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Tutorial: Collage Portrait

The art of making "San Francisco Heart" with Corel Painter X

By Jeremy Sutton

[Due to space constraints, we could not include every step of the Collage Portrait tutorial that Sutton wrote for our March issue of Professional Photographer. Here, for our readers, is the complete version of that tutorial.]

I created San Francisco Heart, a collage portrait of San Francisco, using the recently released Corel Painter X. The principles, strategies, workflow and techniques shared here can be applied to creating a collage portrait of any subject—a person, family or couple; a vacation destination, event or city. My goal is to inspire and empower you to create your own personal collage portraits.

The term collage portrait refers to a portrait painting of a subject in which there is usually one main foundation image interwoven with a multitude of subsidiary images, some more subtle than others, but all relating to the subject and contributing to the whole in a harmonious and meaningful way.

San Francisco Heart was inspired by my experience of living in San Francisco and wanting to express my appreciation of the beauty, diversity, creativity, excitement and richness of this City by the Bay.

Acquire source images

Initially there is an idea, an inspiration, a vision. With the idea starts the research process. Take your time. Allow the idea to gestate as you seek out and acquire imagery.

Have a good project folder structure and organization. Every file must have its home on your computer. This allows you to easily locate your files and in turn frees you up to be more creative. My system is to create a project folder (07 SFHeart) containing sub-folders (SFHeart-Source Images, SFHeart-Working Images and SFHeart-Painter Data).

Once you have acquired your source images, determine which will be the main compositional image (Foundation), which may support the main composition (Secondary), and which will be smaller and more subtly woven into the artwork (Subsidiary).



Foundation image

I chose an image of the Golden Gate Bridge as my Foundation image. The Foundation acts like a compositional anchor for the artwork, setting the main structure and framework onto which many other layers of imagery can be added.

I selected a San Francisco heart, created when local artists were invited to paint large hearts that were placed around the city and then auctioned off to raise funds for charity, to be my Secondary image. A variety of subsidiary images reflect my personal experience and view of the city. I saved my Source Images as TIFF files into the SFHeart-Source Images folder.



Secondary image

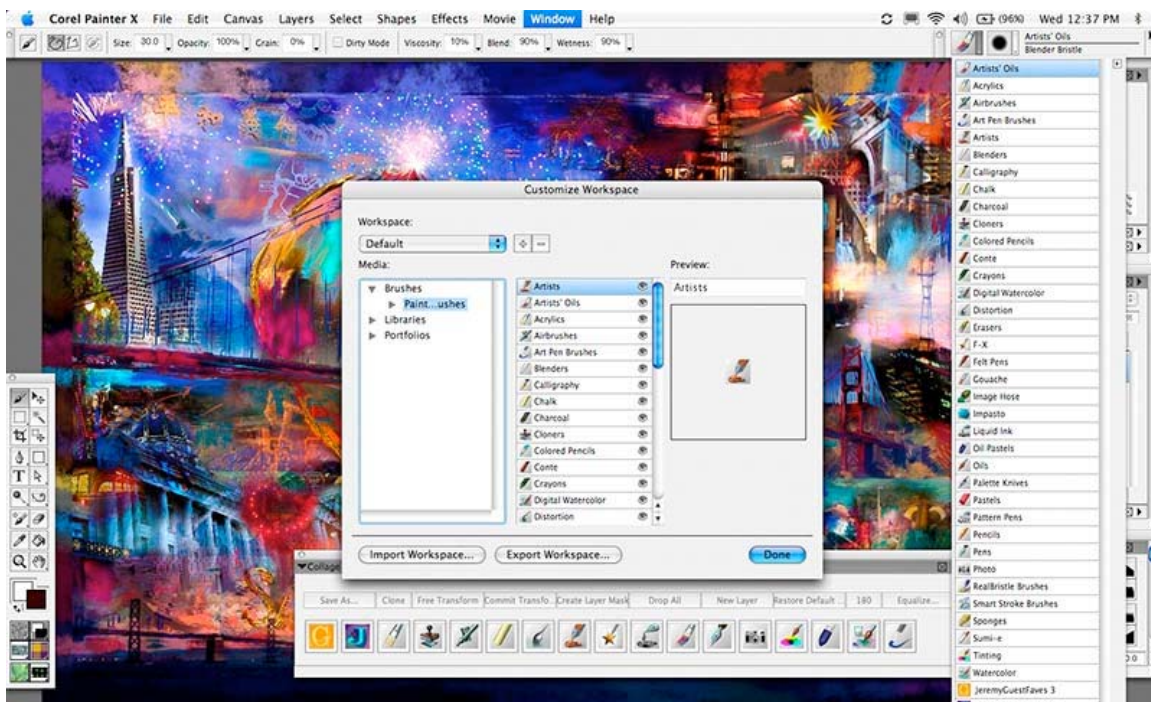


Subsidiary images

Prepare

For a collage project, it is important to have the right tools for the job and that you prepare your tools for action. You will need as much computer hard drive space and RAM memory as you can afford, a pressure-sensitive graphics tablet (I recommend the Wacom Intuos3 6x8 or larger, or the Cintiq 21UX) and Corel Painter X software.

1. Back up and clear off as much of your computer hard drive as possible. Maximize the amount of RAM.
2. Optimize your Control Panel settings for your Wacom Tablet.
3. Load in extra brushes (like those that come with my book or new DVD set).
4. Use the powerful new Painter X Workspace Manager (Window > Workspace > Customize Workspace) to move your favorite brush categories to the top of your Categories pop-up menu.



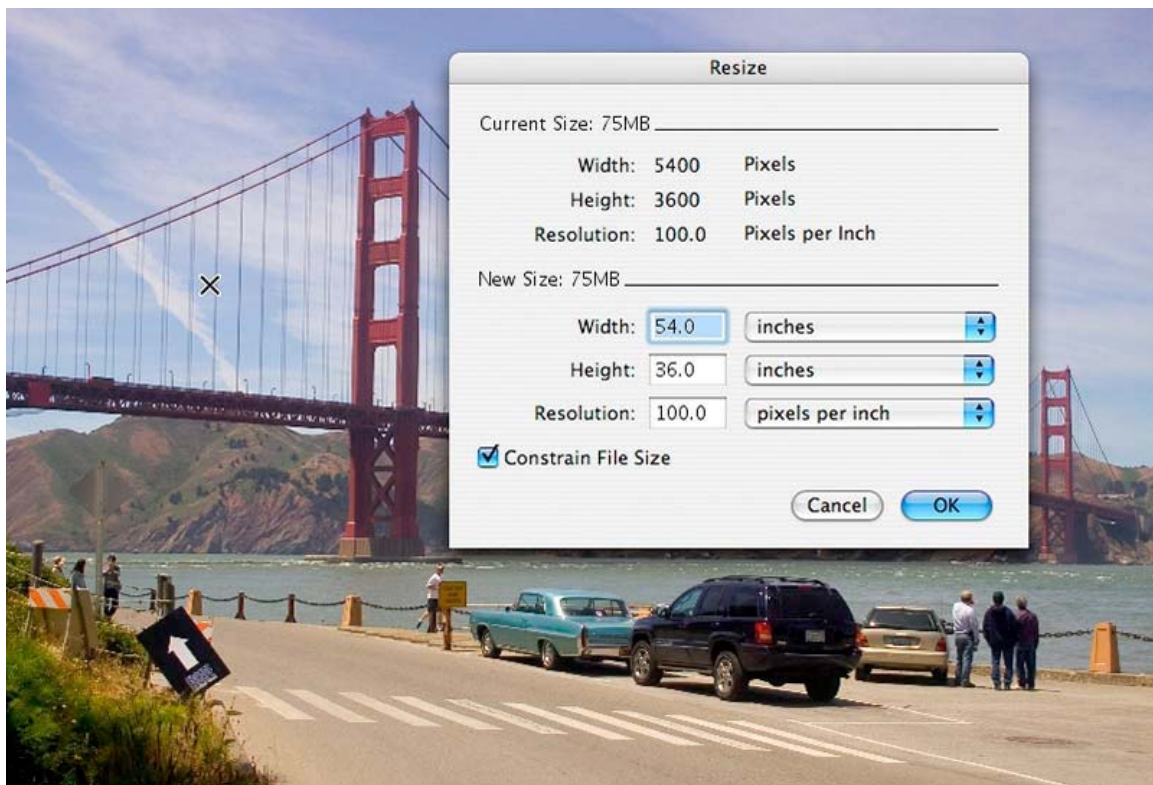
5. Adjust the Painter X Preferences for ease of use and create a Collage Shortcuts Custom Palette.

Detailed instructions for preparative tasks can be found in my newest book and DVDs.

Create a working image template

The working image template serves as a basis for a consistent canvas size throughout the project, eliminating any confusion through the use of different size or resolution source files.

Open the foundation image in Corel Painter X and choose Canvas > Resize. Change the units from pixels to inches, uncheck Constrain File Size and adjust the image size to match the desired end result.



Resize image

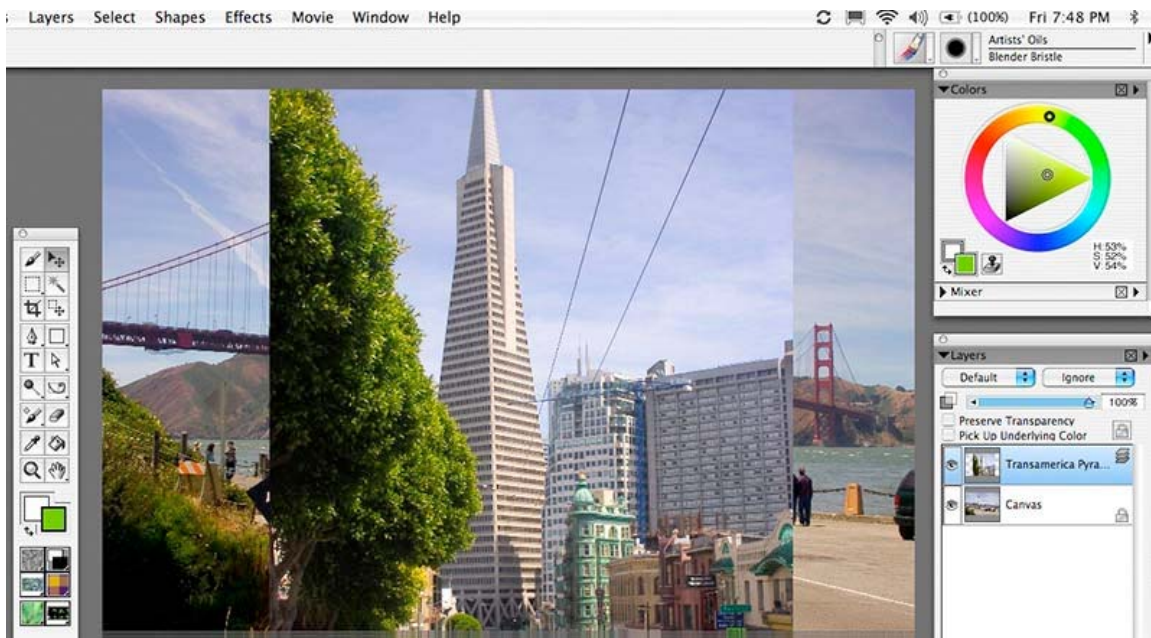
I normally print at 150 dots per inch (dpi) but chose to work at a lower resolution to keep my file sizes down. I used a resized version of the foundation image to generate the working image template. The goal is to establish a template size that you maintain for the remainder of the project.

Choose Effects > Tonal Control > Equalize (cmd/ctrl-E) followed by Window > Show Underpainting > Photo Enhance > Saturate to enhance the image for painting. Increase the tonal contrast and saturation of the foundation image beyond where you would stop if you just wanted to make a photographic print.

Choose File > Save As (shift-cmd/ctrl-S) and name your working image template with the following naming convention: short project name-two digit version number-short description of what this version contains or what effect was applied or which brush was used. Save as a RIFF file (the native format of Painter) to preserve all data and maximize the future editability of the file in Painter. Save your file into your Working Images sub-folder for the project. Use Save As regularly throughout your creative process, saving sequential version numbers as you go. In making the San Francisco Heart I ended up saving 60 versions.

Add a subsidiary image using Select, Copy and Paste

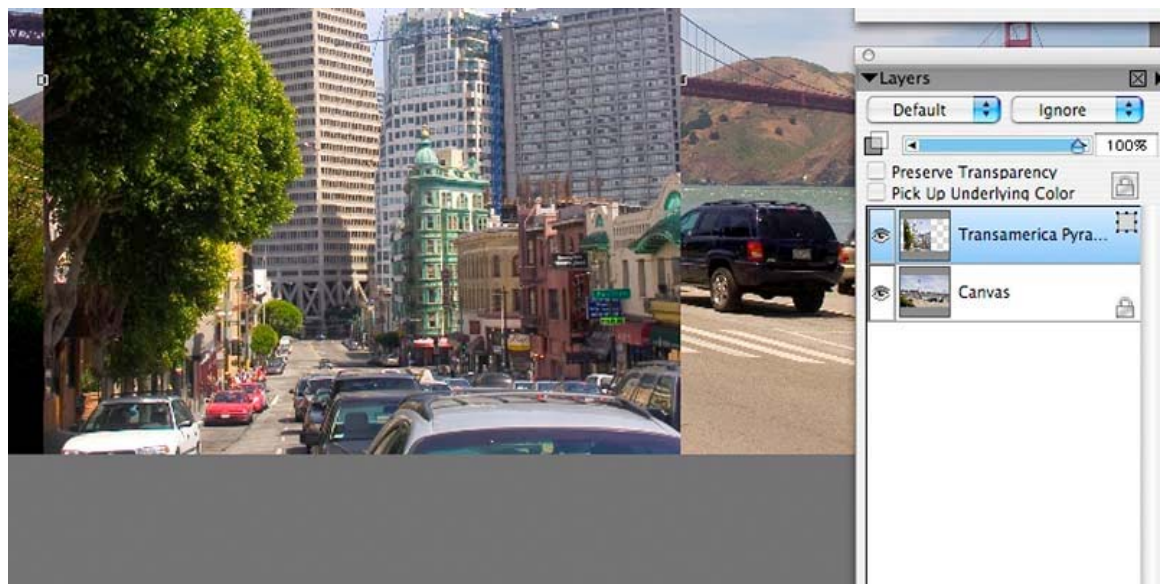
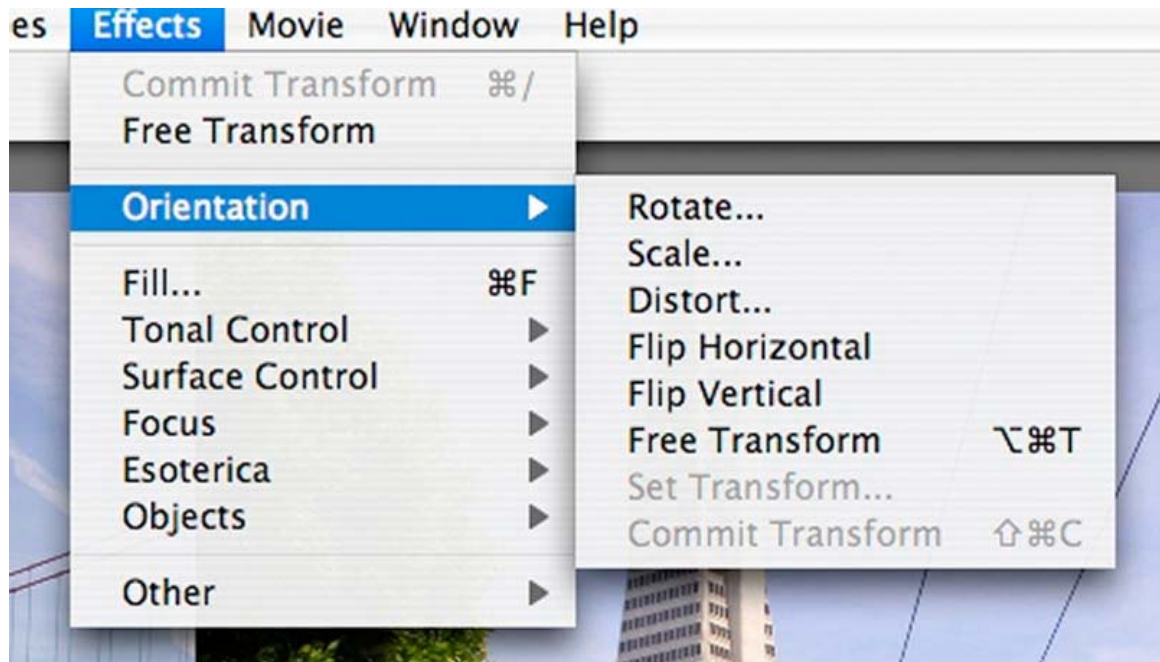
1. Open the Subsidiary Image in Painter.
2. Choose Select > All (cmd/ctrl-A).
3. Choose Edit > Copy (cmd/ctrl-C).
4. Make the working image template the active image in Painter.
5. Choose Edit > Paste (cmd/ctrl-V).
6. You will now see the subsidiary image pasted over the working image template as an image layer listed in the Layers palette.



7. Double-click on the image layer name in the Layers palette.
8. Rename the layer in the Layer Attributes dialog window to describe what the layer is.

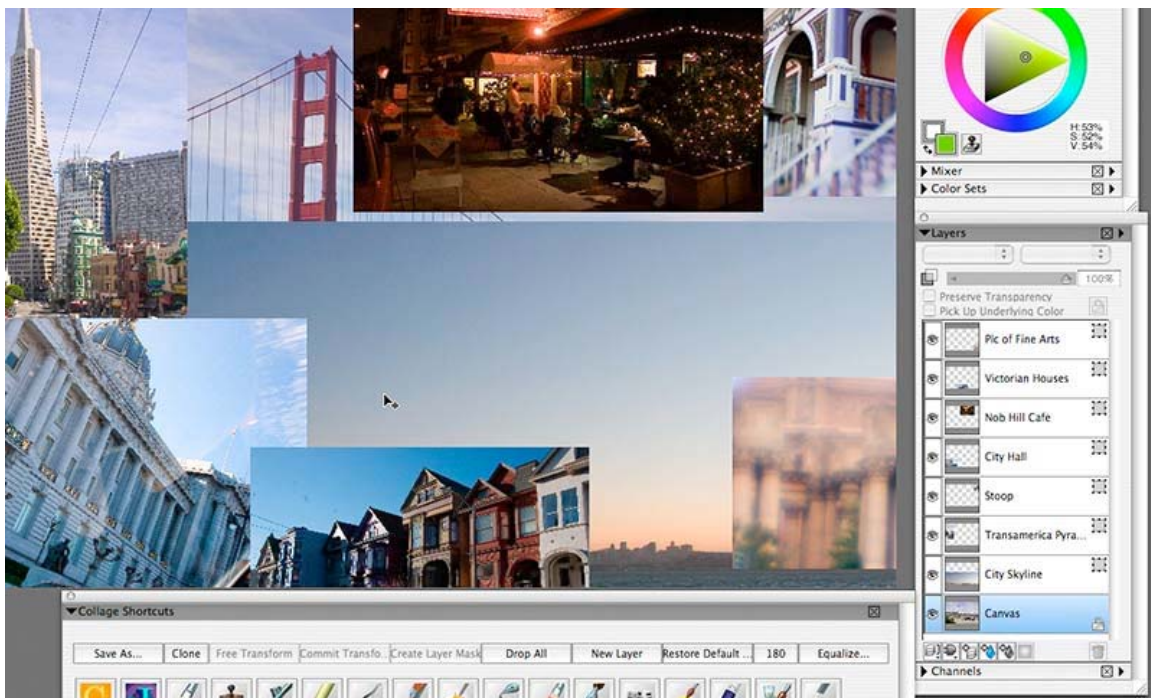
Resize and rotate the layer using Free Transform effect

1. Select the layer in the Layers palette, making sure that the lock symbol does not appear next to the layer name.
2. Choose Effects > Orientation > Free Transform. This converts the Image Layer into a Reference Layer with faintly visible control handles (small squares) in the corners and half way along the sides. If the layer is larger than the background canvas the control handles may be situated beyond the edge of the image. You may need to put your image in Screen Mode (cmd/ctrl-M) and zoom out (cmd/ctrl- -) to see the handles.



3. To resize the layer keeping the aspect ratio the same hold the Shift key down while dragging in a corner control handle.
4. To rotate the layer hold the Cmd key (Mac) or Ctrl key (PC) down while dragging in a corner handle.

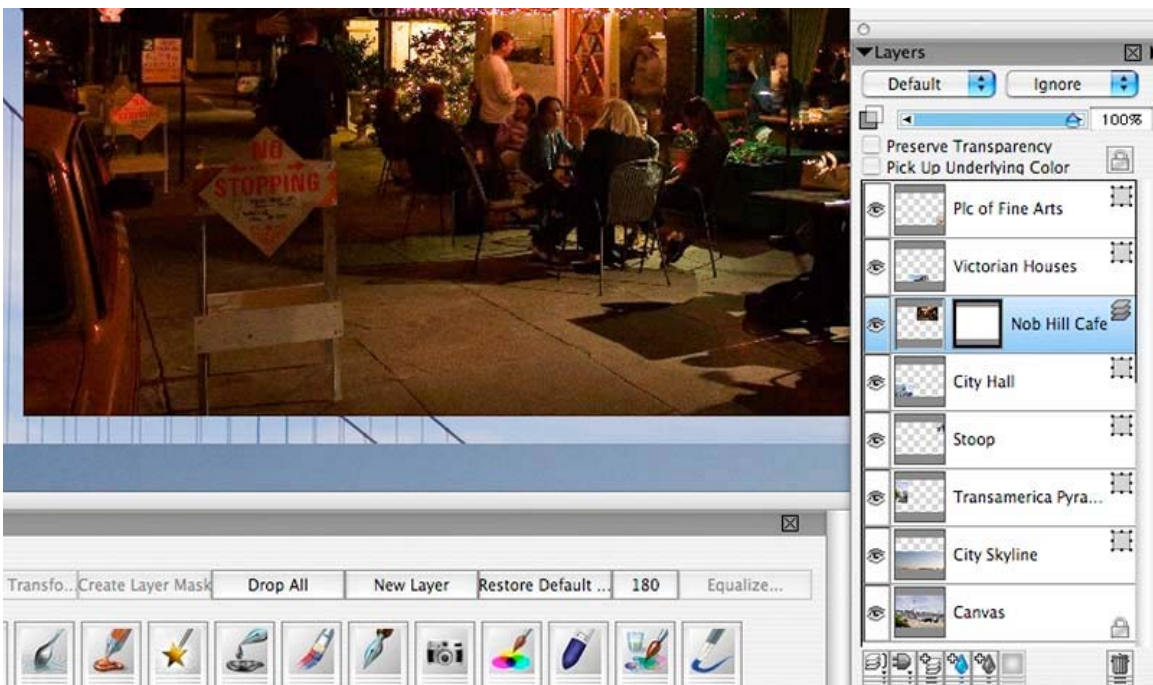
Repeat this process for other subsidiary images. If you have more than four layers and wish to see them in the Layers palette all at once, hold the tip of your cursor down on the last row of pixels along the bottom of the Layers list and then drag down.



Subsidiary images in multiple layers

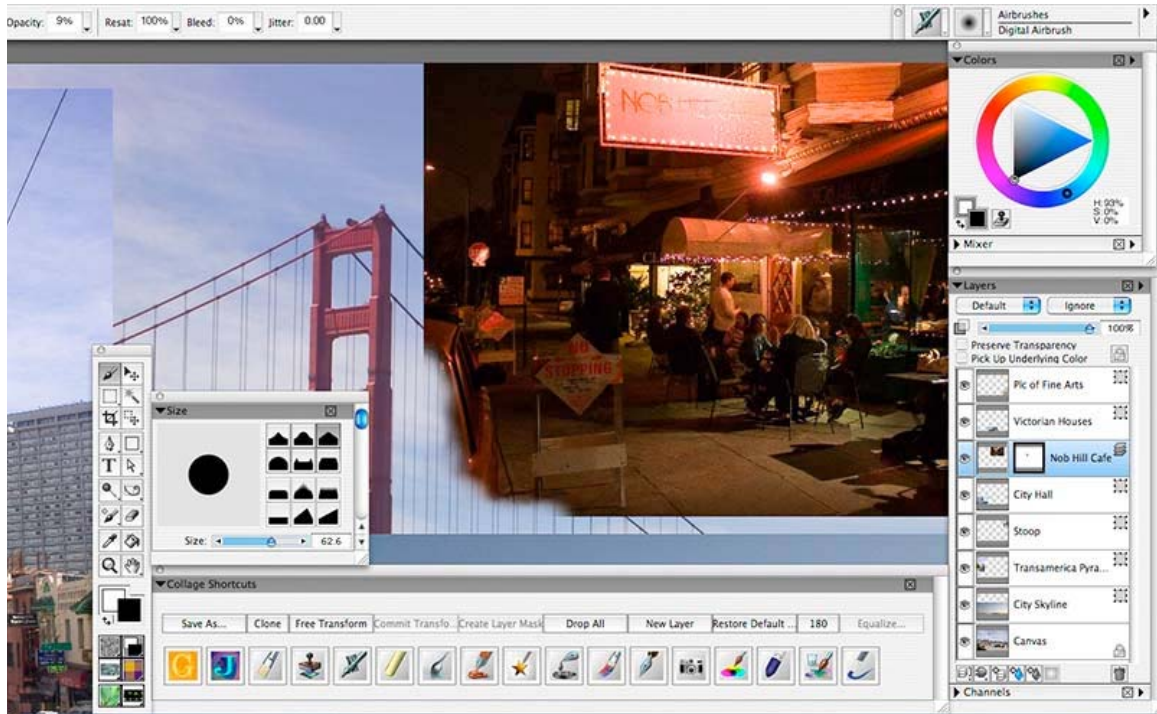
Control layer visibility with layer masks

1. Click on the layer with the Layer Adjuster tool (top right of Toolbox) provided Auto Select Layer is checked (left of Property Bar), or click on the layer in the Layers palette.
2. Choose Effects > Orientation > Commit Transform. This changes the layer from a Reference Layer back into an Image Layer, which you can paint on.
3. Click on the Create Layer Mask icon (last icon on right of row of six icons at the bottom of the Layers palette). You will see a black square against a white background appear immediately to the right of the layer thumbnail in the Layers List.



4. In the Brush Selector choose Airbrush category > Digital Airbrush variant.
5. In the Color palette take the Value-Saturation Triangle cursor to the bottom left corner to select pure black as your Main Color (front square).

6. Make sure that the Layer Mask is active (it will have a bold black box around it in the Layers List) and then paint black onto the visible part of the layer in your image. You will see the layer image disappear. If you instead see black appear on the layer, undo the brush stroke and reselect the Layer Mask. If you want to bring back any of the layer, make white your Main Color.



7. Repeat this process with all your layers.

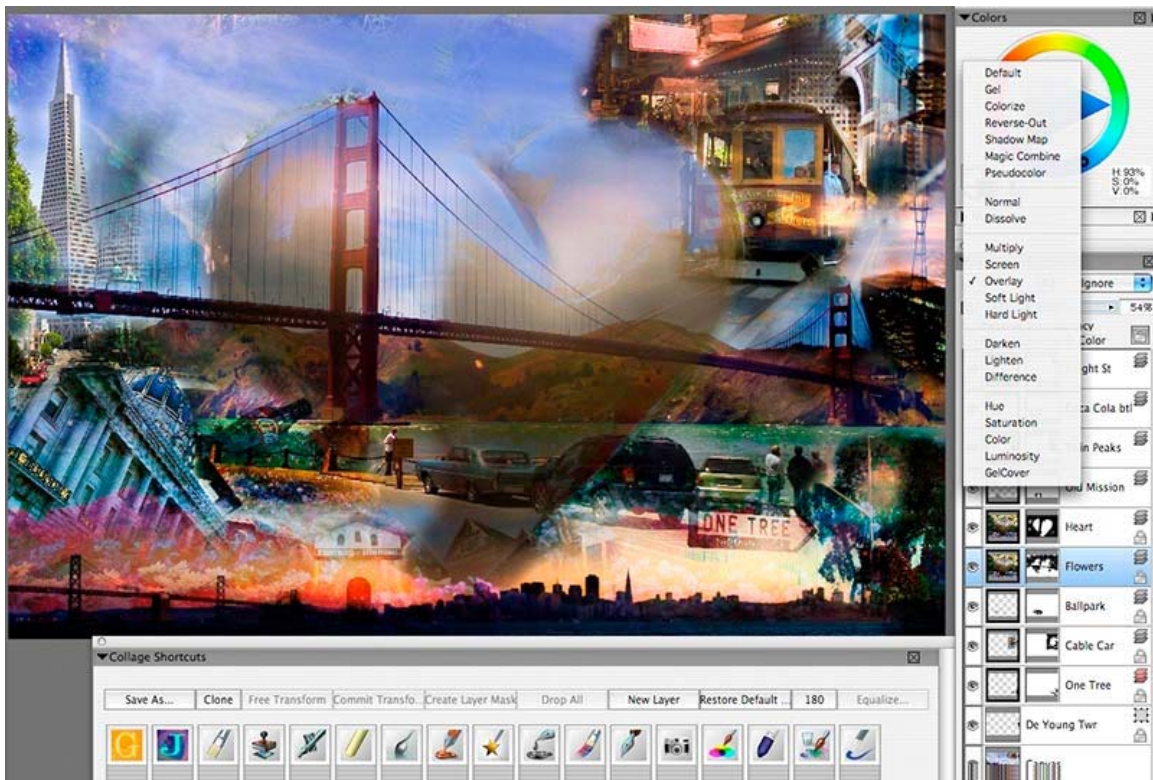


Group, collapse and lock layers

To group layers together, hold down the Shift key, select them in the Layers List and choose Layers > Group. Select a closed group and choose Layers > Collapse to collapse a group of layers into a single layer. Select a layer in the Layers List and click once on the right-hand end of the layer to toggle the lock icon on and off.

Experiment with Composite Methods and layer opacity

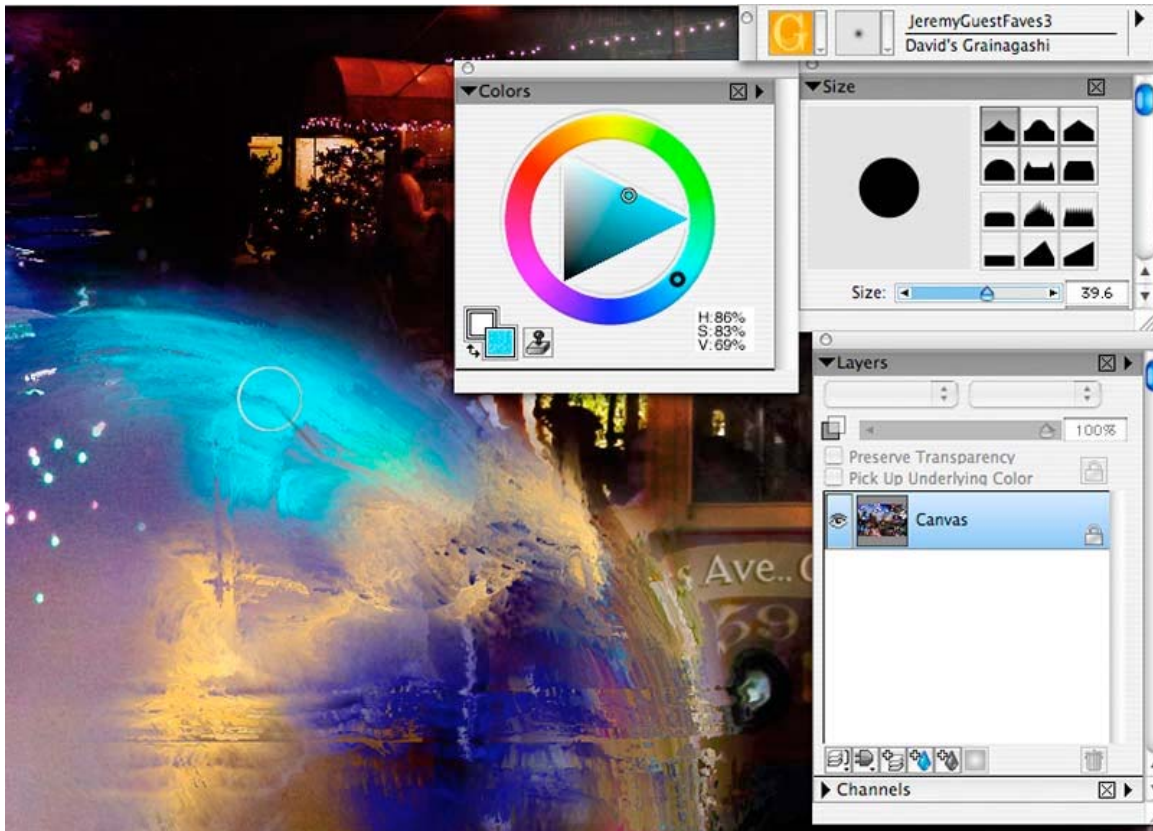
Composite Methods (accessed through the drop-down menu in the upper left of the Layers palette) control the way colors in a layer are affected by colors beneath the layer. Experiment with these Composite Methods.



Choosing the Overlay Composite Method

Periodically flatten and paint

Periodically flatten your layers (Layers > Drop All) to keep your file sizes manageable and ensure you are always able to conveniently see all your layers at once in the Layers palette. Flattening your image also allows you to use brushes to paint over, blend, smear and distort your imagery on a single flat background canvas. For example, I used David Gell's wonderful Grainagashi brush variant on the heart after flattening the image.



Painting over the flattened image

Create a Paper Texture template

Paper Textures in Painter offer a versatile way to integrate imagery of all kinds—photos, maps, logos, musical scores, handwriting—into your collage.

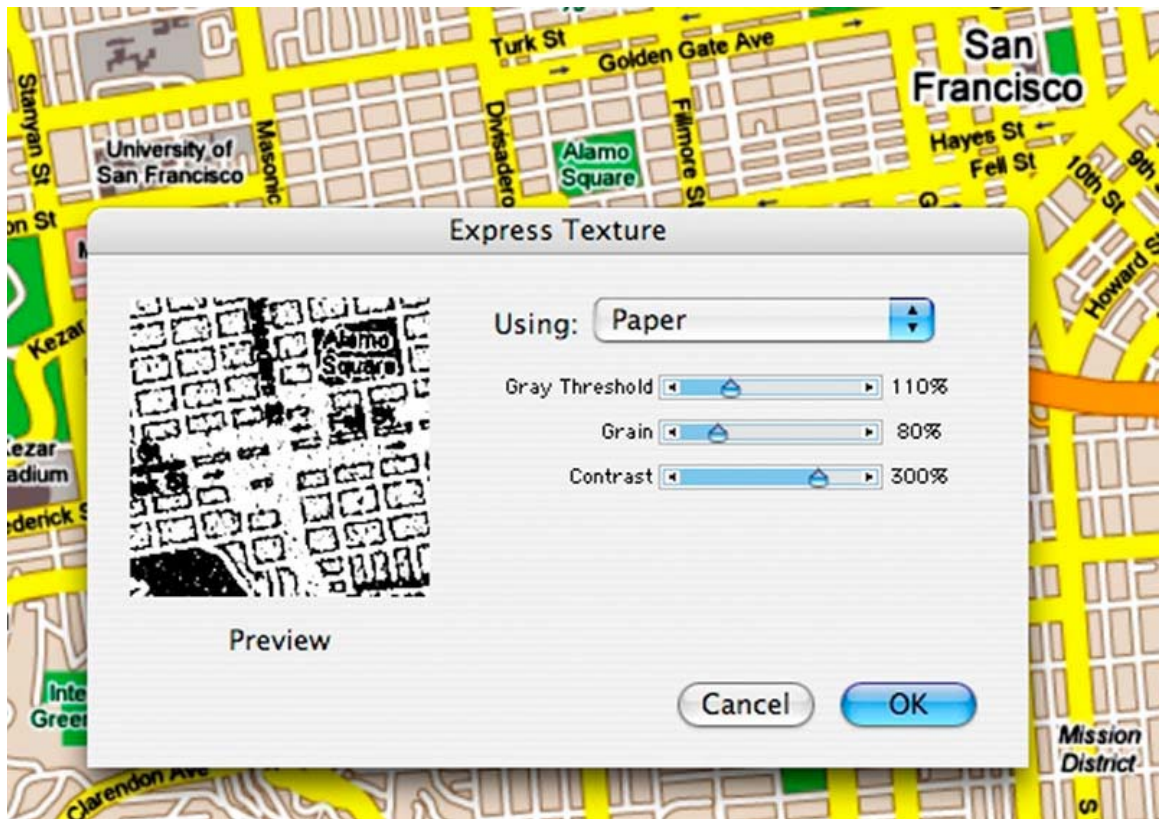
1. With the current Working Image active, choose File > Clone. This makes a flat clone copy of the working image. This working image clone copy will become the Paper Texture template.
2. Open the image you will incorporate as paper texture. I used a San Francisco map. Copyright laws apply to collage art, so if you use copyrighted material, even small parts, be sure to get permission.
3. Choose Select > All (cmd/ctrl-A).

4. Choose Edit > Copy (cmd/ctrl-C).
5. Now make the working image clone copy the active image in Painter.
6. Choose Edit > Paste (cmd/ctrl-V).
7. You will now see the map pasted over the working image clone copy as an image layer listed in the Layers palette.
8. Lower the layer opacity using the opacity slider in the Layers palette. This allows you to see through the map and observe how the map relates to the underlying collage.

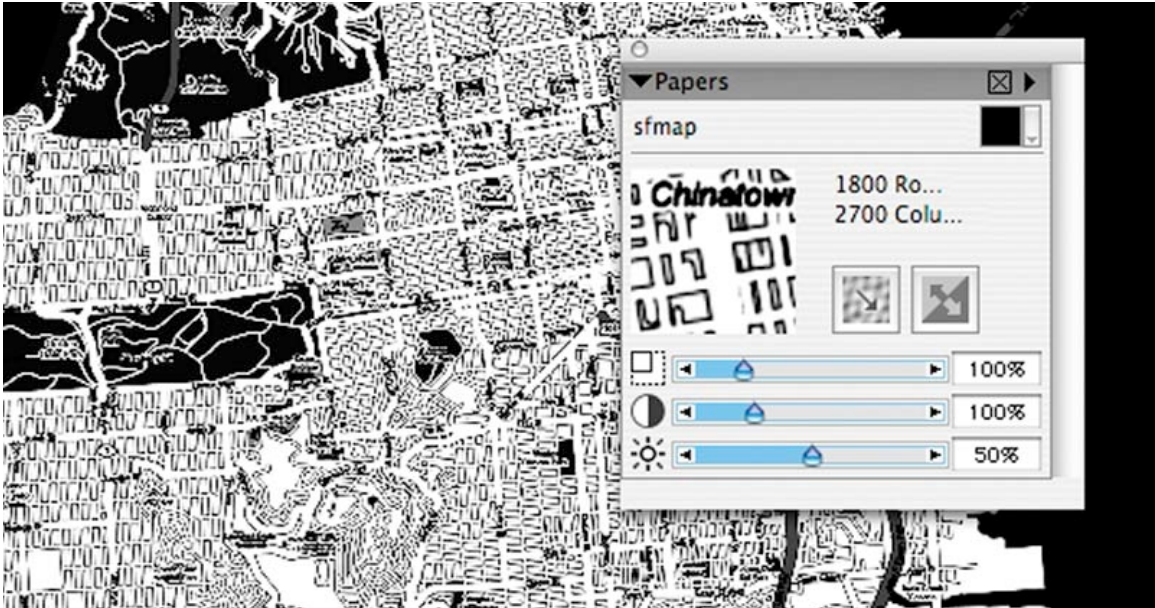


9. If the layer needs to be resized or rotated, use Effects > Orientation > Free Transform.
10. Once satisfied with the scale and position of the layer, return the layer opacity to 100% and save this file as a RIFF.
11. Choose Layers > Drop.
12. Choose Effects > Surface Control > Express Texture.

13. Experiment with the Express Texture sliders until you get a high contrast image that preserves details.

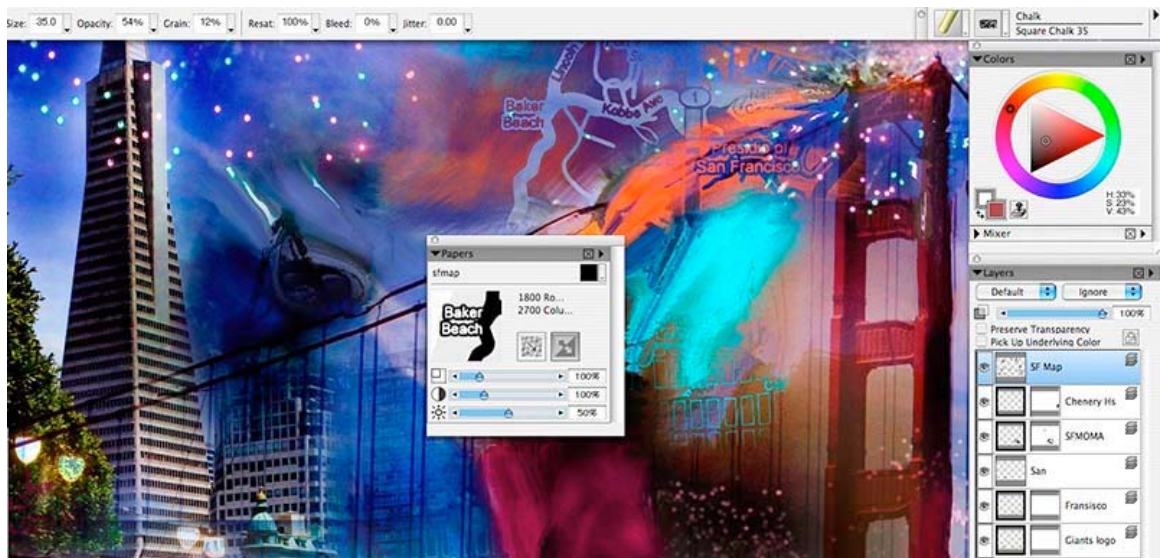


14. Choose Select > All (cmd/ctrl-A).
15. Choose Window > Library Palettes > Show Papers.
16. Choose Capture Paper from the Papers Palette pop-up menu (small solid black triangle in top right corner of palette). Name and save the custom paper. You will now see it appear in the Papers palette preview window.



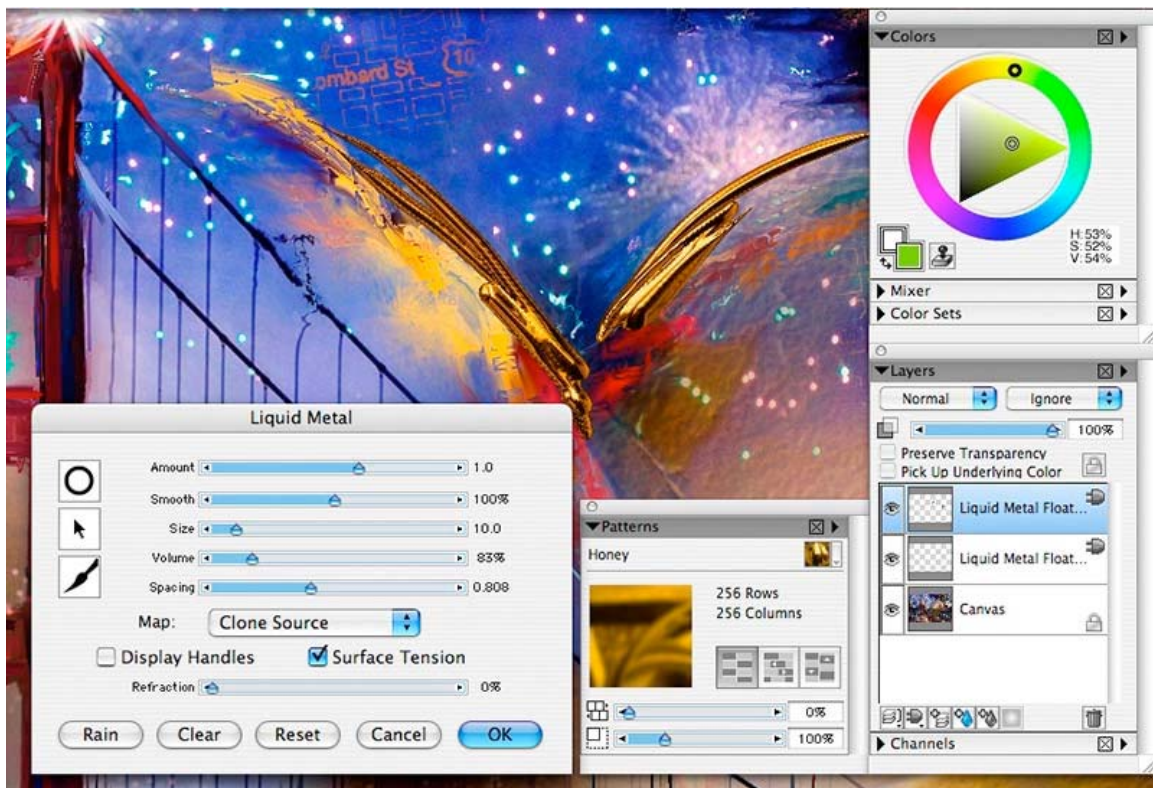
Return to your working image and paint texture into a layer

1. Choose the Chalk Brush Category > Square Chalk 35 variant.
2. Choose Layer > New Layer. This is your paper texture layer. Name the layer.
3. Pick a color you'd like to start painting in the texture with.
4. Start painting the texture into the paper texture layer.
5. Click on the Invert Paper icon in the Papers palette (right-hand of the two icons to the right of the preview window).
6. Experiment with painting into the negative space of the paper texture.



Paint with Liquid Metal

1. Have the most current Working Image open and active in Painter. If you have loaded in Jeremy's Extra Patterns Taster library from my book or DVDs, follow steps 3 to 5, otherwise skip to 6.
 2. Choose Window > Library Palettes > Show Patterns.
 3. Choose Open Library from the Patterns palette pop-up menu (top right corner).
 4. Open the Jeremy's Extra Patterns Taster library.
 5. Choose the Honey pattern from the Patterns palette selector menu.
 6. Choose Layers > Dynamic Plugins > Liquid Metal. A Liquid Metal layer will appear together with a Liquid Metal dialog window.
 7. If you have Honey pattern selected, select Map: Clone Source in the Liquid Metal window.
 8. With the brush icon selected in the Liquid Metal window start painting in the image. Experiment with the sliders.
- You will not be able to access any other functions in Painter while the Liquid Metal window is open.



Painting with the Liquid Metal Dynamic Plugin

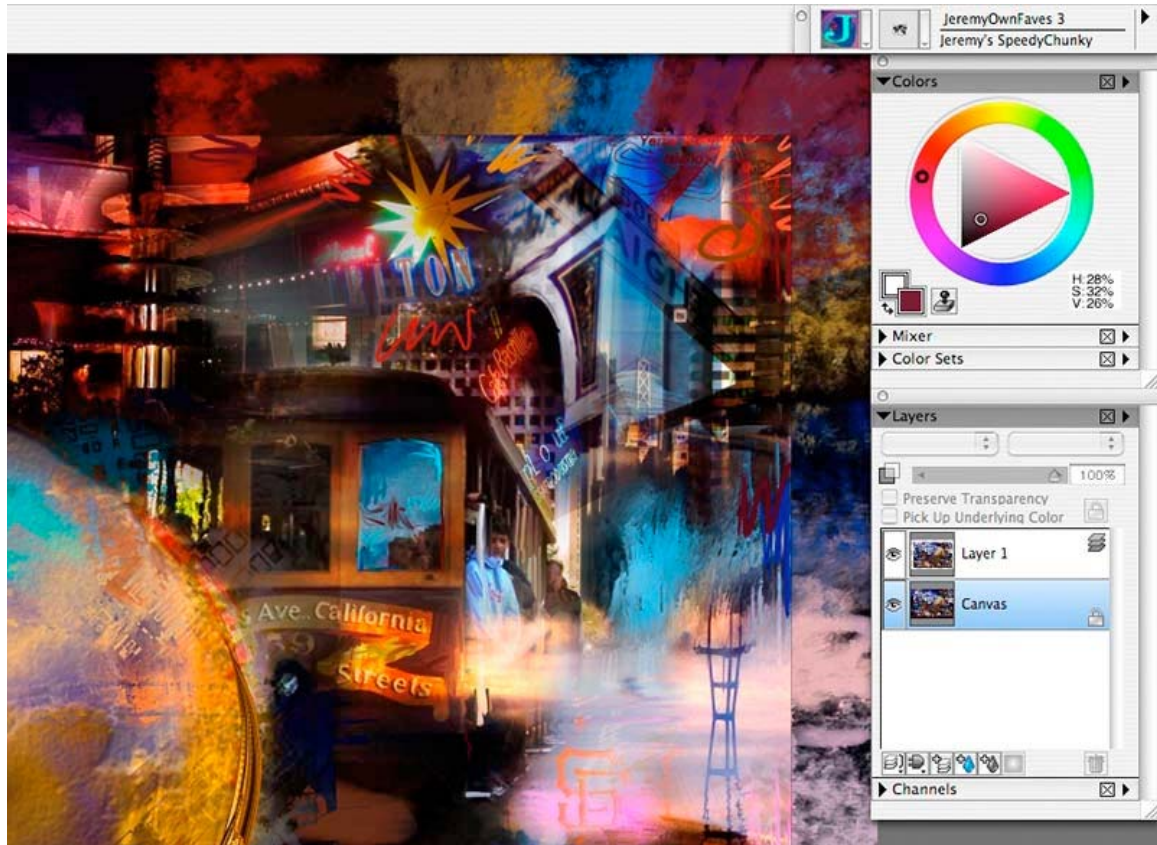
Add a painted border

Knowing when you are finished is not easy. When you feel you have done enough to the image, put it aside for a day or two and revisit it later with a fresh eye. I often find that I keep developing work long after I originally thought I was finished.

At the point when you are ready to print your collage portrait, flatten your image and resave it. Add a colored border and paint into it so it can be wrapped around a stretcher bar (gallery wrap) without losing any of your main composition around the edge. A painted border also creates an attractive edge that enhances your painting.

1. Open the flattened completed image in Painter.
2. Choose Select > All (cmd/ctrl-A).
3. Hold down option/alt and choose Select > Float. This generates a layer with a duplicate of the completed image, leaving the original in the background canvas.
4. Click on the eye icon at the left of the layer in the layers palette. This turns off the layer visibility.
5. Click on the background canvas in the Layers palette so it is active.
6. Use the Dropper tool to select a suitable border color from within the completed image.
7. Choose Canvas > Set Paper Color. The current Main Color is now set to be the Paper Color for the active image.
8. Choose Canvas > Canvas Size.
9. Insert the appropriate number of pixels to be added on all sides. I suggest adding the equivalent of 2 inches border all the way round. When you click OK you will see a border appear with the current Main Color.
10. Choose a suitable brush for pulling color into the border region. In this case I used the JeremyOwnFaves 3 category > Jeremy's SpeedyChunky. The Artists > Sargent Brush also works well for this purpose.
11. Make sure the Clone Color is not on. Then use the opt/alt key to turn the cursor into the Dropper tool and go round the edge of the image, selecting color near the edge and painting with that color beyond the edge into the border.

12. When you've worked your way all around the edge save the file as a RIFF. Then turn on the visibility of the layer. You will see the edge of the completed image showing up.



13. Select the layer and choose Drop from the Layer Commands icon in the lower left of the Layers palette. Save the file as a TIFF. It is now ready for printing.

Work on print for relief, richness and impact

After printing on my Epson Stylus Pro 9600 with UltraChrome pigment inks, I fix the canvas using PremierArt Print Shield and apply a clear Gloss Acrylic Medium & Varnish, building up a physical brush stroke texture that follows the forms of the composition. I then add opaque colored acrylic paint with a brush and palette knife to bring an extra level of life to the artwork.

The most important aspect of your collage portrait is not your choice of media and techniques, it is what you say in your art, what you express about your subject, the story behind the painting, the passion you share.

Jeremy Sutton studied drawing, sculpture and printmaking at the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing, Oxford University, while earning a degree in Physics. Sutton's artworks are in private and public collections worldwide. Sutton is the author of four books including the "Painter Creativity: Digital Artist's Handbook" series. His DVD tutorial "Expanding Your Creativity: The Art of Collage Portraiture" covers the techniques described here. www.jeremysutton.com and www.paintercreativity.com