

# ROUND UP

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## The Colorful Peter Maier

Artist makes portraits larger than life

by Joe Potoczak, photographs by Regina Nicolardi

**“RIGHT NOW, YOU’RE LOOKING AT THE painting.”**

Peter Maier is holding his hand up in front of him and pointing to his pinky finger which faces me; his thumb is directed at himself. “But I’m going to show you the steps.”

With the grin of a magician about to reveal the secret to his illusion, he begins to count his fingertips, beginning at the thumb. First, you have the base layer, which is painted either white or black, he explains. Next, he adds layer upon layer of color by airbrushing or hand-brushing them into the painting. Maier applies these layers extremely thin, nearly to the point of transparency.

The final layer is a clear coat that sets up the process of refraction. The light that passes through this clear coat enters a prism, bending as it hits each color and allowing you to see deep into Maier’s creation. This process provides his work with a depth and saturation, nearly impossible to achieve, that helps to bring his portraits to life. I quickly realize that this simple explanation of his layered work



The Poconos

is only a tutorial, since in practice his paintings contain more layers than can be counted on one hand. The eight-foot-tall portrait standing behind us, for example, contains more than 50 layers of color.

Maier is linked to the art form known as photorealism, a movement that began in the 1960s, but in reality he is more of a fine artist. Photorealists will take a picture of a subject in the real world and then attempt to replicate it exactly with details so precise that viewers can’t believe it’s not a photograph. Traditional photorealists use a projector to display the original image on their canvas to be traced and colored, and this is where Maier separates himself from the pack. The pictures he takes of a subject are merely a study of what he will place onto his canvas. Using snap-

(upper left)

**Burning Light-Copper, Brass Ensemble, 54" x 84" in the artists collection.**

(upper right, behind the artist)

**Double-take, 100" x 84", 2011 at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery**

(bottom)

**Maier showing how he uses many colors, layering them one on top of the other to get a desired effect.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST





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(above) **Holstein, 60" x 60", 2012,**  
in private collection.

(top right)

**1908 Indian Racer, 4' by 8', 2006,**  
in the artists collection.

shots from several different angles, Maier begins to sketch and paint the portrait the way he envisions it should be.

"I change things as I go," says Maier. "If I just start copying a photograph, I don't get the life into it."

These little touches can be anything from adding a reflection in a car that wasn't there to fluffing the feathers on a chick to make them as soft

as a ball of cotton. He refers to these deviations from the real-life subject matter as abstract elements, and they are why he does not define himself as a true photorealist. Instead, he considers himself to be an artist.

## **The Secret Is in the Paints**

**MAIER WORKS FROM** his home studio in the heart

of the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. He moved to the area in 1980 after leaving a job as a car designer for General Motors to devote his efforts to fine arts. In the early '90s, he constructed a studio separate from his home. The large open floor plan with its towering ceilings was created to house the larger-than-life works he planned to produce.



This building is as much a workshop as it is a fine art studio. Giant compressors run his airbrushes. Long aluminum panels act as his canvases. And, hand-built wooden structures range in function from the seeming tables, which vary in height and actually work as a giant set of steps so that Maier can be at eye level with his monstrous creations, to the easel built of lumber climbing overhead and anchoring the heavy aluminum industrial panels that the artist is transforming into art.

The secret behind his work is in what he applies to those panels. Through contacts made in the automotive industry, he became aware of a state-of-the-art waterborne paint that the DuPont chemicals company had been experimenting with. In 1991, the artist sat down with representatives of the company to discuss the type of life-size work he had in mind that would showcase DuPont's latest innovation. After some initial hesitation, DuPont, which had never released a prototype to someone

outside of the company, was convinced to give quarts of all 54 colors the lab had been concocting to the artist. Maier was granted exclusive access to the Cromax AT paint.

"This apple green is my favorite color," Maier says, pouring a small amount of green batter into a plastic lid. A sorcerer of color, he rubs the paint with his fingers until it is spread thin and the dark green shifts into a rich shade of yellow. He has used this shade to make skin tones warmer and reds more vibrant. Maier says that what he can achieve with this paint cannot be accomplished with conventional oils or watercolors.

### An Automotive Background

**A NATIVE OF** Brooklyn, Maier caught his first big break attending the Pratt Institute in New York, where he studied industrial design. He was chosen to assist professor Robert Mallary in sculpting "Cliffhangers" for the 1964 New York World's Fair. After seeing what Maier was capable of at the World's Fair, GM Vice

President Bill Mitchell offered the young artist a position with the automobile company's design department.

Maier displays a genuine enthusiasm and energy for what he does. As he talks, his animated hand gestures and personable sense of humor draw you into the story of his life's work. He is the first to say that what he is able to accomplish in his art would not be possible without the experiences he had in the automotive world and the relationships forged there. His work has been displayed throughout the country and in galleries in Europe. He is also featured in art guru and gallery owner Louis K. Meisel's recent book, *Photorealism in the Digital Age*, which was released in November 2013. Meisel, who coined the term photorealist in 1969, included Maier's work in the book under a section devoted to the masters and innovators of photorealism.

The subjects Maier has chosen for his paintings range from vintage cars to Clydesdales to longhaired motorcyclists. He seeks out subjects

that are unique and have him thinking, "OK, this has that presence to it."

His portraits usually start with either a white or black background that allows the focus to be solely on the subject, who is displayed in a powerful stance from either a front or side view. Once you catch sight of one of his completed portraits, it's hard to believe that Maier has simply applied paint over metal. As you walk by the portrait, you can't help wondering, "Is it breathing?"

No matter what he chooses for his next artistic endeavor, the goal remains the same. "I want to create a lasting iconic image that will burn into the mind of the viewer," he says. "You don't necessarily have to remember who I am, but I want you to always remember my paintings." 🖌️

Joe Potoczak lives in White Haven, where he spends most of his time kayaking, climbing, hiking and trying to get lost in the woods.

Regina Nicolardi is an award-winning freelance photographer from White Haven, whose photos have appeared in *National Geographic*, *Canoe & Kayak* and *Local Flair* magazines. Her work can be seen at [reginanicolardi.com](http://reginanicolardi.com).