



FRED SICOLI'S AIRBRUSH DESIGNS AREN'T JUST HEAD-TURNERS, THEY'RE NECK-TWISTERS. From his Killer Creations studio in South Philly, Sicoli taps subjects ranging from photorealism to dreamscapes. Traditional motifs include flames masterfully realized in black, purple and a rainbow of fluorescents. Animals, people and fantastic creatures stare back from depths of gloss. At 34, Sicoli has nailed the art of creating illusions in paint, making his motorcycles and cars look fast—even when standing by the curb.

BIKE MIE!

Interview by Sal Emma
Photos by Bill Horin

Sicoli's vision transforms a Suzuki Hayabusa owned by Phil Brady, New Castle, DE



How'd you get into airbrushing?

I learned silkscreen at CAPA [the Creative and Performing Arts High School in Kensington]. We were doing T-shirts. In fact we got in trouble because we were selling them, and our shirts sold better than the ones the school was selling.

Why?

The kids were into them. We did them in graffiti style. I always liked the airbrush look, but had never done it. So one day we decided to do an airbrush shirt. We had no idea what we were doing; it took eight hours to do one shirt. But I stayed with it because I was interested.

Did you ever write graffiti?

Oh, yeah. I used to live in Kensington, and started with a spray can in North Philly. If you rode the Market-Frankford "El" in those days, you'd see my stuff. Lots of it. But it's mostly gone now.

What was your nickname?

Ceaz.

How did you know airbrushing was your thing?

I didn't. Started out doing shirts, signs, did a lot of stuff for the Mummers. Big props—16, 20, 30 feet long. I was doing work for 15 different string bands at one point. I had to give it up because I couldn't keep up with the volume, but it was a great learning experience.

How did you go from Mummers to motorcycles?

My dad is a gearhead, into cars, bikes. He said why not try motorcycles, there's lots of money in it. I didn't want to do it. I wasn't into cars back then. Plus I was 17 years old, I already knew everything and wasn't about to listen to my father. Then his friend got into the act and asked me to paint his Harley Sportster. I had no idea what I was doing, but I did it. I had no place to work, I cleared it outside in the yard. As soon as I was done spraying all these leaves blew up and ruined the clearcoat so I had to start over. So I cleared it indoors next time. My neighbors were dying from the stink. Then I went to buff the tank and I didn't know you needed someone to hold it down. So it just shot across the room and got a big dent in it that I had to fix. I had to figure it out.

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How did it turn out?

Really good, amazingly. He still rides it and he still likes it.

How do you feel about your early work?

I like it. But I wish I knew more when I did it. It's not bad but it could have been a lot better.

So you learned by doing?

And watching and asking a lot of questions. I got into a car accident, and in getting the bodywork done I met this guy who was doing insurance work. When he discovered I had an interest in airbrushing we decided to go into business together. We weren't really well matched. We're still friends, but we weren't for a while—but it was good for both of us in the beginning. He was showing me stuff, I was showing him stuff. Then I went and got PPG certified in auto paint. Things started coming around. I'd say really only in the last four years I've started figuring it out. Now I'm good, but I'm still learning.

What airbrush people have influenced you?

I learned a lot by watching Angel down on Passyunk Avenue [at the Airbrush Place]. She's mostly a T-shirt, canvas, pinup kind of artist, but she does a lot of stuff. She's really good—we are still friends and we sometimes work together. And [Hajime] Sorayama is amazing.





“My real goal is high-end pinup art on canvas, still related to bikes and cars – but out there, really in the fantasy category.”

Left: With an airbrushed canvas in his South Philly studio.

What other artists are you into?

Norman Rockwell, believe it or not. And Dali. Rockwell blows my mind. The illustrators of his day didn't have the tools we have today, yet they were able to paint in incredible photographic realism. That's really cool.

I guess there's a big learning curve here. What are the technical challenges?

Yeah. Paint on canvas is a pretty straightforward process. Our process is less forgiving. You have to do it step by step, or the paint flakes or it won't stick or whatever. One little thing, one ingredient you leave out or mix wrong and you have trouble. The science of bodywork and paint is a whole job in itself. We're painting metal, plastic, fiberglass—even wood sometimes. You have to understand paint chemistry, latex, urethane, enamel. I made so many mistakes learning it. Big trucks that cost me thousands to repaint. Especially when the clearcoat goes bad—it's the last thing on top of hours and hours of airbrush work and it could ruin the entire job.

How can you be yourself and stay creative, but give the customers what they want?

Most of the time they trust me. The computer helps a lot. I can pull up hundreds of images and styles in a few seconds to help me get a handle on what they like and don't like. Usually they come without a clue and I have to guide them. They'll say they want to do a Batman theme—but they can't envision it. Or sometimes they'll want something ridiculous that's not going to fit. Then I have to convince them that they're not going to be happy. I tell them: I know in your head it looks great, but you're not an artist. You're not going to like it. They'll want a whole person on a bike, a hot woman. I say she's going to be a big fat woman. Because the tank is fat, the fairings are curved. If it was a flat piece of canvas, then maybe I'd do it. But it's a motorcycle. There's a ton of variables. You can't just slap it on there and expect it to work.

Airbrush is pretty old-school. How has digital technology influenced the art form?

This machine has made a huge difference. [The Roland Stika vinyl cutter.] It's just like a printer but it cuts stencils. I am still learning it, but it definitely helps me work faster. A job that would have taken eight weeks before now takes maybe three. You design the shapes in Illustrator or Photoshop and the machine cuts them very accurately. I don't use it for everything, mostly for stuff that's hard to do free hand, like lettering—and some curves. The bulk of my work is still done the way it's been done for decades, freehand with the airbrush—especially the portraits.

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Bike Me! - continued from page 29

Is the computer a help or a crutch?

It's not cheating—it's a legitimate part of the art form—but it's not the same as freehand. With my teaching, I constantly tell my students that the computer is a tool but it will never replace the artist. You can cut stencils for the whole job, even portraits. But it's not the same. I encourage people to learn it but not to depend on it, because really well done freehand technique is what separates good work from great work.

What do you tell young people who want to get into airbrushing?

Take the time. Practice. Get good. And I tell them about the business side. Kids think they can start doing this and make money instantly. There's a lot of competition out there, all over the country, and there's a lot of good artists you're up against every day. Make sure you're good before you put yourself out there. Learn the craft first. I would never touch somebody's \$40,000 motorcycle if I weren't good enough.

How did you get into teaching?

Eventually I am going to get out of painting bikes and cars. There's an enormous amount of labor in doing the bikes. In the end, stuff happens out in the world. Guys crash their bikes or they get scratched, and they bring them back to me to fix. If I sell a canvas, a print or a poster, it's unlikely to come back for repair. My real goal is high-end pinup art on canvas, still related to bikes and cars—but out there, really in the fantasy category. I can't wait to get the stuff that's in my head onto canvas. Like crazy, futuristic floating cars. But I know I am going to need different sources of income to make it happen and teaching will help. I am getting calls from all over the country, so I know there's demand.

What kind of students do you get?

All kinds. Kids that want to learn. Kids with parents looking to get them into something. Cake decorators. Car painters. But most are already artists who either want to learn airbrush or get better at it.

What's been the biggest challenge on the business side?

We lost pretty much everything in a flood. The whole roof collapsed, and we had no place to work and a lot of losses. I worked out of a truck for a while, picking up parts and working in another body shop. I considered selling meat door to door, it was that bad. But God works in mysterious ways. The flood was what got me out of that old building where we had a lot of problems and into the new place where we could set it up right. It makes you stronger. Now, no matter what happens, I think if I could get through that, I can handle this. The worst part is the original canvases I lost. Can't get them back.

Does mastering the airbrush make you better in other media?

Definitely. Everything you learn takes you to another level. That's why I want to learn Adobe. I want to learn it because I know it will take my canvas work to another level. Also I'm trying to learn more about photography. It adds depth to your work, especially once you start mastering the computer. In any art form, you're always learning. If not, there's something wrong. I know a lot, but there's always more to know.

What's your favorite job?

In this business you're always trying to outdo yourself, so there's really no one job that I can say is my favorite. There's a new favorite every month.

What's your ride?

Nothing special, a Chrysler 300, flat black. But I'd like to get a Dodge Challenger. What I'm driving never looks like my customers' stuff. I don't like a lot of decoration and artwork. It's always plain and clean. I got rid of my bike, but I'd like to do a Suzuki GSX-R flat black in a Batman theme. Thinking of doing it really crazy, with actuators on the panels so it changes shape, that kind of thing.

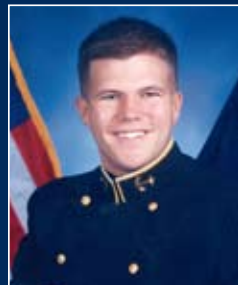
What are you into when you're not painting?

Break dancing. Sundays on Rittenhouse Square. 📍



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