



# MUNJO MUNJO

*A new shop proves the resilience of Raleigh's creative spirit*

By ANTINO ART

Everyone had to get creative this year. And often, creativity calls for fearlessness. Case in point: a pint-sized Pomeranian barks at a dog more than twice its size while walking the mural-lined streets of downtown Raleigh. The dog's name is Munjo, who doubles as the face and namesake of the area's newest retail offering, Munjo Munjo – an emporium of creative artwork that opened downtown in late October as if defying a business climate of shutting down or bordering up as the new norm.

## Art Show Meets Things You Can (Afford to) Buy

The inside of the shop is a canvas in and of itself. Doodles of bow-tie wearing bears leap off the shelves and hang from the clothing racks. Mural-worthy illustrations grace the front of pizza boxes and notebook covers. There are jars of cotton candy called *Munjo Floof*, made to resemble the dog's trademark afro. There are even T-shirt pins in the shape of T-shirts (think about that). You're surrounded by a potluck of quirky merchandise made by local artists, much of which are original works by the owners themselves. Everything you see, from dress socks and fridge magnets to fanny packs and stationery, is a vehicle for self-expression.

Munjo is the brainchild of owners Amber Echevarria and Jaime Radar, two Raleigh-based and Chica-



go-bred artists whose suite of creative talents span design, screenprinting, illustration, muraling, animation, photography, and more. Their collective background in marketing and branding, along with their active involvement in Raleigh's art scene, has helped bring their visionary retail concept to life.

"Munjo wasn't something we planned," said Jaime. "We just knew we wanted to make gifts that people would enjoy."

However, 2020 was a year when things got destroyed, not made. A recent informal study from Shop Local Raleigh found that nearly 60 percent of small

businesses could possibly be facing closure. Staying open is a dogfight.

## Bet on the Underdog

Munjo began as a web-only store in 2016. From there, it evolved into a pop-up stall in the ex-Downtown Raleigh Alliance office space on Wilmington Street that was more of an unfinished commercial space than a storefront. While just half a block away from their current downtown footprint, the duo peddled their gems in a pedestrian no man's land, flanked by a parking deck, Centro Restaurant, and Met-Tech, a local billiards shop. If you ever walked through downtown Raleigh, chances are you didn't walk by there.

"We didn't even have running water," said Amber, who was juggling three jobs at the time just to clear rent. "It was hard to create when you couldn't wash the paint off your hands." Their saving grace was the foot-traffic from downtown events. As the advance of the pandemic and social unrest threw the small business community into survival mode, Amber and Jaime knew that they had two options: move out or go under.

## In Dogged Pursuit of Daydreams

While working as a barista at The Morning Times, Amber set her sights on the lime green retail space next door as the ideal candidate for the next incarnation of Munjo. It sat on a coveted corner lot, perennially vacant on the intersection of Wilmington and Hargett >>>



Streets – a thoroughfare that sees the second-highest foot traffic downtown according to data from the Downtown Raleigh Alliance. The space had long been the retail operation for the iconic Holly Aiken vinyl handbags and accessories. (DRA link – <https://downtownraleigh.org/sod-2020/shopping-dining>)

The two artists took their brave vision (and humble budget) to Greg Hatem – the owner of Empire Eats (which runs Morning Times, Raleigh Times, and many local eateries) and one of the largest real estate owners on the campus of downtown. Their plan was for Munjo to not just become another shop to buy artwork. It represented a stronghold for local creators and a bridge between the community and its art. After striking a chord (and a deal) with Greg, they set their idea in motion.

### Art is Everywhere

“Some people think they don’t like art, but art is everywhere,” said Amber. “Munjo is a store for people who want more in art than just paintings.”

At Munjo, coloring outside the lines is encouraged. Paint finds its way onto practical items that people use. Mugs, socks, and T-shirts are among their best-sellers. Jaime described their brand strategy as a question. “We’d look at an ordinary object and ask, ‘how can we make it into something fun?’”

### Keeping it Fun

The word Munjo itself means “silly” in Croatian. One of the go-to designs you’ll see in their shop is a slice of pizza with a face, whose pepperoni-eyed glare seems to question the self-seriousness of adulthood.

“One day, we made pizza shirts and said, ‘Let’s



color and have a pizza party,” said Jaime, reliving the a-ha moment when the idea for Munjo was born.

Now, the fingerprints of these two artists can be found all over downtown — whether it’s the colorful “Am-bear” mural that still hugs the underground entrance to the now-closed Imurj or the stickers of Munjo’s winking face making cameos on bike racks and street poles.

### When Munjo Eats, Everyone Eats (Pizza)

While creativity may be the force that guides them, it’s the community’s success that drives them. The shop is built to support and spotlight multi-disciplinary creatives from all over the Triangle and beyond. From renowned muralist Chris Pyrate and

homegrown painter Molly Raleigh to anyone with a creative vision, Munjo’s doors are like downtown Raleigh itself: *open to all*.

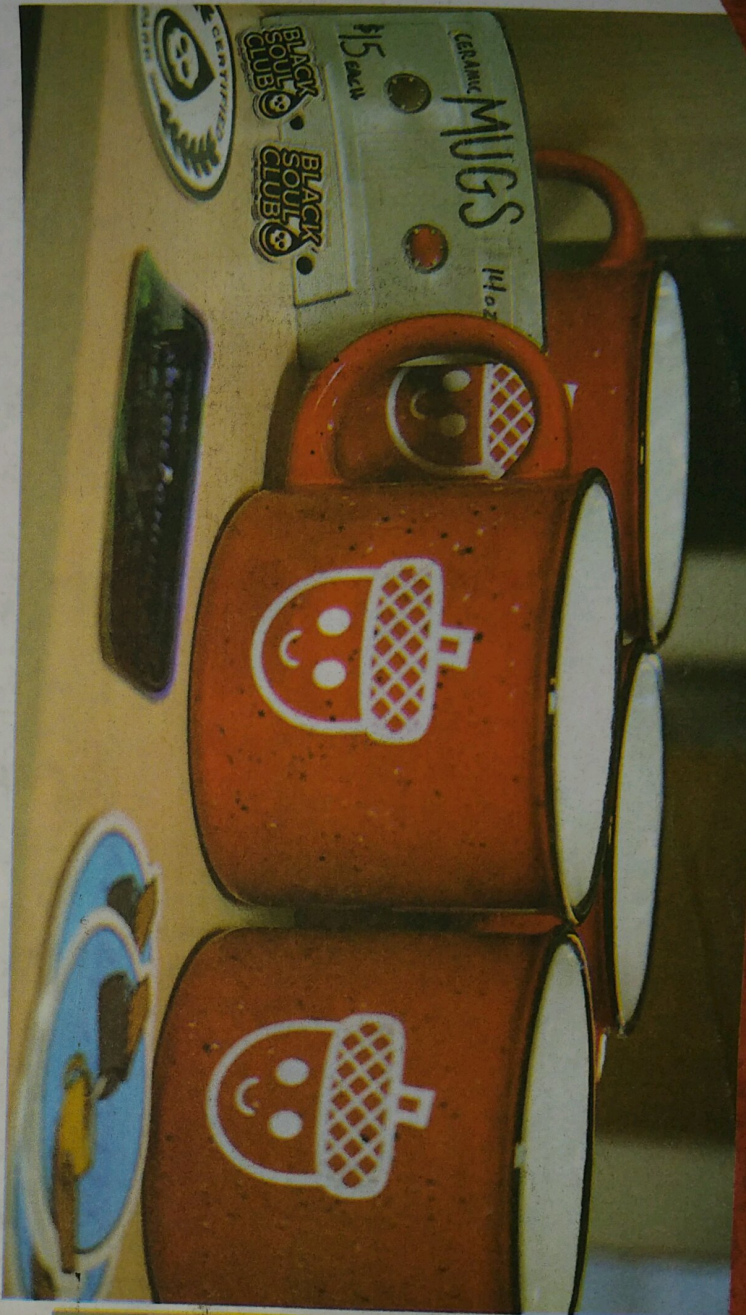
And there is no formal application process for those looking to make their mark. If you cross paths with Amber or Jaime, and they like your artwork, you’re in. Case in point: I wandered into their shop one day to show them copies of my new chapbook, “Raleigh for Ronin,” a walking guide to downtown written in vignettes with a feudal Japan motif. They loved the concept. Now, my work is available on Munjo’s ‘zine rack. (See more at <http://raleighisforronin.com>.)

“It’s community over competition,” said Jaime. “That’s what I love about Raleigh compared to bigger cities like Chicago. Everyone supports each other here.”

Printing, studio equipment, production, marketing, and distribution are a few of the resources that Munjo offers. Their ultimate goal is to “empower the community of local creators” as a haven where brilliant ideas become real. Part of the mission statement on their website reads: “Where you find a creative will, we help find a creative way.” The altruistic bent is what separates Munjo from the regular pack of commercial establishments and puts them in the class of a cultural movement.

In the early weeks of COVID, Amber and Jaime designed and produced the *Support Local Makers* T-shirts, which helped raise funds for struggling businesses in collaboration with the Visual Art Exchange.

Both frequently lend their talents to non-profit causes like Girls Rock NC, a grassroots initiative focused on empowering girls, women, and people of marginalized genders through creative expression. (<https://www.girlsrocknc.org>)




**Raleigh's New Spirit Animal**

If you had to put a face to the name of downtown's creative spirit, let it be the underdog that barks above its weight. "Munjo is our boss," Amber jokes. "This is his shop."

The fact that Munjo's doors are open is a reminder to be like the titular canine: fearlessly creating and never too serious. When you combine those things, even the worst of times can become a pizza party. Shop at Munjo this holiday season and beyond. You'll

not only up your gifting game but also join a celebration of things made in a year when things broke. They'll even give you free stickers like you just voted to make Raleigh a place where creativity reigns. 🐾

*Antino Art is a contributing writer for the Downtowner, content writer for VisionPoint Marketing, and the producer of RaleighisforRonin.com, a creative writing project that celebrates the downtown Raleigh experience during interesting times.*



**Munjo** **Munjo**

20 E Hargett St, Raleigh, NC 27601  
 Th & Fri: 12-5p • Sat 11-5p • Sun 11-4p

Please wear a mask.  
 Price Range: \$\$\$\$

In-store shopping, Curbside pickup, Delivery  
 Web Store: <https://www.munjomunjo.com>  
 Instagram: @munjomunjo