Painting with Pixels

These notes have been prepared using Photoshop CC 2015.5.0, a Windows PC and a tablet such as Wacom Intuos. A tablet of some sort is virtually mandatory as the brush strokes are supposed to emulate painting which you can’t really do with a mouse! You also need some familiarity with using layers in Photoshop and brushes.

I recommend that you consider looking at John Derry’s tutorials on Lynda.com. He has a number of digital painting courses available and also Wacom tablet training relevant to digital painting. Here’s a link to Digital Painting: Street Scene as an example.

The set up should be the same for Photoshop’s versions since CS5 but the menu options/layout and key strokes for setting up may be different. The painting process relies on using the mixer brush which is one of the brush options found under the brush tool on the tool bar and was introduced in Photoshop CS5. Adobe has a video tutorial on the mixer brush at https://helpx.adobe.com/photoshop/atv/cs5-tutorials/using-the-mixer-brush.html

The Adobe tutorial presented doesn’t use layers to the extent below. Using multiple layers better emulates the painting process in terms of building a panting from underpainting through to detail strokes. Using multiple layers also allows you to tackle sections of the painting separately which is better for re-doing strokes you aren’t happy with. As well an important point of difference with what I have outlined here is that the option for what layers the brush operates on should be set to current layer only rather than all layers as Adobe has in the video.

SETTING UP

The following steps are best recorded as an action but once you have done them a few times they aren’t difficult. There appears to be a lot of steps but it’s not as hard as it looks!

Derry provides actions and brush pre-sets as part of his courses on Lynda.com.

1. Open a (flattened) image in Photoshop.

2. Unlock the layer by double clicking the padlock.
3. Duplicate the layer and name it Reference. Set its opacity to 50% and hide it by clicking on the eyeball so that it is “off”.

4. Select Layer 0 and set its fill to 1%.

5. The image in Photoshop’s main window should appear transparent (though depending on your image you might see a very faint image as it is 1% filled). With layer 0 selected make a new layer either through the layer menu or hold down shift+Ctrl+N or click on the new layer icon in the layers panel. Move the new layer to the bottom.
6. Select Layer 0 and layer 1 and merge them.

7. Add a hue/saturation adjustment layer and create a group with layer 0 and the hue/saturation layer in it. Colours in paintings are often more saturated than in photographs and having a hue saturation layer set up is handy but not always used. You can of course add any other or multiple adjustment layers here, or none. You can also add them later.

8. Duplicate the group twice. You should now have three groups that each contains a layer 0 and a hue/saturation layer.

9. Name Group 1 “underpainting” and its layer 0 “underpainting”. Name Group 1 Copy “Intermediate strokes” and its Layer 0 “Intermediate Strokes” and name Group 1 copy 2 “Detail Strokes” and its Layer 0 “Detail Strokes”.
10. Select the Underpainting layer in the Underpainting group and make a new layer. Move the new layer to the bottom of the layer stack. It should move outside the group and be offset to the left. Fill it with White and rename it Background and lock it by clicking on the padlock at the top of the layers panel.

11. Select the reference layer and click on its eyeball to make it active. Lock it as well. The reference and background layers are locked so that you don’t paint on them by mistake. They can be unlocked during the painting process to, for example, change the opacity of the reference layer for blending into the final image.

Select the underpainting layer.

You are now ready to start painting and the screen should look like this.

**THE PROCESS**

**Brushes**

Select a brush from the mixer brush set. Right click on the brush tool in the tool bar and select the mixer brush. Its icon is a brush with a droplet –
Once selected click the mixer brush icon in the options bar and select a brush type.

If you don’t see the brushes as above load the “Artists’ Brushes” tool pre-set by clicking on the gear icon thingy in the top right of the brush panel.

Select the Fan – Flat Cloner and start brushing on the underpainting layer. The brush picks up colour from the 1% layer that was merged into the underpainting layer when the layers where set up. For that reason don’t erase your work with the eraser as you’ll also erase the 1% layer too. The best way to go back is to create another layer group. You can have as many layer groups as you like – and it’s sometimes a good idea to create more and build your painting up slowly rather than try and do it all on the three layers. The reference layer is not intended to add anything to your painting and is simply a reference so you know where and what you are painting. However, I usually merge the reference layer into the final image at a low opacity to add some detail. The background layer simply provides a white background ‘canvas’ for the painting.

Experiment with the different brush types and also the brush pre-sets. The names of the brush pre-sets are descriptive of how they should behave. The best thing to do when starting off is to doodle and just see what the different brush types do, Adobe’s tutorial referenced above sets out what the parameters in the options bar do for the brushes. **An Important point of difference with what I have outlined here is that the option for what layers the brush operates on should be set to current layer only rather than all layers as Adobe has in the video.** In the current version of Photoshop it is the icon that looks like a stack of pages second from the right in the options bar – and displays the tool tip “pick up wet paint from all layers” when you hover over it.

Here’s my underpainting with the reference layer turned off:
The intermediate Layer turned on:

And the detail layer turned on:

And finally with the reference layer turned on, I’ve set the opacity of the reference layer to 34% and will blend it in at that for the final image. Of course you can also apply adjustment layers globally or to individual layers, crop or any other Photoshop work.
Here’s a final image. I’ve created a stamped layer (select all the layers then hold down Ctrl+Alt+Shift+E) that has the reference layer blended in at 34% opacity. I’ve also made some global adjustments and added a pattern layer:

Enjoy, and experiment with the brush options!