

Workshops



5/2007

Painter

PAINTING EMOTIVE FANTASY ART

Simon Dominic Brewer takes you through a no-frills approach to creating an evocative and original design

My aim for this workshop is to help demonstrate a couple of things. Firstly, that fantasy art need not be clichéd and, secondly, that you don't have to use a bunch of fancy tools to achieve your goal.

The piece I'm going to paint is called King of the Sea. Deliberately straying from traditional fantasy, I had the idea of a once-noble sea beast, now little more than a rotting corpse washed up on the beach to be pecked at by gulls and pulled at by the tide. Cheery, I know, but I'm hoping that the unusual theme together with a subdued implementation will prove a lot more evocative than your everyday grimacing monster or fire-breathing dragon.

I'm going to keep things simple. Understand that I've got nothing against the more elaborate tools digital artists have at their disposal – I'll sometimes use them myself – but I'm a firm believer in getting to grips with the basics first. With this in mind, I'll be painting on to a single canvas, primarily with a single brush, and staying well away from Ctrl/Cmd+Z.

Although I won't be using references, I have spent an hour or so studying dozens of paintings and photos of beaches and cliffs, noting interesting features that may be of use. For instance, rocks on a beach often have a dip or depression around them due to the tide washing away the sand. Little things like this can add to the authenticity of a piece. Unfortunately I couldn't find any dragon corpse photos, so it looks like I'm on my own there.



1 No white
I start on a small canvas, only 870 pixels tall, simply because it's easier to cover in paint than a larger one. This step is something I try to get done as quickly as possible. There's nothing more depressing, artistically speaking, than staring at a blank canvas and wondering where to start. I'm not doing any concept sketches because I have a good mental image of what I want to achieve.



2 Blocking in shapes
From this point on I'll be mostly working with a single brush, varying only its size. The brush I'm using is very much tailored to my needs and has characteristics based around pressure. The harder I press on the tablet with my pen the more opaque the brushstroke.

Applying force also causes the paint to bleed less into its surroundings and to mix less with paint already on the canvas. This brush has an added advantage in that applying a very light pressure will blend existing paint.

I throw down some basic colour blocks: cliffs, sky, monster and sand. I don't worry too much about contrast or highlight because the overall tonal scheme seems right. I use darker colours in the foreground to give a feeling of depth.

Shortcuts
Eyedropper
Alt (PC)
Option (Mac)
Use this to easily pick a colour without breaking your workflow.

Artist
PROFILE
Simon Dominic Brewer
COUNTRY: England

Simon is 38 and lives in the north of England. He works with Painter X. He's a bit of a late starter – up until four years ago he hadn't done any artwork, digital or otherwise. Now he tends to concentrate on fantasy, horror and science fiction images.
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DVD Assets
The files you need are on your DVD in the folder Simon Brewer in the Workshop section.
SOFTWARE: Painter X (demo)



3 Up-size

I'm easily pleased so now it's on to the next step: image up-sizing. I use the Resize option for this, increasing the canvas dimensions to 3,360x4,060 pixels. Of course, this results in a very pixelated image, but as we only have a few blobby brushstrokes so far it doesn't matter. Viewing the newly sized image at 100 per cent zoom gives you a bit of a shock, because it makes you realise just how much work there is ahead. Solution, don't view it at 100 per cent zoom!

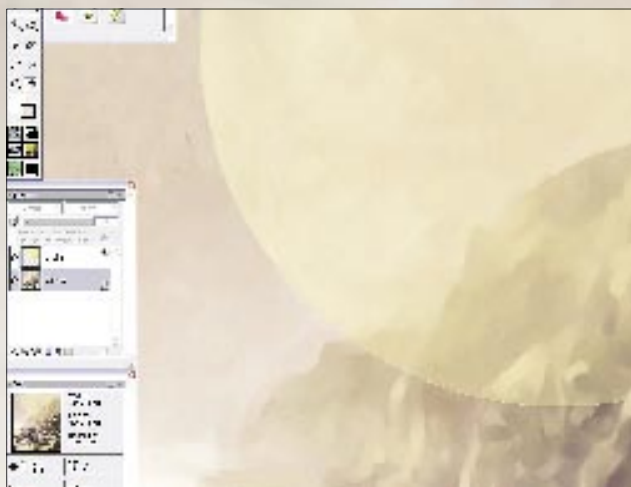


4 Make it look dead

Classical dragons are all about symmetry, poise and elegance. This dragon, however, is about death, bloating and decomposition. That's why, as I further define it, I purposely introduce elements of randomness and irregularity, both in terms of form and colouration. While I'm at it I also slap in a few general highlights using brighter, more saturated

paint. I'm working with my brush sized at around 45 pixels.

I've opened the Info box and I'll be keeping it on the page. It's not that I need to be kept informed of the exact position of my cursor, it's actually because the tiny thumbnail is very useful in assessing composition and impact at a glance, without having to zoom out or squint at the screen.



5 Gasp! Is that a layer?

It is a layer but don't worry, I'm not painting on it. I'm just using it to hold a circle because I've decided to include a planet in the background, subtly looming out from behind the cliffs, and my circle-painting skills suck.

I place the circle where I want it and reduce its opacity. Then, on the canvas, I sketch in the arc of my new planet. At this point I could delete the circle layer but I think I'll keep it in case I accidentally paint over the planet's edge and need to redefine it. I make the layer invisible. I'll add more surface detail to the planet later when I work on the sky in step 15.

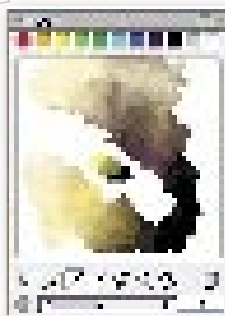
6 Create a mixer palette

I dab a selection of colours representing beach, cliff and rocks on to the Mixer palette and blend them. Most of the time I pick colours from the canvas itself as I paint, using the Alt key as a toggle (Option key on Macs). However, over-use results in a muddying of the colours, so to refresh the vibrancy I will occasionally pick from either the Mixer palette or the standard Colour Wheel. As I paint I pick new colours frequently, usually dozens of times a minute, to maintain a painterly feel.

PRO SECRETS

Don't be a quitter

If you're an artist just starting out, never, ever leave a piece unfinished. It's very tempting to scrap a painting because you've thought of something better, it's too difficult, it's not working out or any of 101 other reasons you can think of to bin it. Resist that temptation because if you give in, you won't improve.



7 Check for flaws

I reduce the brush size to around 27 pixels and add a bit of foliage to the tops of the cliffs. Using brighter, more saturated colours, I dab in the extremes of lighting, making sure the light direction is consistent. I frequently flip the canvas horizontally, which is useful to identify flaws in the composition or anatomy.



8 Take a step back

Before I start on the detail I take a metaphorical step back to check everything looks okay. It's better to catch mistakes and omissions early rather than try to make major changes to an almost finished piece. I decide to rotate the whole image about 15 degrees because the level horizon strikes me as being dull. Taking another look, everything appears okay although there are a couple of minor things bugging me. I can't quite identify them yet so I'll carry on. Hopefully they'll become apparent soon.



PRO SECRETS

There's no 'right' way

It's tempting, especially when following tutorials, to look at the methods of a certain artist and think "that's the right way to do it." In truth, there is no right way and no wrong way. If a method works for you, use it. It's great to understand how other artists work and to try out their methods, but use the knowledge you gain to develop your own style rather than trying to emulate theirs.



12 Skip around

I don't mean that literally, rather that you should feel free to move between elements of your picture whenever you choose. In this case, I've become a little bit bored with water and sand, so I've returned to working on the creature's head for a fresh challenge.

9 Get in there!

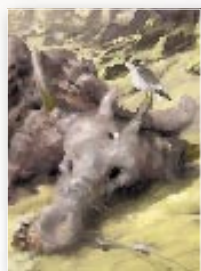
So far we haven't zoomed in, but we can't put it off forever. Reducing my brush size to 14 pixels, I zoom in to around 70 per cent. I start with the beast's head, using light and shade to better define the contours, continually reminding myself that we want to achieve a collapsed, dead appearance and not a traditional majestic look.

I'm using an orangey-red colour, although I vary the saturation to simulate the colours of decay. The blue-tinged areas aren't actually blue, they're desaturated orange and grey. Small amounts of grey in a mainly red/orange colour scheme will appear blue.



10 Add a gull

I decide to add a black-headed gull. Normally I would use reference but I've seen so many gulls I won't bother in this case. I also spot something that was bugging me earlier. The trees on the cliff



look too fussy, so I get rid of most of them with a few scribbles. To get a painterly feel, it's best to paint over your mistakes rather than just remove or reposition them.

11 Water isn't blue

Actually that's not true. Water is blue, but its subtle tint isn't normally detectable by the human eye. Instead, we can safely say that water is colourless and takes on the colour of its environment. In this piece I'm painting the water nearest to the dragon a light sandy colour because it's shallow and the beach is visible through it. The more distant water I paint a brighter hue, almost white, because it's reflecting more light from the sky. The more acute the angle between the viewer and the surface of the water the more light will be reflected from its surface.



13 Detailing the carcass

Still working with the 14-pixel brush I add more detail to the creature, including some lumps and fleshy strands of indeterminate origin. I'm trying to achieve the impression of a carcass while ensuring the viewer is left in no doubt they're looking at a sea monster.



14 Detailing the cliff

Using a nine-pixel brush (reducing to six pixels for highlights) I add detail to the cliff. As with the carcass, I'm careful not to over-define the elements. In the real world it's not always possible to distinguish between, say, moss and grass, so don't obsess about it when painting. ➔



Shortcuts

Drag (pan) canvas

Spacebar (PC & Mac)
Hold the spacebar and drag your canvas to save using the scrollbars or zooming out.

15 Painting the sky

The two elements here are the planet and the fog, neither of which need much work. For the fog I use a different brush. Essentially it's the same as my main brush except it puts down much less paint and therefore enables more flexibility for blending.

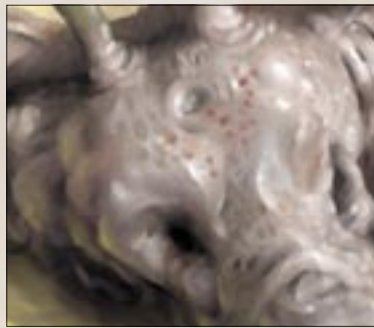
As I add in the fog I find it's useful to tilt the canvas using Painter's excellent Tilt function (accessed by clicking and holding the Pan tool – the hand – until a circular arrow appears, then choosing the arrow and dragging your canvas). This isn't the same as rotation because it only changes how you view the image, not the image itself.

Remember that a planet is a sphere, not a disc. That's why I paint the surface detail to simulate a 3D surface rather than a 2D one. Having said that, the planet requires little detail so I use my original brush at about 20 pixels, spending ten minutes adding blotches and craters. Every good planet has blotches and craters, right?

16 Fine detail

The creature is the focus of this piece so that's where the most detail will go. I reduce my brush to between four and eight pixels and zoom in to around 150 per cent. It's impossible to say exactly how much detail is required on any given piece; just trust your own judgement.

Generally speaking, if things don't appear to be improving it's time to stop. Remember that detail is no substitute for



good form and solid composition. If you reach the fine-detail phase and there are still major areas you aren't happy with then it's time to get a great big brush, splodge out all the things that offend you and start over again. Knowing which areas to detail and which to leave more painterly is a real skill that, once mastered, lends your paintings a powerful aura of maturity. It's something I often struggle with.



17 Huzzah! 'Tis done!

Well, almost. I dab some areas of high and low contrast colour on to the cliff, just to add spice, and get rid of that circle layer, which it turned out I didn't need. And, better late than never, I finally realise what has been bugging me about the composition. That horrible black rock bottom left is drawing the eye and spoiling the layout. A few quick scribbles, colour-picked from the immediate surroundings, and the rock has gone. ●

