

On a Gulf Island High

by ANDREA SPALDING (Avid Magazine, October 2010)

“The times they are a changin’...” The Bob Dylan lyrics ran through my head while driving home from meeting Luke Ramsey. I was buzzed. I’d experienced the new raw energy stirring on Pender. It was exciting.

Luke Ramsey and his wife Angela Conley are part of an influx of energetic young couples coming to live and work on Pender Island. Their cottage on Clam Bay Road is small, but its psychic volume is enormous. It’s a place where ideas expand and become reality, where engaging and serious discussions about art and life take place around the coffee table. As the conversation flows, the nurturing aromas of fresh homemade food promise to feed the body the same way the discussions are feeding the mind.

This is not just a home; it’s a creative space where Luke not only produces art, but where he and Angela live what they believe. They call it Islands Fold.

“Islands Fold is about inviting artists into our home, supporting creative identity, collaborating, promoting health and well being and producing unique art.”

Luke Ramsey is a 30-something artist whose chosen style would have been dismissed out of hand when I was studying at college. It’s cutting edge graphic art with the wonderfully descriptive name of ‘The Psychedoolia Movement’.

The term Psychedoolia — yes, spelled with three ‘o’s — was coined by Vancouver artist Marc Bell. Once ignored by the pundits and considered not much more than graffiti, this style has gained considerable respectability. First seen on posters, T-shirts, and album covers — usually those of Punk Rock bands — its artists are now producing prints, zines, graphic novels, and arresting book covers. Gallery owners want shows, and the pieces such as Luke’s collaborative mural Giant Transition are commissioned to adorn public buildings.

Much of this contemporary art form contains social commentary. Sometimes it bruises the eye and offends our sensibilities, but art has been doing that for generations. (Monet’s impressionism was considered beyond the pale in his day). So even if graphic art is not your style, take a minute to look again and absorb what the younger generation is saying.

Giant Transition is a mural that adorns the side of the highly visible John Howard Society building in Edmonton, Alberta. It was commissioned by the Edmonton Arts Council, with the proviso that Luke involved an Edmonton artist. Luke spent last summer working on the concept, and then collaborated with Edmonton’s Josh Holinaty to install it.

Here is the artist’s statement:

“The giant on the right comes from a land of mass consumption and waste. His body is made-up of junk, trash and random man-made objects. He feels burdened by the weight of his load and feels stress and fear because of it. The giant on the left is showing compassion for her new friend. She comes from a land of green space and an abundance of nature. Her body is made-up of rivers, animals, and vegetation. As a gesture of support and understanding, she calmly puts her hand on the other giant’s shoulder. He’s feeling a little nervous about the change, but a positive transition begins to spread — a change that shares a common ground between the two. Their faces come together and form a complete circle, because they are in harmony with each other.”

Luke is concerned about harmony. He feels our lifestyle is out of whack with the environment, and questions our priorities for money. When asked to create a picture for a window on Vancouver’s Robson Street to be showcased during the Olympics, he produced Money Mountains.

It depicts our beautiful coast range, the site of the 2010 Olympics. Two athletes, a skier and a snowboarder, are speeding down the mountainside. But look closely, the snowboard track is making an S, and the parallel ski tracks cut it in half to make the dollar sign.

“What a venue,” I remarked

Luke was thoughtful. “Once you decide to make your art public, you have a responsibility to say something,” He smiled. “But it was pretty exciting to have thousands of people walk by that window and see my own private comment.”

Like many artists, Luke has always been interested in creating. As a young teen graffiti had its attractions, but the fact it was illegal was a deterrent. Besides he wasn’t interested in ‘tags’, he was interested in creating characters and telling stories.

“The punk rock movement hugely influenced me, it encouraged kids’ own DIY ethics. It encouraged artists to ‘do it yourself’ and share with friends.”

He did it himself.

“I got out of high school and hitched to Newfoundland, then I travelled around the world with several sketchbooks. But it was not until living in Taiwan that I got really inspired with Psychedoolia. Seven years ago I decide to pursue art seriously and four years ago I decided to go full time.”

Turning art into a full-time profession presented ethical challenges to this socially conscious artist.

“I work for clients too... I have done a T-shirt for a rock band and some posters for major label musicians. Phish put out a boxed CD set and hired artists to do posters for each song. I created one for ‘Kill Devil Falls.’”

“Corporate work is always a battle for me,” said Luke. “It helps artists survive. But if you are going to take corporate dollars then do something positive with them, support artwork within your community. I found the mural thing — to be exposed to a broad audience and funded by a public art council — was much more rewarding. However I got a gig with Microsoft; I had to really think about it. Talked a lot about it with Angela. I took the commission and created a design that was etched on the back of MP3 players. I then used the money to help fund Islands Fold.

Islands Fold is a residency program that incorporates my passion for art and my wife Angela’s passion for food and the need to incorporate good nutrition into our lives. Artists are not good at this. Here’s how it works... we invite an artist into our home and they stay a week. They have three meals a day and have no housework etc to worry about — they can just concentrate on creating and collaborating. We fund it by selling their created and donated art online.

I’ve collaborated with over 100 artists. Including my Pender neighbour, Finlay Pogue. He’s 14 now. We worked on some black and white collaborative drawings called Just For Fun that were then published in a Spanish magazine. I really like drawing with Finlay. He is a natural. The results with him are the same as with any professional artist who has been involved with Islands Fold.”

Luke has a growing international reputation. Earlier this year he spoke at the Pictoplasma conference in Berlin, and next year he has a show in the States.

While Luke has probably been under many Islanders’ radar, some of you may have met him and Angela a couple of years ago at the Farmers’ Market. They were selling zines and prints. Their most popular print Orca Inhale depicts a man smoking an Orca with the smoke forming the Gulf Islands.

“It’s about getting high on the Gulf Island experiences and nature,” said Luke.

I concurred with the sentiment. I had just spent a couple of hours with this remarkable couple. They had given me a ‘Gulf Island High’ by sharing their art and ideas. ::