

# ILJA TINFO:

# Transformations

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 canvases. 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

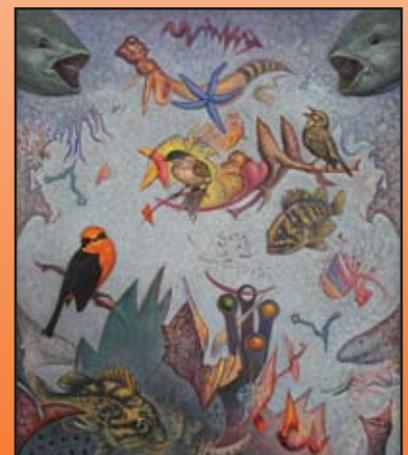
and varied, I tell him, it's hard to imagine that it comes from one artist. Ilja laughs, and replies, “Yeah, that's taboo. Galleries prefer artists who paint in one easily recognizable style, and that's not me.”

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](http://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.”



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

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

*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](http://iljatinfo.com).



Above: Butler Cherry Picking Memory, 14" x 18", pastel and watercolor on paper.  
Right: Rose Easterbrook self-portrait.

# Rose Easterbrook



By Dot Brovarney

Peru, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus all drew artist Rose Easterbrook away from her childhood home, a small cabin, set deep in Mendocino's Redwood Valley. She loves to travel and each new place inspired her growth as an artist. But her work is ultimately about roots and connectedness to place and home.

"I always knew I'd come back," Easterbrook says of her return to Mendocino County in 2005 after completing her senior thesis and graduating from Mt. Holyoke.

Now a mixed media devotee, Rose began drawing and playing with paint as a child, most often making portraits. Growing up with an artist mother – printmaker Marci Easterbrook – amidst art supplies scattered throughout the house, a creative life seemed her destiny.

"Everyone in our family would make art all the time,"

she recalls.

At Ukiah High School, Easterbrook began experimenting with black and white photography and zipping over to Mendocino College for life drawing classes. During her studies at Mt. Holyoke, she resisted the pressure to choose a single medium, unable to decide between painting and photography. She decided to specialize in color photographic

portraits of women and self-portraits in oil. This decision certainly augured her openness to a future in mixed media.

The two media com-

prised her college portfolio, which she brought home to Redwood Valley when she returned in 2005. Carefully tucking the portfolio of several years' work in the grand old house at the Easterbrook homestead, Rancho Mariposa, proved another fateful decision on her artistic path. The historic family home burned to the ground in 2007, the



Summer Daydream, Eel River, diptych, each 8" x 10", oil and RC prints on wood.

flames transforming her art to ash.

“I didn’t do art for about a year,” the artist says. “But I learned from the experience how to let go. Everything I’ve ever done is still with me even if I don’t have it physically. I can always do more and put it out in the world.”

Like the phoenix that rises from the ashes, Easterbrook started to explore new ways of artistic expression. Inspired by College of the Redwoods instructor Anthony Mahone, she began to create multi-photo images, and by 2008 she was mixing it up, using pen and ink with photographs and then adding paint to the images. In an interesting intersection, her subjects began to shift from personal portraits to portraits of place and home.

Easterbrook’s mixed media includes oil, pen and ink, gouache, and photography. She uses a bifurcated approach to her subject matter, in effect, viewing it through both her camera and the paint. At the same time as she portrays the whole view of her subject, she also focuses on its individual components.

“I literally create a puzzle – an art puzzle,” Easterbrook explains. “With the individual smaller parts, I’m able to convey more of a feeling of the place, rather than just how it looks. I also like the idea of missing pieces of information, which leaves some things to the viewer.”

A technique the artist has adopted over the past several years is building her own surfaces on board using gesso and sand. She appreciates this return to the tactile, which she’s been missing since the decline of hands-on darkroom printing.

The Mendocino Coast holds a special place in Easterbrook’s heart. She’s had several shows there over the past several years, including the one that she considers her most successful to date. That exhibit, at the Mendocino Art Center, featured work she completed in 2010–11 as an artist-in-residence at the Center.

More recently, Rose Easterbrook is taking



*Empire Avenue Magnolia, 9" x 12", gouache and RC prints on wood.*

another cue from her mom and entering the world of arts education. She’s just concluded a student teaching job at Potter Valley’s junior and senior high schools.

The new teacher says, “It’s a challenge to be a good teacher. I need to learn the basics again, put aside my own vision, dissect my intuitive abilities, and be clear and accessible to the students.”

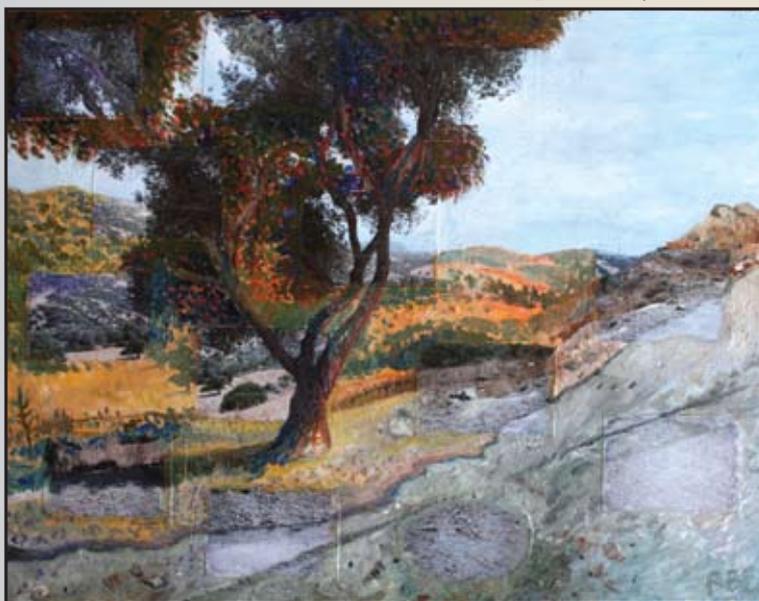
Although travel is one of her great loves, Easterbrook now is settled comfortably on Ukiah’s west side. She hopes to remain here, close to home, working as both an artist and a public school teacher.

“My paintings are manifestations of my search for home, and place,” says Easterbrook. “I love to travel, but

I’m always delighted to return, with a better understanding of the world. My family has had roots here for about 50 years, and for me, this feels like the right place to make home.”

*Rose Easterbrook’s work can be seen on her website at [easterbrookstudio.com](http://easterbrookstudio.com).*

*Dot Brovarney is a writer and historian in Mendocino County.*



*Roadside Olive, Crete, 30" x 36", oil and RC prints on wood.*

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Mendocino Art Center
September 8-13, 2014

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Howard Wheatley Allen

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(09/8–13)

Howard Wheatley Allen  
Collection (09/15–29)

### GALLERY TEN

Mendocino Open Paint Out Celebrity Artists (09/8–13)

Mendocino Open Paint Out Award Winners (09/15–29)



Ilja Tinfo

## October

MAIN GALLERY  
Ilja Tinfo

GALLERY TEN  
Toby Lurie

## November

MAIN GALLERY      GALLERY TEN  
Mendocino Eco Artists      Nan Penner

Second Saturday Artists' Receptions  
Each month at 5:00pm

## December

MAIN GALLERY  
Mendocino Quilt Artists



## January

MAIN GALLERY  
Members' Juried Exhibit

GALLERY TEN  
Paul Kozal

Marion Bush, 2014 Members' Juried Exhibit,  
Best in Show

## February

MAIN GALLERY  
Mendocino Figure Drawing Collective

GALLERY TEN  
Lynne Prentice

## March

MAIN GALLERY  
Marine Wildlife Exhibit

GALLERY TEN  
Moss Rock



Moss Rock



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## MEET THE STAFF:

# KEITH MIDDLESWORTH

425 Degrees and 15,000 Volts –  
Harnessing the Elements of Heat and Electricity

By K. Andarin Arvola

Keith Middlesworth started his sculpting career in New Mexico in the late 1980s. Initially, he worked in both wood and stained glass. In 2008 he discovered the lost art of neon. “I was always fascinated with neon glass bending and wondered if I could learn it. The color, technique, bending. . . controlling the 425-degrees Fahrenheit and the 15,000 volts of electricity. Whew!”

After completing an intensive training at Northwest Neon Instruction in Kingston, Washington, Middlesworth discovered that glass neon bending isn't an easy process. “It takes years of practice and great patience. I'm a very visual person. I realized I could sculpt my work into neon art forms and refocused my talents.

“Neon is a very lost art; there are very few of us now. It's all LED lights, which put a lot of neon people out of business.”



Keith Middlesworth with Traveling Light, his neon enhancement of a 1949 Chevy auto grill. Andarin Arvola photo.



Winesong! Two, 32" x 24",  
neon.

Still, Keith points out, any business can use neon, such as for a logo or sign. “As simple as an ‘open’ sign or you can get as esoteric as you want,” Middlesworth says. “Wineries use them; maybe a gift for Father’s Day. It’s especially popular with men who have ‘man caves’ – they love neon.” Obviously, Middlesworth loves it, too.

A high point would be a visit to the Neon Museum in Las Vegas – at night. “That would be quite a spectacle.” The Stardust Casino sign is there, as is a rearing Palomino horse and rider from the Hacienda Resort.

Custom work is at the behest of the client but Middlesworth’s inspiration for his own artwork is theme-based. “It might represent an idea that clearly comes from the redwood forests, from the diversity of the wildlife and beauty of the Mendocino coastline. Every day I challenge myself to stretch my imagination through my art.

“I’m currently working on a themed-idea of a fish ladder for the Stanford Inn that includes three steelhead trout. I love fish. Close to my heart is the preservation of salmon. I’m a founding member of the Mendocino Eco Artists, local artists whose mission is to sell art to benefit such organizations as Mendocino Area Parks Association, Big River Noyo Watershed Coalition, and Redwood Forest Foundation, Inc. I also

serve on the board of the Salmon Restoration Association; by restoring the rivers and streams in Mendocino County, salmon are able to spawn in their natural habitat.

“I see ideas. At a car show I noticed the grills and thought how great that would look with neon. The next week I located a rust-coated 1949 Chevy grill. I showed it at a vintage car show in Gualala for the month of July.”

He’s also working on a 1948 Packard. We talk about old trucks moldering into the ground, rusted out in this sea air. I have two in the woods near my house. Maybe there’s a usable grill?

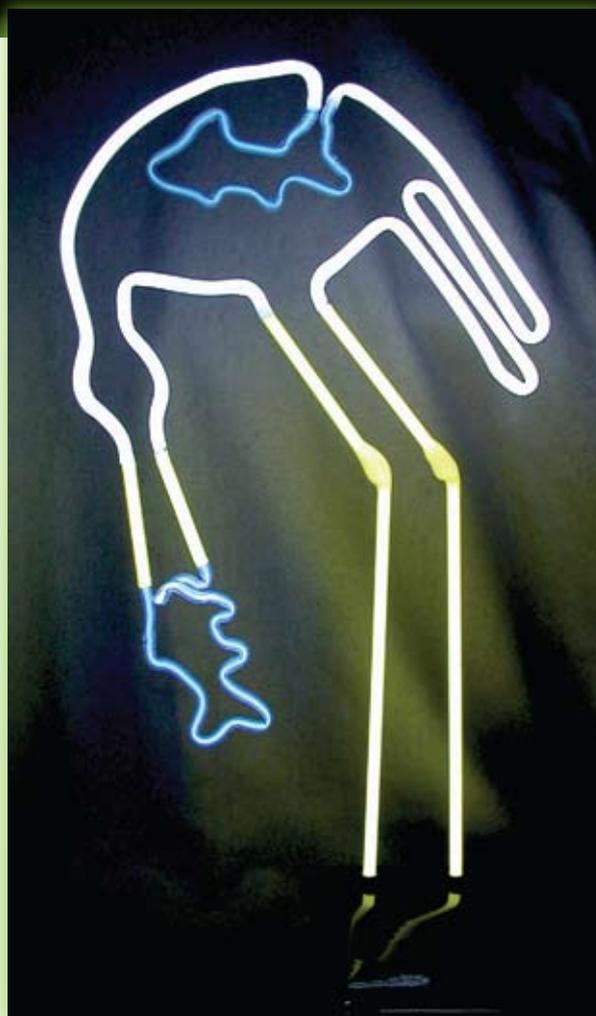
“I’m also big on birds; lots of flamingos, of course – they’re iconic – and herons. They both have the most interesting shapes; none of them the same bird.”

Karen Bowers, the Education Director at MAC, asked Keith to be the Sculpture Coordinator two years ago. “It’s an intense 24/7 sort of department. I applied my managerial and business skills to increase attendance at the Tuesday night Open Blacksmith Studio, to continue upgrading the quality of instructors and students, and to enhance their overall experience.

“Sculpting can be very daunting. At MAC we work on getting students excited about wanting to create their own art. A remodel is currently under way and is making an impact. The sculpture department is in a unique position to become a premier place for training in the areas of blacksmithing, casting, metal pouring, and sculpting.”

Middlesworth spent most of his working career in the Land Title business. After his retirement in 2008, he gravitated to the Mendocino area with his wife Deanna. “We’ve always loved the beautiful coastline and the uniqueness of the kind, wonderful people who live here. Living here has allowed my art to blossom. I can think of no other place in my travels that I would rather live.”

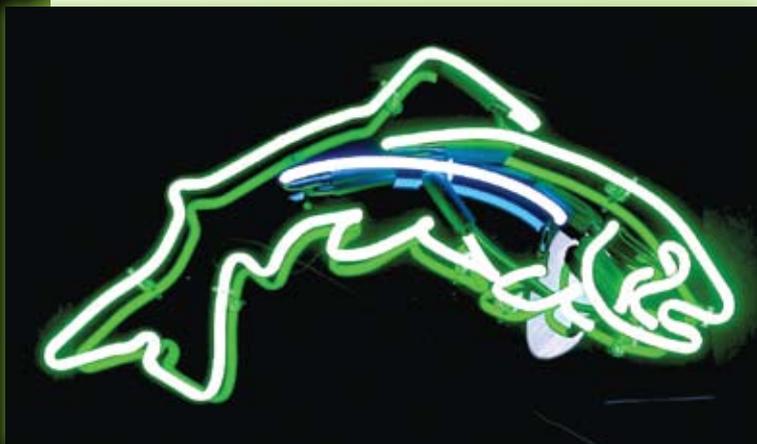
Middlesworth and Deanna have an interest in vintage and antiques. “I assist her,” he says. They have two children, son Eric in Washington with six children and daughter Kelly in New Mexico with one child.



*Two for Me, 28" x 18", neon heron.*

See Keith Middlesworth’s art in business establishments and art galleries throughout the Mendocino County area and in Aspen, Colorado. Keith can be reached by email at: [kmiddlesworth@mcn.org](mailto:kmiddlesworth@mcn.org).

*Other resources: Neon Museum Las Vegas, 770 N. Las Vegas Blvd., Las Vegas NV 89101 (702-387-6366), [neonmuseum.org](http://neonmuseum.org); Northwest Neon Instruction in Kingston, Washington; and the video, Neon Sign Makers in Hong Kong, [wimp.com/neonsign](http://wimp.com/neonsign).*



*Salmon, 16" x 36", neon on metal cutout, made for Wild Fish, a restaurant in Little River, CA.*