TEXTURES, THE UNIVERSE & YOU*

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*NO, NOT REALLY. IT'S JUST ABOUT TEXTURES.

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"The Door to December," also featured in detail on the cover. Two textures used of varying opacities.

TEXTURES, THEY'RE EVERYWHERE

One of my favorite techniques when creating compositions is the ability to give a composition a "textured window"---a portal---that introduces someone looking at my artwork into my world. I also tend to use textures with color as a basis for compositions. Textures can also be used to unify seemingly disparate elements in a composition.

They can be subtle or they can be dramatic. Photoshop CC not only makes this process easy but also fun to explore your creativity.

This isn't really a tutorial. Instead, it's a look into how I use textures in my workflow. You probably know a lot of these tips but, hopefully, you'll pick up something new or feel inspired to make your own textures. These tips assume you know the basics of Photoshop---namely, the use of layers and blending modes.

Let's go!.

CUSTOM TEXTURES

One of the challenges when wanting to use textures in your compositions is, Where do I get them? If you ultimately don't want to create your own, there are always resources like Adobe Stock. (https://stock.adobe.com)



"Self Portrait." One texture used. ("Clean Coffee Filter 02" from the collection.)



"Concord Path 2." Two textures used of varying opacities.

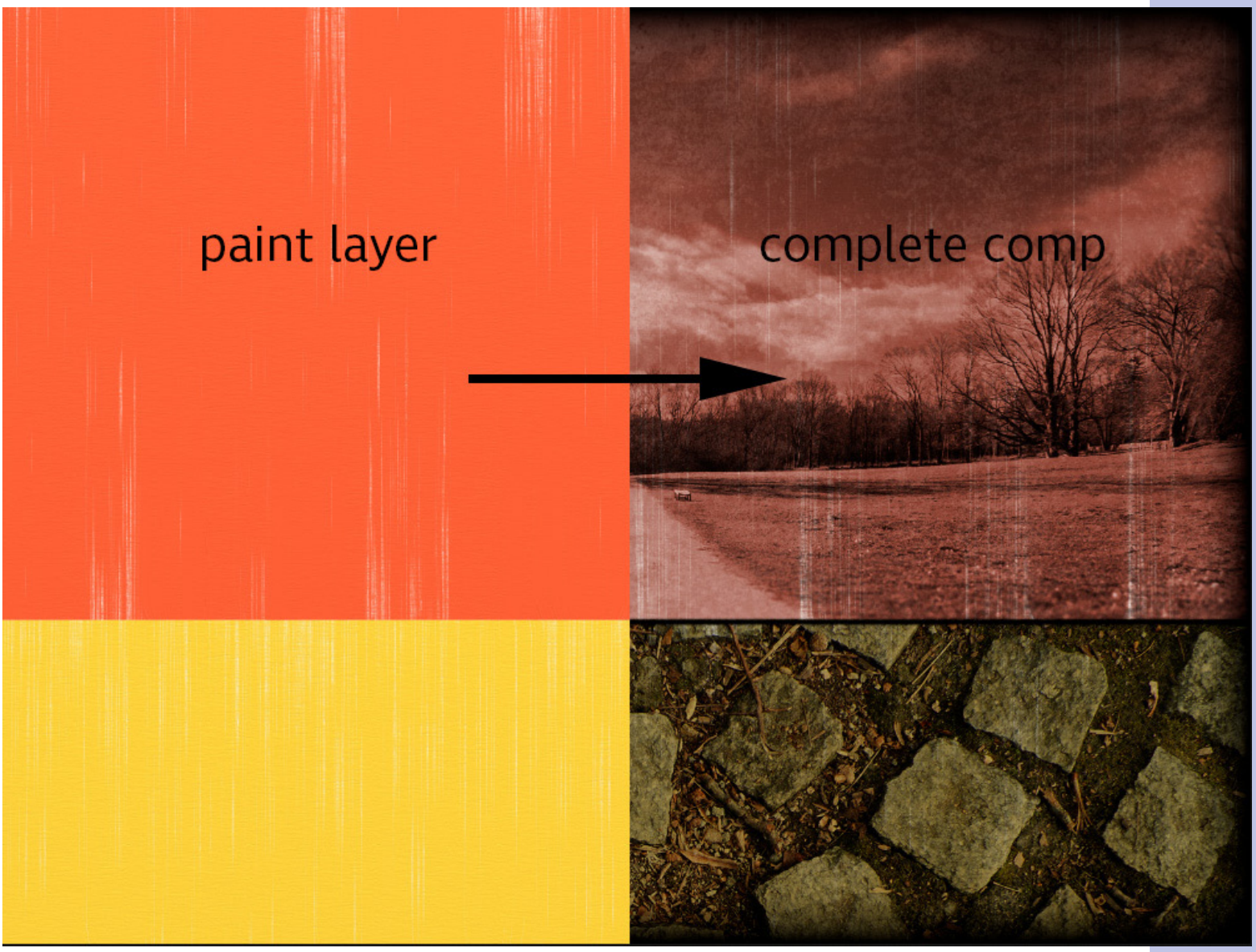
Personally, I like to use my own custom textures just to give that extra layer of customization that can't be found anywhere else. While it's true one can use stock textures and nobody may know the difference in the end, nothing beats having that extra layer of uniqueness. All of the textures used in this document's examples are all mine, created from nothing, made into...something.

SOURCES OF TEXTURES

You can obtain textures from anywhere and capture using practically any device that captures images. If you want high-quality textures, consider using a good-quality camera (via DSLR cameras, mirrorless cameras or even some smartphones and tablets) or a flatbed scanner.

Cameras are great for capturing textures you couldn't otherwise get with a scanner, like the side of a big tree or a building. Scanners are great for capturing flat textures like papers and even organic material like leaves. Painting applications that mimic real-world media like oils can be another great source of textures.

One word of caution: For scanners, make sure you keep your scanner bed dry and clean before and after scanning textures. For example, dry used coffee filter paper out before placing on the scanner bed glass so there isn't a mess later on. You'll still want to clean your scanner's glass after scanning material just to keep it free of debris that may have fallen off the paper.



The paint layer (left) and the complete composition (right). Note the lightly-loaded paint brush strokes over the comp.



The floor layer (left) and the complete composition (right). Note the texture of the floor over the comp.

GEOMETRY

When evaluating textures, consider their use. A tiled floor or surface would look great when framed as a "rule of thirds" texture. A painting or painted wall (digital or real-world) with two contrasting and textured colors would look great as the basis of a composition. Coffee filter paper, tea bag paper and construction paper are great for unifying a composition due to their uniform textures.

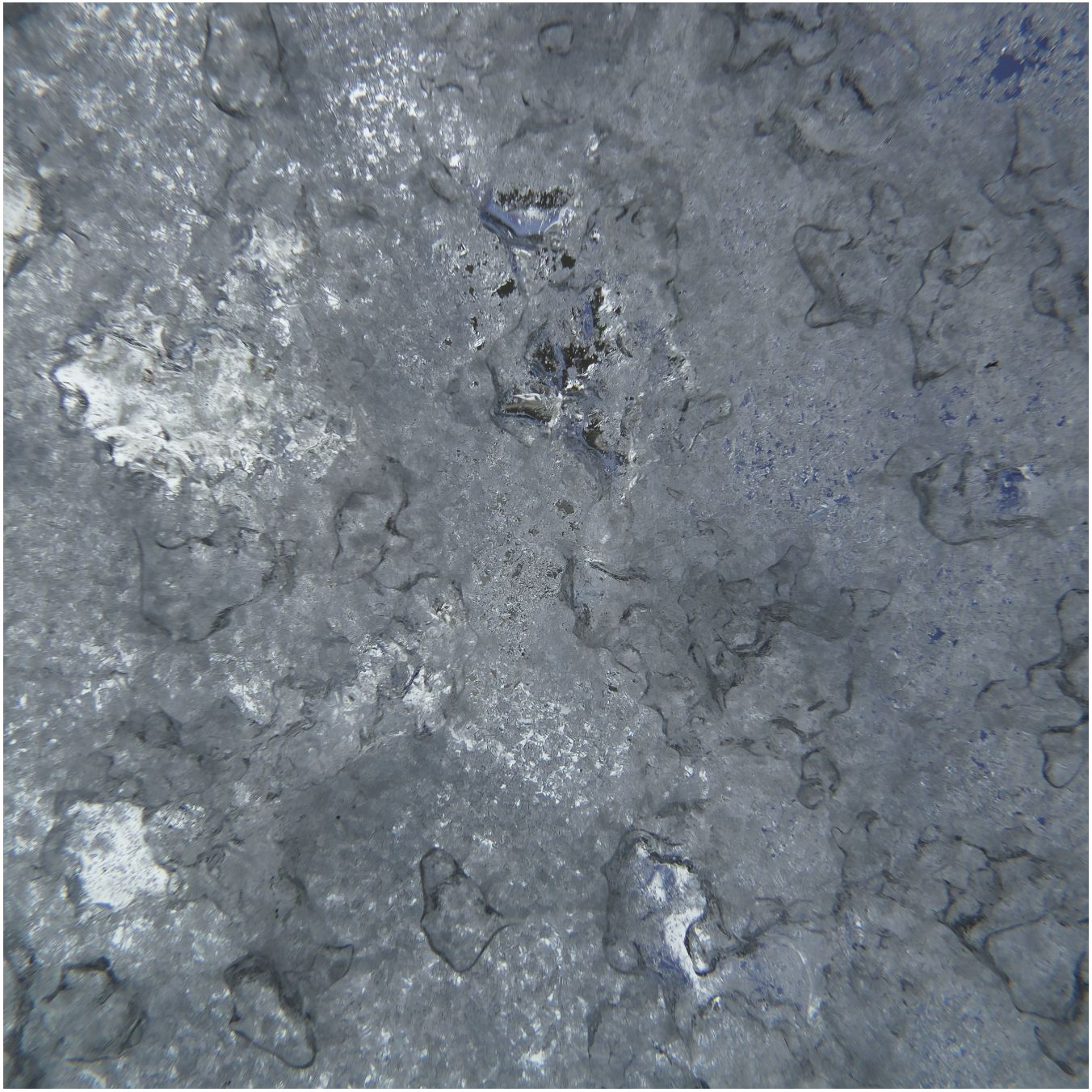
SCALING SCANNED TEXTURES

Depending on the size of the texture, you may want to increase the scale, especially if the texture is small and plan on using the texture on anything larger than its original size. You would do this in the scanner software's advanced or custom mode. Today's scanners are pretty good at scaling so, again, experiment. Typically, a scan scaled at 200% of even 300% can look pretty good.

Every scanner's software is different but the terminology is the same. Consult your scanner manufacturer's website if you need help.



A screenshot of my Epson scanner's interface. The highlighted area ended up being "Coffee Filter 02" from my free collection.



"Ice 01," from the collection. Taken from my camera against my door's window after a blizzard.

ON-DEMAND? BY-THE-PROJECT?

Inspiration strikes in the unlikeliest of places. You may want a certain texture right there and then or you may come upon something that would make a great texture later on. For the latter, don't hesitate to capture potential sources of textures as you may not come across them again for awhile. (e.g., Patterned frost on a window in winter or fallen leaves in autumn.)

BUILDING & STACKING TEXTURES

Don't exactly fret if you ever have a texture that doesn't cover your composition. You may have some options that work well, such as simply transforming the texture to cover the entire composition, or making copies of the texture to "build" an area so that it covers the composition. As always, experiment.

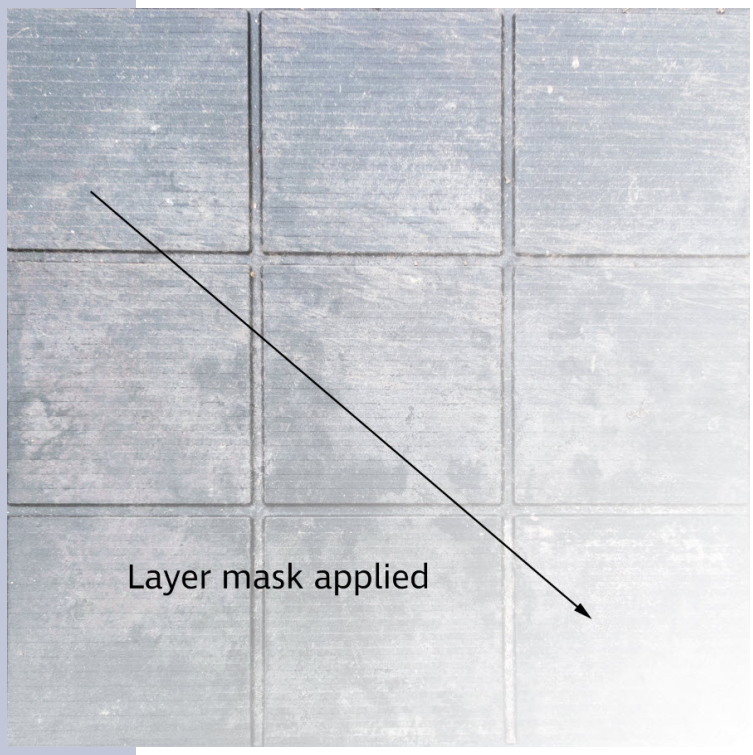
If employing the latter technique, remember to group your textures together to keep everything neat and orderly. (And use a blend mode at the group level.)

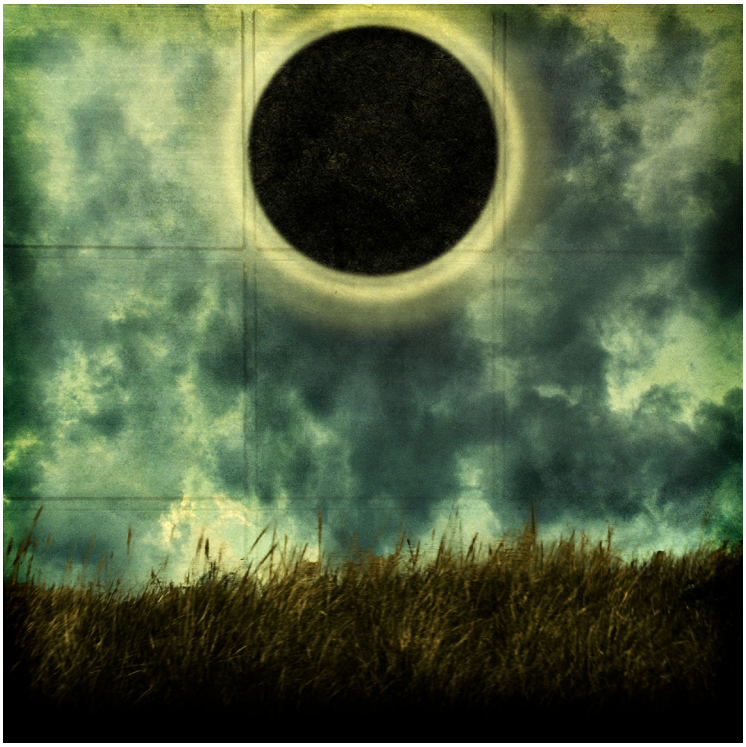
Since it's ultimately a texture, nobody may notice if there's any repetition in a texture that repeats itself over a composition, especially if the texture's grain is small and uniform.

Of course, you can stack different textures with different blend modes and different opacities for an even more unique look. This also can hide any repetition.



"Concord Path 3." Two textures used at varying opacities.





The layer mask as it graduates over the floor (left) and the entire composition on the right.

MASKING

Applying a layer mask to a texture is yet another way to present your texture with varying levels of opacity. Paint with varying levels of gray or use a grayscale gradient mask on the layer mask to break up what would otherwise be just another texture.

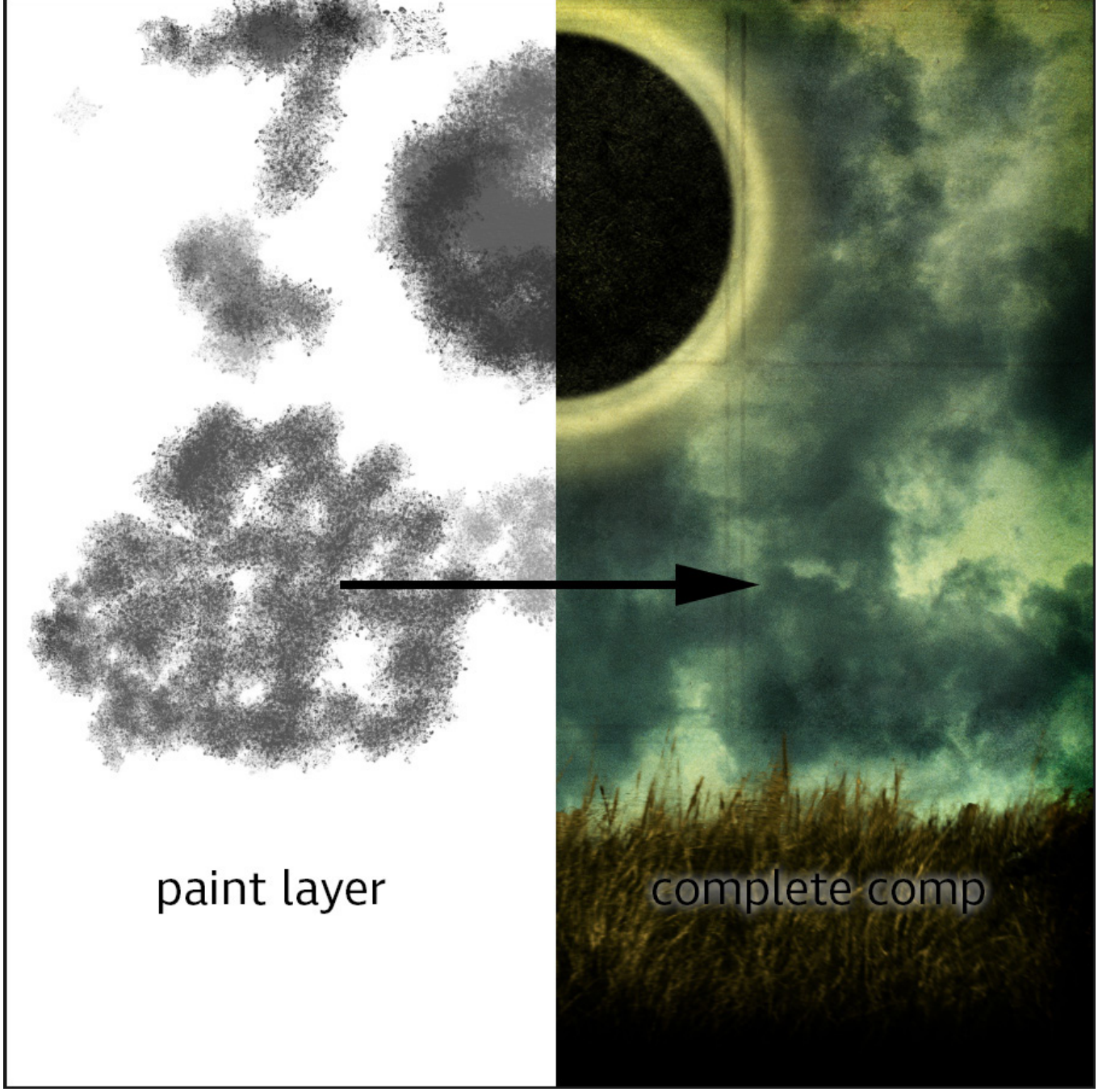
TEXTURES AS A MASK

Copy and paste a texture into a layer mask for another way to give a textured look to a layer. Hold down Alt/Opt + click on the layer mask's thumbnail to make the layer mask visible. Making sure the layer mask is selected, copy and paste the texture into the mask. Hold down Alt/Opt + click to make the layer visible again and to see the results.

TIP: Pasting a texture in this way will make it permanent unless you copy and paste a texture into the mask once more. Textures that have a defining, contrasting pattern usually work best. While having the layer mask visible, you can perform adjustments (Image > Adjustments on the menu bar) like Curves or Invert to make the mask look better.



"A Tree in Concord." The texture ("Tea Filter 02" from the collection) was copied and pasted into a layer mask.



The paint layer (left) and the complete composition on the right. The paint layer was treated like any other texture and blended using the Soft Light blend mode.

PAINTING

Paint with the Brush Tool using a gritty-looking brush on a new, empty layer with the layer's blend mode set to something other than Normal (like Soft Light when using a darker gray brush). This will give your textures an extra layer of "grit" and can help accent any part of your composition you want to draw a viewer's eye.

This technique can be used with other applications as well like Ambient Design's ArtRage or Corel's Painter as they allow you to import an image for reference. Once you're done creating your "painterly" layer, you can export the work as a PSD to complete your vision in Photoshop.

BLEND MODES

The blend modes I tend to use are Multiply, Screen, Overlay and Soft Light. I tend to adjust opacity as well so the texture doesn't come off as too strong.

TIP: With the Move Tool active, hold down Shift + the Up or Down arrow keys to cycle through the various blend modes to experiment if you don't have a particular blend mode in mind.



"Concord Path 4." Two textures used with varying opacities.

MORE TIPS

Textures can work best on images when they have varying levels of contrast in their grain. Examples include tea bag paper, coffee filter paper and construction paper. But remember this is all subjective; experiment and you may be surprised at what you find.

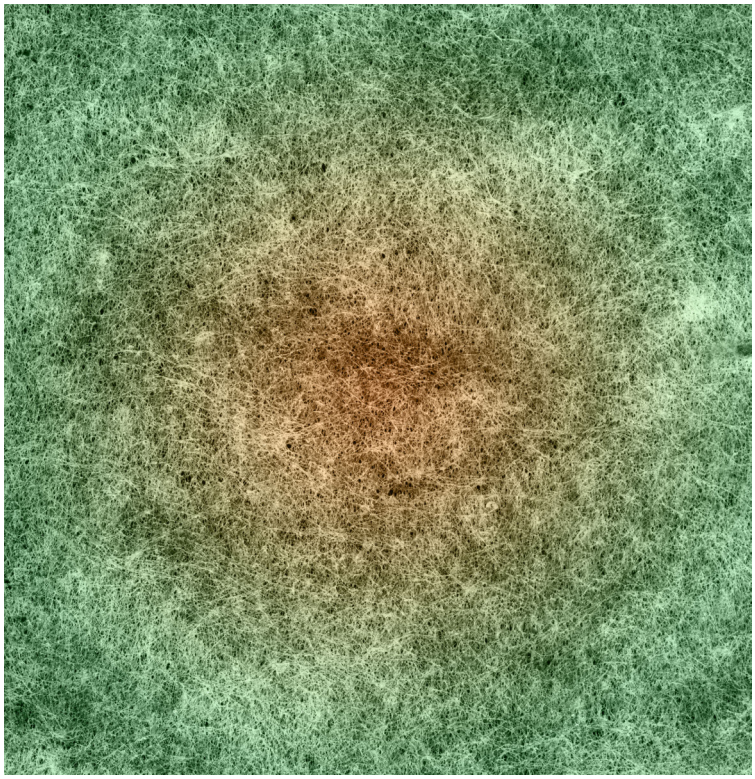
I can practically guarantee that whatever texture you employ can use some sort of editing to bring out the texture more. You want to bring out the contrast of the texture, otherwise the effect might not be so striking as intended. I'd suggest, oh, Photoshop CC to edit your textures. (I mean, really. Photoshop CC. The sine qua non of image editing. Why would you use anything else?)

Depending on the look you're going for, you may want to keep the color of a particular texture rather than just using its grayscale values to give texture to an image. Keep the original color of the texture and create a grayscale copy if that's what you want. Likewise, you may want to change the inherent color of a texture so you can, for example, use your own color wash. (Example below.)

Use a Curves adjustment layer clipped to a texture with the classic "S curve" to really bring out the contrast in a texture.

If a texture looks a little too imperfect for your tastes like too many rips or holes, don't forget tools like the Patch Tool can really help in making the texture look more uniform.





Unmodified texture (left, "Tea Filter 01" from the collection) and the resulting effect (right). A color wash was applied by using a Gradient Fill adjustment layer with its blend mode set to, "Color."



A set of textures from the collection. l to r, “Tea Filter 02,” “Coffee Filter 03” and “Facial Tissue 01.”

CONCLUSION (AND PRESENTS! WHO DOESN’T LIKE FREE GOODIES?)

As you can see, it’s really not all that hard to implement your own textures, other than the time and planning it takes.

Just because I’m a giver, I’ve created a never-before seen, exclusive collection of textures for you, dear reader! One-of-a-kind, made by yours truly. Yours for you to use, royalty-free, ad infinitum, ad perpetuam, pro gratis, forever. You get the picture. Go get the collection (in ZIP format) on my Google Drive here (do not worry about virus warnings since the file is big; it’s safe to download):

The Warunicorn Collection

For Windows and Mac users, double-click the ZIP file to open up the archive. The textures are neatly named for your convenience. All the textures were optimized color-wise as they were originally conceived. (e.g., Used coffee filters have a stained brown color. If you want to change it to something monochromatic, simply add a clipped Black and White adjustment layer. Add a Curves adjustment layer to bring out contrast.)

Note these textures are 300 DPI by default. That means that if you insert them into a 72 DPI document using File > Place on the menu bar, they might look small when placed. To remedy this, use Image > Image Size in Photoshop’s menu bar, uncheck the “Resample” option and set the desired Resolution.

If you also don’t like the idea of Photoshop resizing things for you and like to keep anything as it is in size during import, use Edit (Photoshop on the Mac) > Preferences > General on the menu bar and uncheck the “Resize Image During Place” option.

If you any questions on these tips, don’t hesitate to give me a buzz at: warunicornmusic@gmail.com

Now go out there and texturize all the things!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Rodel is a freelance photographer, designer, musician and author. He frequently hangs out at Adobe's official Photoshop forum under the username, "Warunicorn." He lives in Massachusetts.