

PHOTOCRYLICS[®]

WALKING THE JOURNEY STEP BY STEP *part 2*



ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © KAT SILVERGLATE

“Art is not about learning how someone else does something. It’s about discovering what’s inside you.” — *Georgia O’Keefe*

By *Kat Silverglate*



The completed project as it appears today in Aventura, Florida.



The first print coming off of my 42-inch HP Designjet 5000 PS UV. Note the extra space around the image to allow for stretching.

As I share this step-by-step journey of how I created four Photocrylics® paintings for a wonderful client in Aventura, Florida, I do so in the spirit of Georgia O’Keefe and in the spirit of my Southern grandmother, who spent many hours each summer teaching me to cook. “It’s not the recipe that counts,” she’d say in her deep Southern drawl. “It’s whether the heart of the chef can be tasted in the food!”

This is not a recipe. Not a formula. Not a script. It’s a journey! By sharing the general steps I took in creating this project and some of the lessons I learned along the way, my hope is to inspire you to think outside the traditional digital toolbox and take your own spin on the after-capture ride. Start your own journey.

What is Photocrylics?

Photocrylics is simply the term I made up to describe my brand of digital canvas paintings. It was my answer to the question, “What exactly is it?” It was also a response to the continuing debate over whether this type of finished product is actually a painting or a digital print, whether it is an original or multiple original, and whether it is fine art or digital art.

Because Photocrylics fit none of those categories particularly well, I leapfrogged the entire debate by making up a word that associates two different concepts—photography and painting (usually with acrylic paint). My company has registered that word with the United States Patent and Trademark office to identify the finished product we sell.

I learned this process, as I have with just about everything digital, by pure trial and error. Starting in 2002, never having painted a picture, my earliest experiments were with clear acrylic paint. Using a clear substance that dried to look like paint but revealed the image underneath was simply the safest way for me to have the courage to apply a painted effect on a digital canvas without any formal training. As I sold more and more pieces, colored acrylic and textures became a part of the process.

For this article, I’ve chosen an actual commissioned work completed in 2004 for a mediator’s conference room. The series of four images, aptly titled “Growing Out of Your Gourd,” shows how simple digital images on canvas with clear acrylic paint can be transformed into artsy finished pieces.

Selecting the Image: Keeping it Simple

I photographed the gourds on my back patio by placing them in natural sunlight on a white canvas with a white canvas backdrop. The plain white backdrop was intended to accentuate the color that gradually covered the canvas as the gourds grew from print to print. The four images were created from one original, which I enlarged four times in Photoshop until it covered the printable surface. The original RAW image from which I created the four pieces is simple but hardly artistic and rather drab.

Early on this journey, selecting images to paint was more about simplicity than artistic drama. Why? Because painting a digital image with clear acrylic paint has everything to do with learning how to make basic, realistic paint strokes that are consistent with the digital image. If done well, the image will appear to absorb the strokes of your paintbrush. Learning to “stroke” a canvas with clear paint is easiest with a simple image that has large areas of color and little detail. If you are an accomplished painter, you are less likely to worry about detail and more likely to jump right into the fabulous world of color and overpaint any details that need to change or disappear.

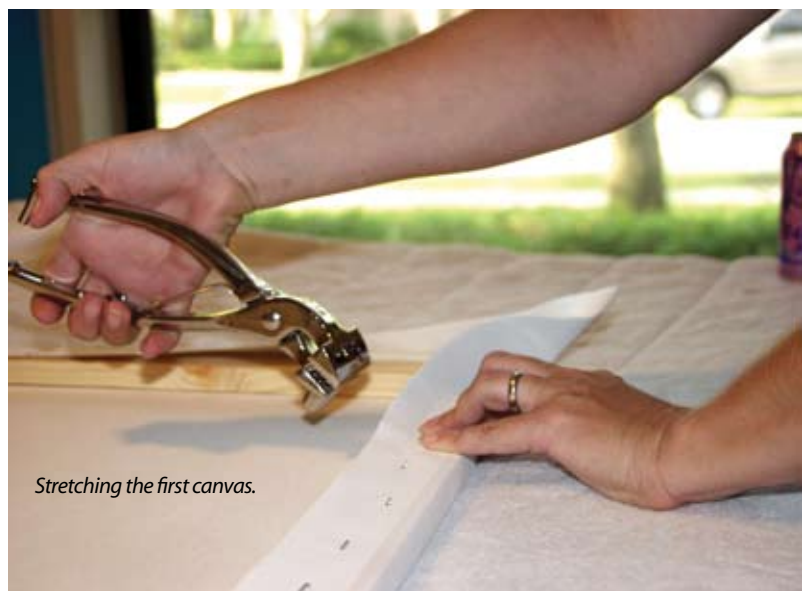
Editing for Texture: Lose the Photographic Feel

As I edited this image for color, saturation, contrast and texture, my end goal was an artistic, painterly look that would suit the color palette of the office where the finished pieces would hang. While it is the acrylic paint that gives the image a painted look, the effect would be unnatural if the digital image looked too much like a photograph. In my quest to lose the photographic feeling of the image, I’ve found that extremes work well—minor filter adjustments in Photoshop CS2 or drastic reworking of the image in Corel Painter IX. Very little in the middle seems to work for me. The middle ground tends to produce a product more akin to a digital print than a painterly looking one.

Photoshop’s Dry Brush filter was the cure for these gourds. A very minimal application of this filter took the hard edges from the gourds and roughed up their smooth surfaces. For the more adventurous, Corel Painter and a Wacom pen and tablet allow you to alter the image digitally, one paint stroke at a time.

Editing for Color: Think Like a Painter, Saturate Your “Canvas”

Color in a painting is different than color in a photograph. In the painted world, apples don’t have to be red or green or yellow. They can be whatever hue the creator needs them to be. Indeed, the painted look is often characterized by its departure from realism. This office space needed spice colors, so that is what these gourds got.



Stretching the first canvas.



Original image before Photoshop enhancements.

If I've learned one thing about color prepping an image for canvas, it is this: lean toward over-saturation. A canvas print, particularly a matte canvas, tends to lose some of its color density on the textured material. I am heavy on the saturation when I prepare to print on canvas. Note also that the clear acrylic paint will make the color pop off the canvas even more, so don't worry if the image still looks a little flat or powdery when you print.

Sizing the Image: Size Matters

It took many rolls of misprinted canvas before I learned the true meaning of "size matters" as it relates to a large finished piece. Whether you print on your own large format printer or contract with someone to transfer your image to canvas, an image with enough resolution to print without pixelization is essential. Until I bought my 16.9-megapixel Canon, I was creating Photocrylics paintings in sizes upwards of 55 inches with my 4.1-megapixel Olympus E-10. Through lots of trial and error, I learned that a high-resolution image can be printed in large sizes at 72 dpi with little pixelization and enough quality for a paintable canvas surface. Rather than enlarge my 300-dpi images to the size of the canvas I wish to print, I select the largest size of the ultimate painting I wish to paint and reduce the dpi to 72, do a slice test print and continue to adjust until I see no pixelization. With my 16.9MP Canon, adjustments are rarely necessary.

Print Formatting: Room to Stretch

In order to stretch a canvas on stretcher bars [basically, an empty wooden frame], you need a border of canvas that wraps around the side of the wood and onto the back. The wood frame in this case was 28x22x $\frac{3}{4}$ -inches. Each final gourd piece will appear, from the front, to be a 28x22-inch painting. In order to stretch the canvas over the wood, however, I needed to print the image with a two-inch border on all sides. This gave me $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch of canvas to cover the side of the wood and 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches of canvas to cover the back of the wood [this is where the staples are applied to hold the canvas in place]. So that I wouldn't have to worry about perfectly aligning my image on the front of the canvas, I actually made the whole image 32x25 inches and allowed the picture to wrap around the side of the wood.

If your image will later be framed in a shadow box, as these were, you have much more freedom to goof on the placement of



Edited image with Photoshop Dry Brush filter and super saturation.

your print. If your image will remain unframed, then you need to make sure that it wraps around the side of the wood, or that you paint the side of the print with a solid color to eliminate any print edges. A print line on the side of your painting will detract from the painted effect.

Selecting Canvas: To Paint or Not to Paint, This is the Question!

Large format canvas comes in many shapes and sizes. In simple terms, they break down into two basic categories—gloss or satin, and matte stretch canvas. When I plan to paint over an image, I generally use matte, which shows the texture of the paint lines and seems to accept paint well. When I simply want to print and stretch the canvas without paint, I generally use gloss or satin. While it does not offer the textured paint lines that a painted matte canvas does, it does reveal a canvas-textured look. To paint or not to paint is always my first question when choosing canvas.

For the gourd project, I used Intelicoat UV Ink Compatible Stretch Canvas DMCVM17UV. In order to prevent ink smudging when painting over this digitally printed canvas, however, I had to apply a spray fixative. Fixative sprays are generally used by pastel, pencil, charcoal, chalk, tempera and other messy medium artists to prevent smudging. In the last year, I've fallen in love with Lex-Jet's Universal Photo Matte Canvas with Prelume because I am able to paint over the digital print without a fixative. It is also easy to stretch, has a bright white canvas look and great texture, and gives true color in the print process.

Again, you must check with your canvas manufacturer for longevity and compatibility with your printer, inks, fixatives and/or paints.

Stretching the Canvas

Stretch before you paint, otherwise the paint may crack at the edges of the print. I learned to stretch a canvas by walking into the nearest art store, asking for the employee who knew how, and sitting on the floor with him while he explained how to do it. I walked out with a \$25 stretching tool and went to my favorite school to practice—the school of trial and error.

Picking the Paint: You're Almost There!

For the gourds, I used Golden Gel Medium Regular Gel Gloss. It is a thick, clear acrylic paint that leaves heavy, clear paint lines.

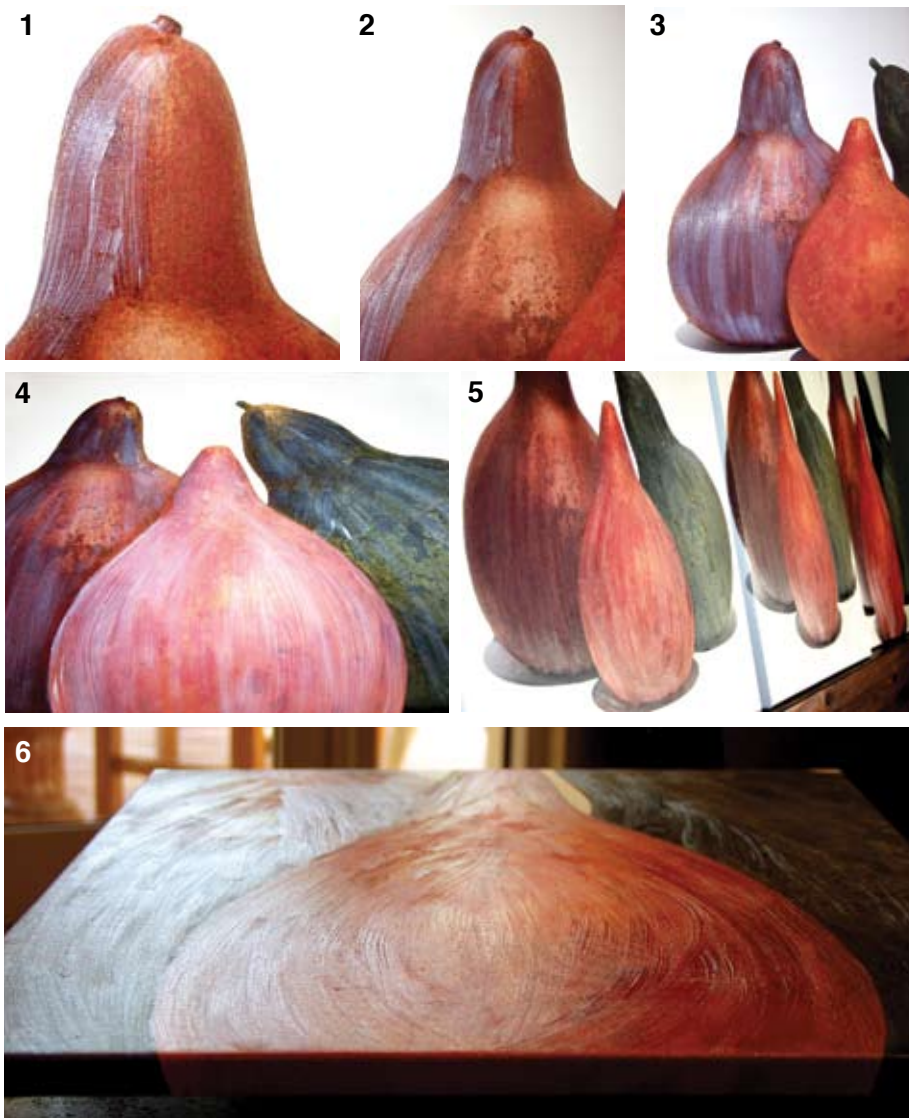


Photo 1: Start painting with the most distant image and come forward.

Photo 2: As the paint dries, the opaque white will disappear.

Photo 3: Long, even strokes produce a more realistic feel.

Photo 4: Change the direction of your paint strokes as the images change.

Photo 5: The images on the right are nearly dry and popping with color. The images on the left are still wet and hazy from the gel medium.


Photo 6: In natural light, the final paint strokes on the final image are apparent and reflect the dramatic impact clear acrylic has on the canvas print.

the amount of paint. Don't. You need to apply it liberally so that it adheres to the canvas and gives you the effect you want. These pictures of the wet prints will give you an idea of how much paint to use. If you see clumps or thick globs that are totally white, thin them out. But if you see white lines with areas of translucence, you're right on track.

When you stroke the canvas with the paint, use long, even lines that mimic the lines of the image. Watch for bubbles, which will form if you paint too fast or too vigorously. If bubbles do form, gently paint over the area again until they disappear.

Once all of the gourds were painted along their shape lines, I painted the white background with a vertical stroke. This emphasizes the lines of the gourds as a contrast to the vertical lines of the backdrop.

Finally, I let the pieces dry in a cool room for 24 hours before hanging or framing. As you can see from the picture of the canvases drying, the color becomes more and more vibrant as the paint dries. The image on the far right is drier than the image on the left. While these pieces are suitable for hanging with no frame, I chose to frame them in custom rosewood boxes to contrast the bright white wall.

If you are ever in Aventura, Florida, and want to view the finished pieces, or need a great mediator, contact David H. Lichter at Higer, Lichter & Givner, P.A., owner of a large private collection of Kat's Photocrylics works (dlichter@hlglawyers.com). If you have questions, or want to share your own after-capture journey, visit www.photosbykat.net. 

Kat Silverglate is a private commission artist, photographer, writer and speaker. After almost 15 years as a civil trial lawyer, Kat followed her dream and took the plunge into the digital world. She is passionate about helping artists and photographers follow their dreams and encouraging them to grow by sharing information. Kat has spoken at WPPI, served on the Knowledge College for the Professional Digital Imaging Association and written for Great Output magazine.

Gel Mediums are made in all shapes and sizes, but they are the generic term for an acrylic product that usually dries clear and can be mixed with colored acrylic to achieve different paint effects. They come in matte, heavy, regular, soft and everything in between. The gloss finish is far superior to the matte for this type of project because it will show the paint lines and will give the textured feel of a painting. The heavy gel is hard to work with, and the soft gel doesn't leave as much of a line. I buy the gel mediums in gallon jugs and spoon out small portions for each project. It looks like Elmer's glue; it goes on thick and opaque, but it dries clear.

As for the brush, here is my rule of thumb: If I want to have a dramatic paint effect, I use a coarse brush that leaves deep paint lines. For this project, I used a Loew-Cornell 2150 Flat. Translated, that means it is a coarse, stiff hairbrush that won't bend very much in the painting process.

Painting the Canvas... Finally!

Finally, you're ready to paint. And I'm happy to report that this is the easiest and most fun part of your project. To paint your canvas, you need to study the lines of the art. Are they straight? Are they curved? What lines do you want the viewer to focus on? What lines are central in the print?

Acrylic dries fairly quickly, so once you start, be prepared to work at it until you're done. Where on the print do you start painting? That depends on the overlap of your image. Painting the background first allows the gourd in the foreground to predominate the image, as final strokes on and at the edges of the gourd in the foreground eventually overlap any strokes used to paint the background. That said, since the lines on the gourds are curved, I simply started with one and followed its arc.

Your tendency when you try this for the first time will be to go sparingly on