



Back to Basics

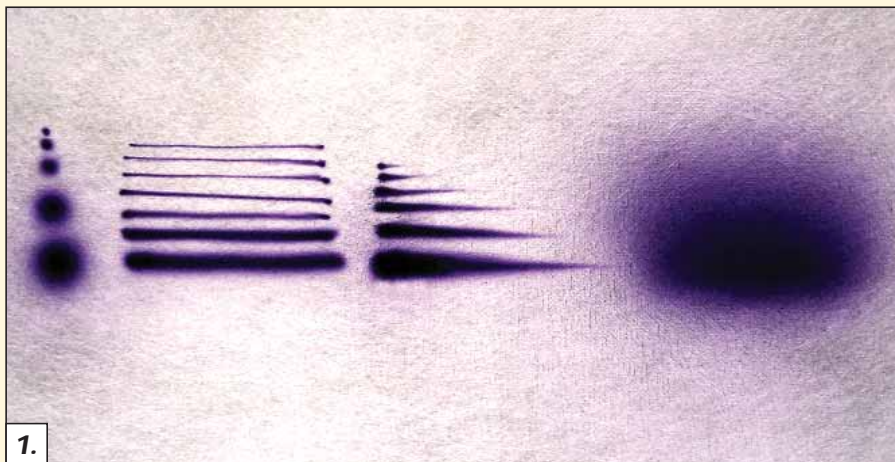
THE "HARD" DAGGER STROKE

PART
I

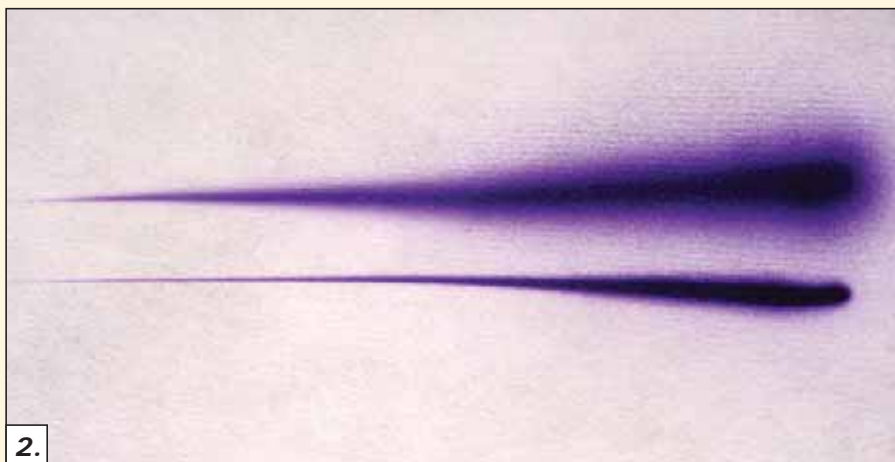
AIRBRUSH MASTER TERRY HILL RETURNS WITH ANOTHER ARTICLE IN HIS BACK TO BASICS SERIES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY HILL

The past three installments of this column have been an important foundation-building primer to ready you for the most important, most difficult, most widely used, Mack Daddy of all strokes in airbrushing: the hard dagger.



1.



2.

A BRIEF REVIEW

If you're a beginner or intermediate airbrush artist reading this column for the first time, I strongly recommend that you purchase the 2006 January-February, March-April, and May-June copies of *Airbrush Action* and master the exercises detailed in those editions. Don't advance until you gain complete control of each of the four major strokes (*Figure 1*) that form the groundwork of freehand airbrushing. The dot, the line, the dagger, and the ability to shade and blend are essential skills to master. Learn these strokes and you'll be able to perform any airbrush technique.

As an added bonus, the 2006 March-April issue contains an important sidebar dedicated to troubleshooting your airbrush and paint; an absolute must for any airbrush user. It's important to know when you're making normal newbie mistakes versus fighting a losing battle with equipment or paint malfunctions. The good news is that most frustrations in learning to airbrush stem from simple equipment glitches clearly defined in that article.

FIGURE 2

The past two T-Shirt Tactics articles were dedicated to the soft dagger stroke. Notice the dramatic difference between the two. The hard version (bottom) is clearly more controlled and in focus than its close cousin, the soft dagger stroke.

TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 3A and 3B

The biggest difference between producing a hard dagger and a soft dagger is the distance of the airbrush from the surface. The farther back the airbrush is held from the substrate, the softer the result, and vice versa. First, notice that the airbrush is moved in a consistent parallel to the surface from start to finish. Before paint is released be sure that the airbrush is in motion with full air on (finger lever is completely depressed), then discharge the paint wide open (this occurs when the finger lever is pulled back fully) and then cut off the paint (not the air!!) at the end of the stroke, followed by an exaggerated follow-through. The follow-through, a critical phase of this stroke, serves to fling the residual paint across the surface to achieve (you hope) a fine point. To assure success of the sometimes elusive tip of the dagger, many artists swoop their airbrushes toward the end of the stroke, as close to the surface as possible, without catching the needle.

PRACTICAL USE: HARD AND SOFT EXAMPLES

FIGURE 4A

This simply rendered portrait of a girl's eyes was produced in just a few minutes on stage in front of a large crowd in Switzerland to demonstrate the power and speed of T-shirt airbrushing using the dagger stroke.

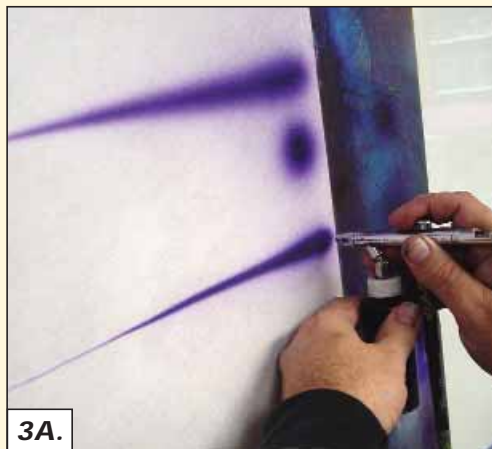
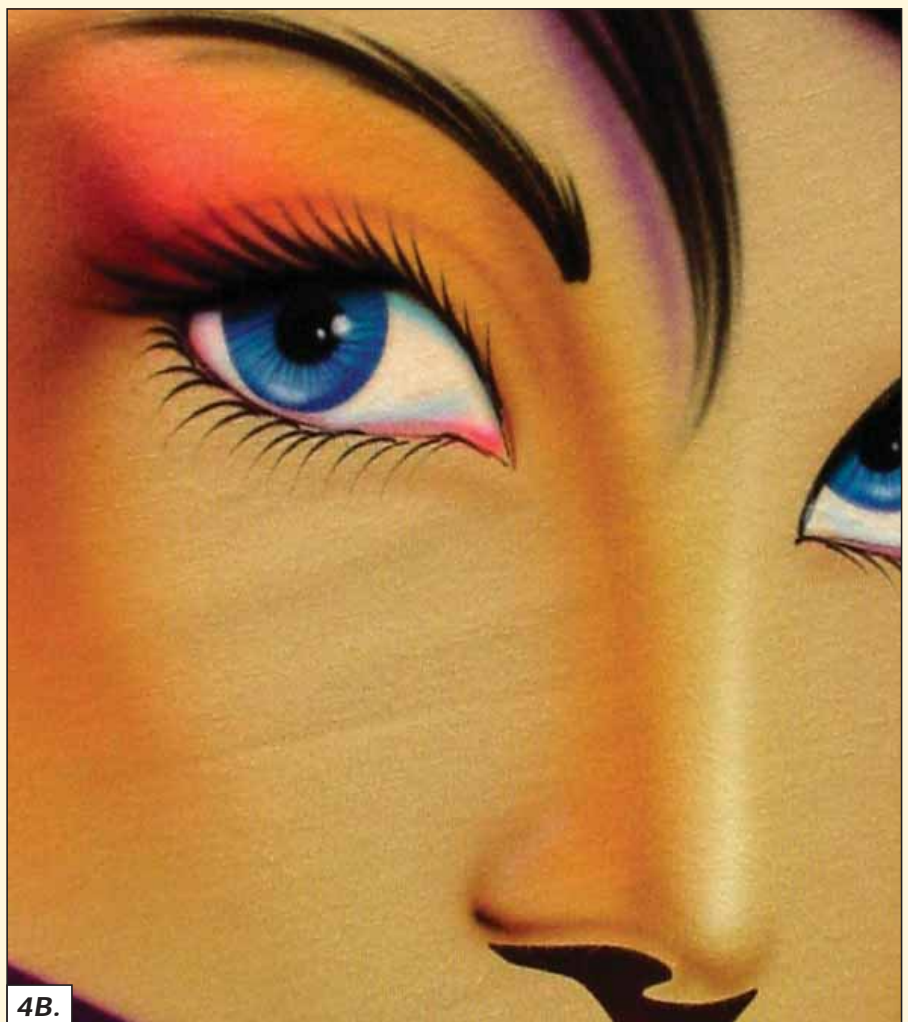


FIGURE 4b

You can clearly identify the hard and soft versions of the dagger. The hard dagger was used in the rendering of the eyelashes, hair, and eyebrows, and the soft dagger was used in the purple shadows beneath the hair, in some of the brown tones on the face, and most

effectively as a very soft white highlight on the bridge of the nose. Also notice the effective use of lines and dots from our previous exercises being put to practical use! This demonstration alone is proof that you can make anything from the four basic strokes of airbrushing (Figure 1).





5A.

FIGURE 5A

Here's an example of a finished painting where all the major strokes are used, but the overwhelming star of the show is the hard dagger stroke. Viewed from a distance, it's a convincing portrait of a lowland gorilla, a big fury guy showered in morning light.

FIGURE 5B

At close examination, hard dagger strokes clearly dominate the image. The strokes are very small and short,



5B.



6.

but there's a clear thick-to-thin shape ending in a well defined point; a classic dagger!

FIGURE 6

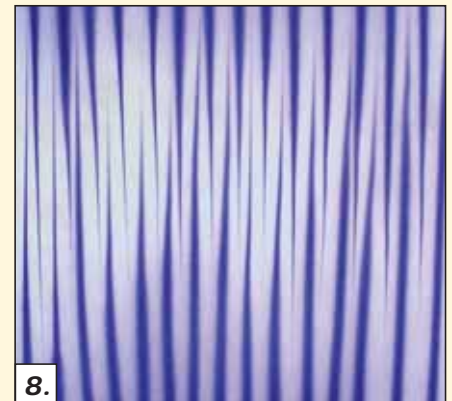
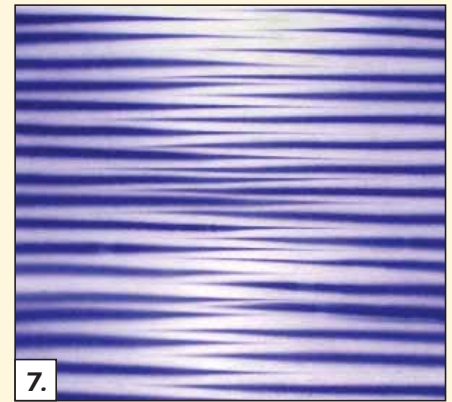
In this portrait of a chimpanzee you can clearly see the dagger strokes in the fur. Although these strokes are much longer and curvier than the gorilla's, the technique is still the same. I applied layers of dagger strokes, followed by soft shading, more layers of dagger strokes, and on and on until the desired look was achieved.

EXERCISES

Well, now that I've made a strong case for mastering the hard dagger stroke—the most important lick in airbrushing—it's time to put you to the challenge of performing it yourself. Let's get busy!

FIGURE 7

We'll begin the hard dagger exercise with horizontal lines from left to right, and right to left. In each case go from thick to thin by rolling the trigger wide open at the beginning of the stroke and then decrease the paint flow as the stroke ends (this happens more quickly—in a second or two—than it reads). Resist the urge to pull farther back from the surface; that's how we performed the soft dagger stroke. We're learning a completely new technique here so pay close attention to how you achieve the end result. To properly accomplish this stroke you must use only trigger control while maintaining a constant distance of about a 1/2-inch from the surface. *ALWAYS LEAVE THE AIR ON.* Just depress the trigger to start the air flowing and then you should only



roll the trigger back and forth as you start and stop each stroke. Practice this position until you're proficient in both directions, and also try different length strokes before you move on. To assure steadiness and a straighter line, keep your elbows tight to your body and rely solely on the pivoting motion of your hips. This also helps maintain a consistent distance from the surface (Figure 3A and 3B).

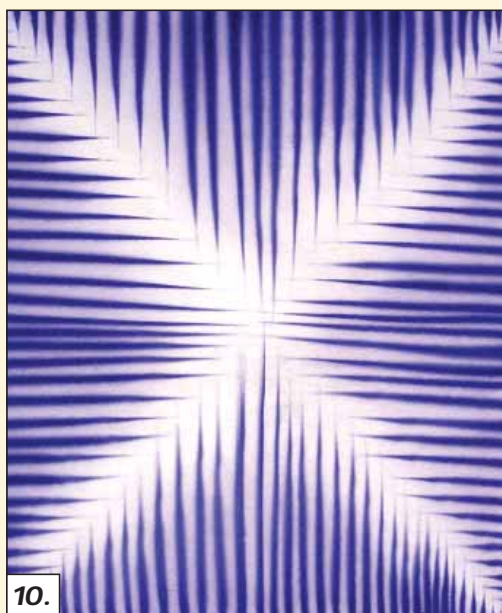


FIGURE 8

Now try a vertical stroke. Your body is less helpful here but you can achieve some benefit by bending at the waist and using your spine to sustain vertical alignment. It's easy to get sloppy on this one so concentrate on keeping your airbrush parallel to the surface.

FIGURE 9

Using the hard edge of a ruler and a piece of chalk, I layed out a simple "X" from corner to corner onto my exercise pellow. This serves as a guide for the next exercise.

FIGURE 10

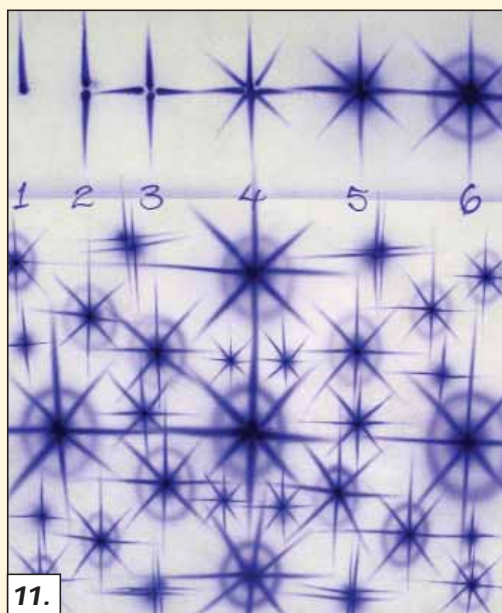
I call this exercise "Leaving the Ex" because it's almost as fun as leaving someone that's unhealthy for you, and it also happens to leave a nice white



"X" shape when done properly. First, choose any side, top or bottom, and start in the center. Make a single dagger stroke that extends all the way to the center without crossing the chalk line. Continue along toward the corner making progressively shorter and shorter strokes until you've made it to the corner. Be careful not to violate the chalk line. This exercise is designed to force you to gain control of the length of your strokes. It was developed, as many of these exercises were, to overcome a language barrier I experienced while teaching in Europe. I simply made up my own language of monkey-see-monkey-do.

FIGURE 11

Another practical use of the hard dagger stroke, although often overdone, is the airbrushed starburst. I've broken it down into six individual steps to make it painfully easy to



accomplish. After mastering the previous exercise, this should be a piece of cake for an old pro like you! All I ask is that you use this cliché state fair icon sparingly. A little goes a long way.

FIGURE 12

Here's a fine example of a properly and tastefully rendered starburst. ✖



Terry Hill has been airbrushing T-shirts in the Florida panhandle for 22 years. A leading force in the airbrush world, Terry co-designed the air compressor for Silentaire that bears his name, and he has become a leading innovator of new products for the airbrush industry. When he's not working at Airbrush Headquarters in Destin, Florida, he is the director of the distinguished Airbrush Getaway workshops.

