



Michael Potts photo.
Digital manipulation by Ilja Tinfo.

By Michael Potts

Remember the Sea Gull? In 1985, Ilja Tinfo's paintings on the Sea Gull's walls won him an invitation to paint a cover for the Mendocino Art Center's almost monthly magazine – printed in two colors on newsprint. Inside the October edition, Antonia Lamb interviewed Ilja (whose name was then spelled Ilya.)

Mendocino has changed in three decades – artists come and gone, the Sea Gull a cherished memory, the Art Center magazine morphed into what you hold in your hands – yet Ilja is remarkably steady. Still the “quiet man with a disarmingly sweet smile” described by Antonia, Ilja continues to “keep on experimenting, exploring, learning, and improving. . . I never planned to be an artist, but I certainly don't have any plans to stop being one.”

Ilja's paintings burst off their canvases in a deluge of creativity. Asked where he gets his inspiration, he replies, “Everywhere: life, people, nature. . . It just comes. The ideas are there, but I have to work hard, and oftentimes wrestle to get them onto canvas. I constantly struggle to make the painting as good as the inspiration.” The dozens of paintings that surround us in Ilja's studio are so dazzling

and varied, I tell him, it's hard to imagine that it comes from one artist. Ilja laughs, and replies, “Yeah, that's taboo. Galleries prefer artists who paint in one easily recognizable style, and that's not me.”

Ilja arrived in the U.S. on his second birthday with his Lithuanian architect father and German mother, sponsored by his father's uncle George, who had lined up an apartment in Harlem and gave them \$10 to get started. His father found work in a deli while studying English and Mechanical Engineering at night. Ilja started school in Brooklyn, then at age eight moved to Seaford, Long Island. He started painting at eight or nine, but in high school distractions (“sports and girls”) changed his direction.

Ilja attended the Pratt Institute, studying architecture,



Above: Salt Point series – Cascade – Toad's Hollow, 24" x 36", oil.



Right: Nature's Balance, 26" x 22", oil.

"but there was too much math. I liked the art courses better, so I transferred." He graduated with a major in film and photography. "As soon as I graduated in 1970, I was off to Europe to work with Fellini. Never did meet him, but ended up in London making a promo film for a soon-to-open boutique. A few months later, I was back in the States.

"I lived the hippie life in Provincetown, then San Francisco, where I worked as a bicycle messenger. I needed easier work, and when a friend suggested I try modeling, a young unknown photographer, Annie Leibovitz, shot a roll of film of me: my only claim to fame!

"After a year in San Francisco and Berkeley, I returned to Manhattan, got a job, and started painting again. By 1975 I was back in California with a motorcycle and enough money for a few months of good living. I ended up camping in Philo. When the money ran out, I rode into Mendocino and got a job waiting at the old Sea Gull.

"I loved the feeling of the town. Jim Bertram, one of the first people I met, became a good friend and inspiration. As for other influences. . . well, I have five big books about Salvador Dalí, and many books of the Old Masters, who always inspire me. Each of my 'styles' has a different approach. When I am copying something from life, or from a photo, most of the decisions – shapes, proportions, colors – are already made for me. I just need to transpose



After P.P.R., 26" x 22", oil.

them accurately onto canvas and find the best way to paint them to get the results I want. When I am working from my imagination, I have no reference point, nothing in front of me to look at and interpret. Possibilities are endless, and I am constantly making decision after decision, one thing leading to another. When I start I have no idea what I'm going to end up with. I also sculpt. Much of my work deals with recycled objects, junk, things people throw away, and from wood and metal objects that are distressed by nature, making something new from something old."

The walls of Ilja's house glow and vibrate with canvases in his many styles and his mixed media sculptures. At the time of our interview, his October show in the Mendocino Art Center's Main Gallery looms five months in the future, and Ilja is busy. "I'm constantly considering how to combine my different directions into a show that's engaging and works as a unit – that's the challenge!"

Ilja's new website, iljatinfo.com, provides an excellent overview of his eclectic styles. "My paintings are meant to be enigmatic, the products of discovery, change, and invention, for viewers to puzzle into their own stories. I just make 'stuff.' No hidden meanings or agendas, no narratives, no deep insight. It is whatever the viewer makes of it. To me, each painting is a construction. I start somewhere and end somewhere. I concern myself with formal elements. . . composition, color, tone, texture, edges, balance, harmony, space. . . and try to end up with something that will work, and that I like. . . so it is what it is."

Ilja's art will be exhibited in the Mendocino Art Center's Main Gallery, October 1-29. A free Second Saturday Gallery Reception will be held October 11, 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Visit Ilja's website at iljatinfo.com.



Left: Through the Wormhole, 26" high, acrylic/wood.

Above: Lips II – Gwyneth, 24" x 36", oil.