

Get More Meaning From Digital Art by Eric Swenson

This collage references the deep disillusionment and despair Max Beckmann felt at the state of modern civilization after the first World War.

I am a life-long oil painter, and a university-educated set designer and director for theatre. I became a professional video photographer during a career that began as a Navy print journalist. I will always remember the news editor sending us out on assignment, saying, "Don't come back telling me there was no story . . . that the ship SANK!" The drive was always to produce, as newspapers went out weekly, and later, broadcast air space had to be filled. I witnessed the technology change in the field from film, to 1-inch reel-to-reel video tape, to video cassettes, to digital.

Still photography for me was always a hobby that has developed recently into looking at it as an art form that combines all of my interests. I love art that tells a story.

My style of imagery in the Urban Legends and Country Tales Show is a departure from my usual work mixing many images. In considering this photo, I felt the unaltered, honest reality of Mesa Verde should speak for itself as a combination of Urban and Country for the theme. The rock cliffs of Mother Nature protect the 700 year old remains of a Mesa Verde civilization that vanished without a trace. The irony is that nature may also have forced the exodus and perhaps the destruction of the people who built these once-important and creative (for their time and locale) urban structures. These communities offer tremendous insight into the lives of these ancient people and the advanced state of their civilization.

The story here is the contrast of man-made houses and natural cliffs. The shadow suggests a blanket covering and sheltering these early city-like homes. The lights and darks of the cliffs themselves suggest faces of ancient spirits that could well be standing watch over the site.

Mesa Verde Spirits

My relatively new still photography, digital image career began when I attacked and somewhat learned Photoshop. Does anyone ever totally learn Photoshop? I entered and won first place in the La Jolla Digital Show co-sponsored by the Digital Art Guild and La Jolla Art Association three years ago. The power of the imagery was new freedom for me -- to combine my interest in photography and painting into works of art. And, to tell a story. The piece below is a reference to German expressionist Max Beckmann. This grotesque and sinister-looking sideshow is a compilation of 10 images that, when combined, recall and suggest the deep disillusionment and despair he felt at the state of modern civilization after the first World War. I felt then that the same could be said today. The subtlety of many details are totally surprising when studying all areas of the piece.

Phantoms of the Opera

The challenge of layering and painting in Photoshop is that it is very precise. Sometimes, trial and error; other times, knowing exactly the desired effect desired. The varying opacity of a layer works with the color of another layer to create an entirely different color. Erasing parts of layers is another consideration in the composition. Each action on any layer has an effect on the other layers. One does this work meticulously. The total effect can enhance a scene and suggest, in this example, a romantic impressionistic painting.

Restaurant in Rio

With multiple images, the effect also can become as surrealistic as your imagination can make it. I love vintage cars. When I managed to catch a shadow of a figure on the trunk of a Cadillac at an outdoor antique auto show, that seed of an idea/image grew and blossomed into Remembering 1955. A Chrysler steering wheel and dashboard, a blue Packard which cuts the brightness of the pink Caddy, the super surreal touch of the hood ornament and emblem, and my mother and her 1953 Dodge complete the romance of the era.

Remembering 1955

A simple combination of two layers can make a good photograph even better. A favorite photo of mine, with an Egyptian man standing in a temple, became more spiritual, even dramatic, with the subject matter enhancement and lighting contrast.

Egyptian Spirit

Layering and individual layer painting, and erasures, can give punchy contrast to a subject. The overlaying images create an entirely new effect. Here, three December Nights images make a nice abstract with luscious color and texture that

capture the essence of the experience. The overlaying images create an entirely new effect. This is the story. Memories of what happened and how I felt about it.

December Nights in Balboa Park

Individual layer painting, and erasures, can add drama and mystery to a subject. First, getting THE shot is very important. Then, building a story around it is the next step. Here, the basic effect is one of movement, with the figure position challenging the viewer to participate and fill out the message.

Wonderland -Through the Rabbit Hole

Wonderland could be called the world of digital photography. It allows a place for you, the artist and the viewer to share the experience of the excitement of a moment in life. In this case, this layering of photos and painting illustrates and is intended to remind all of us of the exhilaration of our own childhood joy (or that joy of creating art from Photoshop). Though the "Alice in wonderland" situation is as unconventional as it is in print fiction, it reminds one of universal human experience! As it has been said, "a picture (a face..., even a smile...) is worth a thousand words." What more is there to say?

Eric's Art