" series. The Cool People concept developed several years ago after Ritter decided to become ambidextrous, teaching herself to paint simultaneously with both hands.

"I was getting a little frustrated, as most artists do, and I wanted to change the game. My right hand created the structure and my left hand provided freeform emotion and child-like whimsy," Ritter recalled.

She developed the two-handed skill by writing words backwards and experimenting with painting techniques.

"One day, I just put my hands together and made this person. I thought that was cool, so I painted them for friends and clients. They agreed they were really cool, so I said, yeah, they are the Cool People," Ritter said.

Each depiction of the Cool People is different, representing storytellers and truth speakers who depict the "unfulfilled qualities we all have as people", according to Storm. So far, she has created 34 canvasses using the Cool People theme, as well as many other pieces of art.

'I just came out of the womb doing art'

Ritter, 29, was born in Dunedin. She was competitively involved in theatrical design at the International Baccalaureate program at Palm Harbor High School, designing creatures for the school's production of "Little Shop of Horrors." One was so large, a flatbed truck had to be used to get it to the school.

She later moved to New York, where she styled for Vogue and Marie Claire magazines and earned a degree in didactic, mostly self-taught education at New York University's individualized study program. Her work also has been featured in Forbes magazine.

She credits her parents, Tim and Trisha Ritter, for teaching her how to be creative. She describes them as super-talented, “old-school, rock ‘n roll hippies” who somehow knew that Storm was the perfect name to give their new baby.

“I just came out of the womb doing art. I learned from an early age to use my imagination, doing anything creative from building floats to set design,” Ritter said.

She is a huge fan of her hometown and remembers how enamored she was as a teenager with the 1920s jazz age Fenway Hotel that historically catered to explorers, artists, politicians, and musicians and even started Pinellas County’s first radio station.

“Dunedin has an intimacy. It’s not like Mayberry, but it definitely is special. It is just charming, a nice happy place to be,” Ritter said.

Ritter and Velvet usually return to Dunedin for the winter holidays to spend time with family and friends.

Now that the mural is finished, Ritter will be returning to New York. She said new projects include completing and publishing a deck of tarot cards that will feature her Cool People, participating in art gallery shows, and minting some non-fungible art.