

# **UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR**

(A Survey of Contemporary Airbrush Realism)

## **EXHIBITION PRESS RELEASE**

By Curator/Tour Director, David J. Wagner, Ph.D.

UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR (A Survey of Contemporary Airbrush Realism) will premiere on October 24, 2021 at The Huntsville Museum of Art in Huntsville, Alabama, where it will run through January 16, 2022. After that, it will tour to The Hansen Museum in Logan, Kansas. The exhibition is comprised of 45 works, wide-ranging in theme, by noteworthy, working artists who have chosen airbrush as their principle medium of expression. According to the exhibit's Curator, David J. Wagner, UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR has been a long time in coming: "The earliest, and perhaps the last exhibition to broadly survey airbrushed fine art that I am aware of was The Artist and The Airbrush, curated by Barbara Rogers, herself an accomplished artist, 40 years ago at The Art Department of San Jose State University in California where she served on the faculty." Two of the artists whose work was featured in that seminal exhibition who are still active today, have current work in UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR -- Don Eddy (b. 1944) and Jerry Ott (b. 1947) -- as does another, George Green (1943-2020), though he passed away unexpectedly while UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR was being organized. This exhibition is comprised of works by these and the artists who followed in their footsteps including several of today's younger generation of accomplished airbrush masters.

Airbrush as a medium may be known to most people as a go-to medium for commercial artists who decorate a broad range of material culture beyond fine art, such as t-shirts, sporting equipment and vehicles ranging from boats to pickup trucks, semis, cars and motorcycles, etc. In the '50's and '60's, it became a go-to medium for the so-called Kustom Kulture, a neologism that refers to styles and fashions associated with custom cars and motorcycles in the United States particularly the hot rod culture of Southern California. Then there is animation, the culinary arts, body art, make up, and tattoos. You name it, and airbrush artists seem to have covered it in one form or another. As would be expected, many commercially successful airbrush artists possess incredible skill, but many lack true artistry, which may be the reason why the medium has been unfairly maligned or ignored by highbrow aesthetes over the years.

Though a hip medium in the world of commercial art today, airbrush is actually a nineteenth-century invention. Francis Stanley, who with his twin brother became famous for the Stanley Steamer, patented a simple "atomizer" airbrush to colorize photographs in 1876. An instrument called the "paint distributor," which relied on a hand-operated compressor to supply continuous air, was developed in 1879 by Abner Peeler "for the painting of watercolors and other artistic purposes." A commercial prototype was developed by Liberty Walkup who re-patented it under a name suggested by his wife Phoebe: "air-brush." She would go to found the Illinois Art School in Rockford where airbrushing would be taught. Seventy-five miles north and a decade later, Charles Burdick revolutionized the air brush in Madison, Wisconsin. Patented in 1892, his airbrush was a double-action, internal-mix airbrush similar to those used

today. It contained paint somewhat like a fountain pen, and featured an index finger trigger with the air supply re-positioned through the bottom, which improved balance and control. Burdick's invention was promoted by Thayer and Chandler, a Chicago mail order arts and crafts retailer, which also showcased it at the 1892 World Columbian Exposition. As other improvements ensued the medium took off. Today, airbrushes are used for countless commercial applications, as well as fine art.

In the world of fine art, Man Ray (1890–1977), remembered to many as a force of the Dada and Surrealism art movements, was among the first to employ airbrush in the production of fine art. Alberto Vargas (1896–1992), the pioneering artist who had emigrated from Peru to the U.S. after studying art in Europe, used airbrush in combination with watercolors, to produce his signature pin-ups, which associated airbrush with so-called girlie pictures, an association that has trended to this day. With the emergence of Photorealism in the mid and late 1960's, the airbrush assumed a special place of distinction as a favorite medium among the first generation of artists practicing that style in America, e.g. Paul Sarkisian (1928-2019) and Ben Schonzeit (b. 1942) though he stopped airbrushing about a decade ago and no longer works in airbrush today. Interestingly, this phenomenon hasn't just been male dominated. In addition to Barbara Rogers (b. 1937), Audrey Flack (b. 1931), for example, projected images onto canvas instead of making preliminary drawings, and developed a method of applying paint in layers with an airbrush. Others followed. After the first wave of Photorealists in the '60's and '70's, younger artists produced work that extended the medium of airbrush in new and interesting ways, notably, in the stylistic realm of what has become known as, Hyperrealism. Today, work by artists who use airbrush embodies a diverse range of style, subject matter, and technique.

Of the artists exhibiting in UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR, Southerner, Dru Blair (Charleston, SC), is widely known as much for his art as he is an educator having founded his Blair School of Art in the '90's in Raleigh, NC which he operates today in Charleston. To demonstrate his impact, examples of work by several former students now having their own successful careers are also featured: Silvia Belviso (from Italy, now residing Charleston), David Evanoff (Cleveland, GA), and Joshua Zarambo (Richmond, VA). In addition to this younger generation, and the older masters previously mentioned -- Don Eddy (New York, NY), George Green, and Jerry Ott (Duluth, MN) – others exhibiting in UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR, include some of the very best who have ever worked with the medium: Bruce Evans (Philadelphia, PA), Kirk Lybecker (Portland, OR), Alan Pastrana (Queens, NY; with studio in Plainville, CT), Cesar Santander (New York, NY), and Hisaya Taira (Tokyo, Japan). PAINTING WITH AIR features a diverse selection of works by each of these artists to share with viewers the breadth and depth of each artist's oeuvre and their artistic prowess. As such, the exhibit is a celebration of artistic virtuosity and achievement through a unique, American medium: airbrush. Serving as Curator for UNDER PRESSURE – PAINTING WITH AIR, is David J. Wagner, who earned his Ph.D. in American Studies and served as a museum director for 20 years. For further information, contact:

DAVID J. WAGNER, L.L.C., EXHIBITION TOUR OFFICE  
(414) 221-6878; davidjwagnerllc@yahoo.com; davidjwagnerllc.com  
Member: American Alliance of Museums; International Council of Museums