

# AIRBRUSH *Ilya Tinfo*

## FROM "EXPLODING" PAINTINGS TO AIRBRUSHING WITHOUT THE AIR

interview and photographs by Antonia Lamb

*Ilya Tinfo is a quiet man with a disarmingly sweet smile. He looks like an athlete, with his well-muscled body and penchant for T-shirts and sweatpants. Yet, in his Little Lake Street studio is a collection of airbrushed and painted works that proclaim him to be an artist, and a good one.*

*I first encountered his work at the Sea Gull in the late Seventies, and was simultaneously repelled and attracted by the intensity of his fragmented, bursting abstracts that wavered on the edge of a bizarre realism. His softer, less emphatic, but equally enigmatic airbrushings of tools and found objects kept drawing me back.*

*Ilya was asked to paint the cover for this issue of A&E Magazine, providing the perfect focus for an interview. When I arrived at his studio he was darkening the edges of his cover piece; during the next few hours he gave me a lesson in airbrushing, and some insights into himself.*

—A. Lamb

*How did you get started as an artist?*

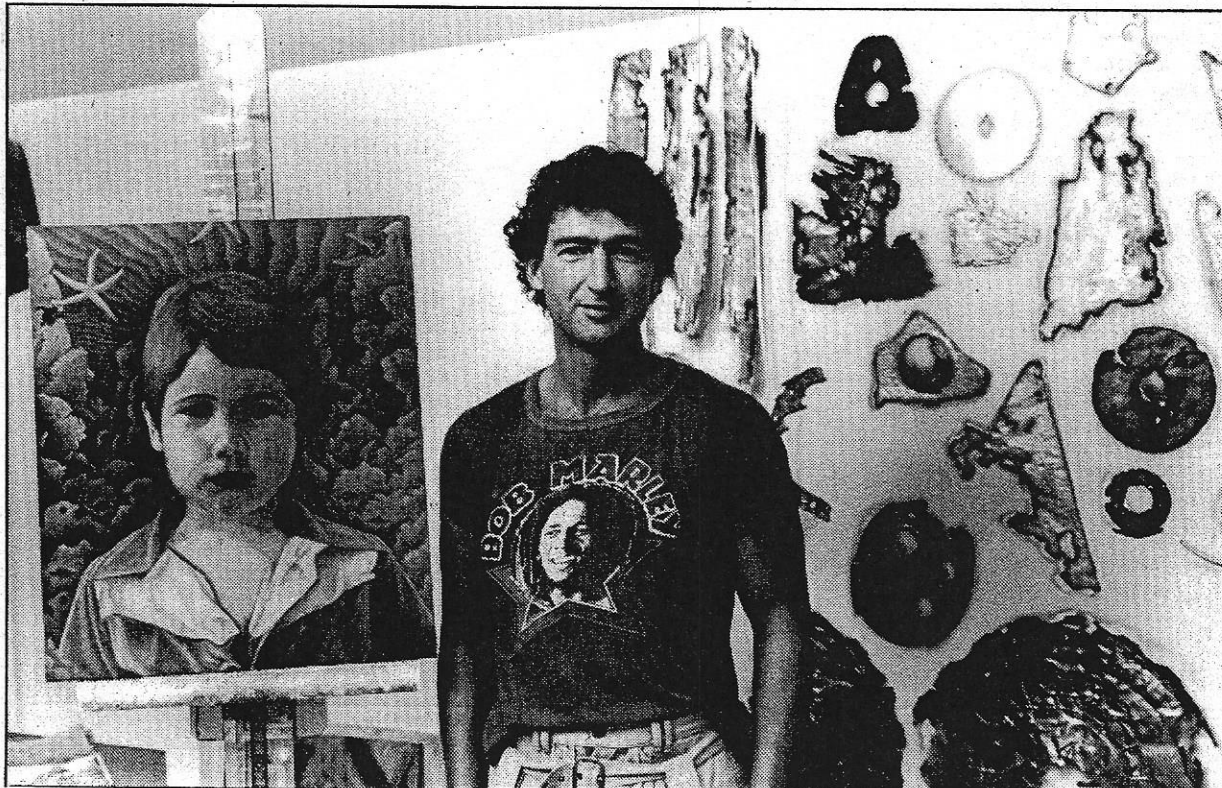
I definitely didn't set out to be an artist, and as I got older, I didn't think about it. It was just something that I did, and that I liked to do. It seems, in this point in my life, that I'm an artist, and have been for a while.

When I was ten years old I started painting. I don't know why I lost interest, but I didn't get back into it until after high school.

I went to college to study architecture, but found that too restricting, too mathematical and technical for me. Most of

my friends at school — Pratt Institute in Brooklyn — were in the art department. We had to take some art classes as part of the architectural curriculum, and I found that that was what I really wanted to do.

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Airbrush artist Ilya Tinfo with a portrait of his son: Effects and imagery developed through airbrushing are now being rendered in hand-brushed acrylics. On the wall behind are some unusual tools of his trade: sawblades, other metal parts used as templates.

# Ilya Tinfo

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My major at the time was film and photography, and also did a lot of painting, sculpture, drawing. I didn't learn a hell of a lot. It was the Vietnam period, the whole hippie thing and drug thing was happening, abstract expressionism was in... we were too busy expressing ourselves, and they weren't into teaching much technique.

It was "do what you want," most of the time. It was a good experience, but later I had to learn a lot that I could — or should — have learned in school. I was probably more at fault than the teachers. But if you really want to learn, you find a way.

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**"We were too busy expressing ourselves, and they weren't teaching much technique."**

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*You work in a variety of ways. My first contact was with your "exploding" paintings and your "futurist" work. Now you're doing realistic paintings of rocks, in oil. Will you be doing more of that, or will airbrushing continue to be your main thrust?*

At this point it's a pretty much evenly divided between brush painting, acrylic and oil, and airbrushing. And now I'm trying to tie them together. For instance, I don't really like the actual mechanical process of airbrushing, even though I like the results. Now I'm working on paintings based on airbrush images, but on a different scale and painted with a brush. I don't feel locked into anything as an exclusive tool or method.

I still do some of those "exploding" paintings, just not so many. But most of my work is getting much more grounded and representational.

*It looks like you started out fairly abstractly.*

I did. I kind of went about it backwards. Usually you go to school and learn certain techniques, learn the classical way, how it was done before. Then you break off and do your own thing. I started off during the abstract expressionist movement, and went with that for quite a while.

Anthony Senna, a fantastic artist who lived here until a couple of years ago,

was my main influence in appreciating art history; through him and his work I became more and more interested in realistic painting.

*My impression is that your main interests are physical fitness and art. You play a lot of softball, seem to work out a lot...and then, here you are in the studio.*

I'm a very physical person. Doing art-work is a very mental thing, really. Even if you're an abstract expressionist who's splashing paint around in a more physical way than other artists might, doing art is a very "head-y" thing. You're constantly making decisions, and that comes from the mind.

Doing physical things is a release for me. Just to be able to go out and play ball, go to the gym, go swimming — it helps me get away from the mental aspect of trying to create something. And I do enjoy playing sports.

*You've collaborated a certain amount with other local artists, haven't you?*

I worked with Jim Bertram on a painting with that "crumpled paper" technique. And I've done a lot of plates with Matt Rowland. Art seems to be a very individualistic thing, but collaborating is fun. It takes you into another realm that isn't as serious, somehow. You're not isolated, anymore. Sometimes, being alone in your studio can be very frustrating. But if there's somebody else there, you have a give and take.



**Health in art: mask screens flying pigment**

*Of course, Matt makes the plate and then you decorate it, so the aspect of individualism is still there.*

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Right. But even though you're essentially just given the plates and work on them, the work happens in a different environment. There are other people there, Matt's around to help or give suggestions; you're working with other people's energy.

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**"Collaborating is fun...  
You're working with other  
people's energy."**

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*I notice you're working on some commissions, now.*

Well, at this point most of my commissions are from friends who have become successful and have become patrons, as well as from my family. David Jones, the former owner of the Sea Gull, is a wonderful man and patron, not just for myself, but for many other artists as well. Over the years, David has purchased many of my works, and given me the opportunity to display my and other artists' work in the shows that I put together at the "Attic Gallery" in the basement of the Sea Gull.

I've had a lot of restaurant jobs to support myself and my painting, but right now I'm lucky enough to be able to concentrate on the art.

*Is there one kind of artwork that makes you happiest?*

Just painting. I like working in two dimensions. I haven't done a lot of sculpture, or photography as an art form. I don't write, or do video or film... for me, it's just painting.

*Can you describe your airbrush techniques?*

When I first started airbrushing I worked mainly with torn paper, creating landscape images. This was in New York, so you don't find a lot of stuff like you can here, at the dump or on the beach.

Then I came across some broken glass, and used that along with some cut-out stencils. I started experimenting with things like the washers that hold down my paper; then I realized that I could use just about anything as a stencil and spray around it.

When I first came to California, one of my favorite things was to comb the beach, find driftwood... then I saw all these pieces of metal, took some home, and used them in a painting. It just escalated from there.

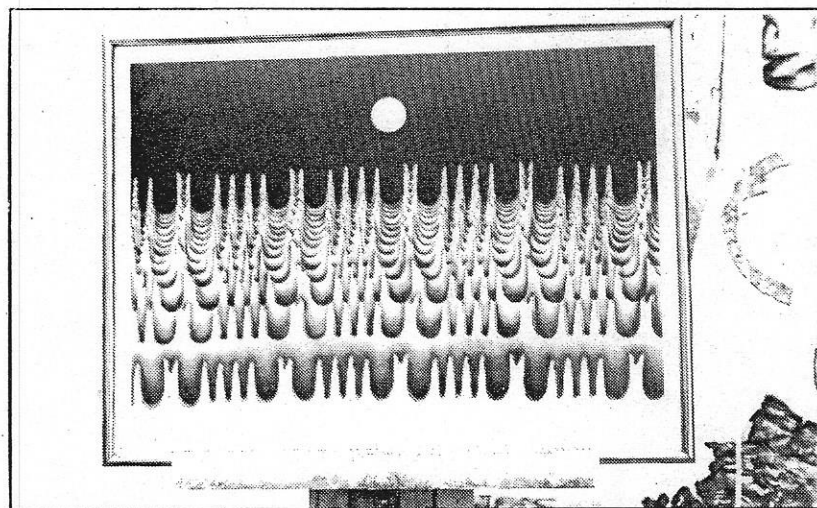
*Do you have any sense of overall purpose as an artist? Some idea of where you're going?*

I'm just doing it. I don't have a plan about where I'm going, except to keep on going... to keep on experimenting, exploring, learning, and improving. And though I'd never planned to be an artist, I certainly don't have any plans to stop being one.

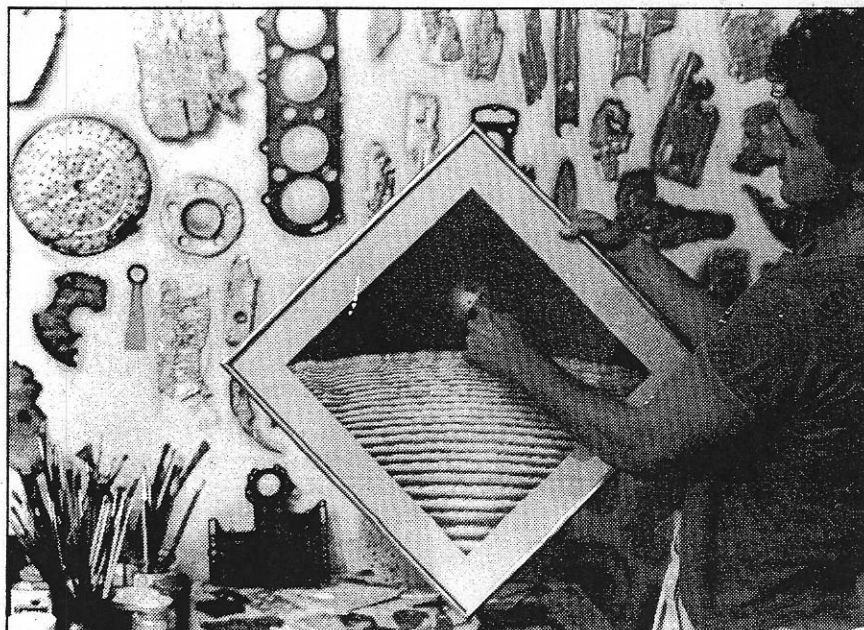
*Ilya Tinfo's airbrush works are currently exhibited at Mendocino's High-light Gallery, Main Street; and his paintings at King of Hearts, Lansing Street. His studio is also open by appointment: phone 937-4620.* □



*Tinfo's newest direction:  
realistic paintings of rocks*



*A virtual moonscape that used some surprising tools: The basic template — you have to look closely — was a sawblade.*



*An early airbrush "landscape" created with layers of rippling pigment; and crumpled paper served as the template.*