
Colorful Abstract Painting with Courtney Cerruti

Chapter 1 - Overview

Introduction

(energetic music) - Hi, I'm Courtney. I'm an artist, the author of *Playing With Image Transfers* and *Washi Tape 101*. I used to do window and display for Anthropologie, and now I do set design for Creativebug. And often I need to make something that's really large, with a lot of color, really quickly, in a day or so, not something I can spend weeks and weeks on like I did in college when I was painting. So I came up with this kind of process to get some color down and create an abstract piece that's actually really fun and easy to do. You don't have to have any formal training to do this. We're gonna use some really inexpensive craft store paint in a variety of colors, and our tool for applying the paint is not gonna be a paint brush like you might think. It's actually gonna be a credit card, or even a library card. In this process, it's gonna be your whole body working. It's a really visceral process to paint a larger surface, and in the end, you're gonna wind up with something that's very painterly, has really consistent marks, and is gonna be really beautiful.

Chapter 2 - Materials

Materials

- You're not gonna need a lot of materials for this project. You're biggest investment is gonna be whatever you're creating your painting on. For me, I'm using a 36 inch by 48 inch birch panel that I got from the art supply store. This may seem like an investment. These are under \$100 but at this size, if you were to buy some original artwork or even a print, that's three feet by four feet, you'd be spending hundreds of dollars. You can work smaller if you want to get the technique down to make sure that you like it before you go really big but even as a headboard or some giant scale piece that you're gonna hang in your home, this is actually really affordable. In addition to your surface, you're gonna need your craft paint. I'm just using inexpensive craft paint in a variety of colors. I've got a neon red or kind of corally color, a little bit of pink, two shades of an aqua, some neon yellow 'cause I like my neons. I want to pair that with an ochre and then I've got a variety of dark blues like a medium blue and then an indigo. You do want to limit your color palette a little bit that way it airs on the side of more sophisticated and a little less elementary. If you had every color in the rainbow in there, the eye is not gonna know where to fall. But you can pull out the colors you like and we can edit it down as we're working as well. In addition to your craft paint, you'll need a couple of credit cards. You can use your library card or some old gift cards. Baby wipes are handy to have on hand. Something as a palette. You can use an old cookie sheet. I'm just using wax paper and then you definitely want to have an apron on especially at this scale. Once you have everything, find a space that you can work in. You can put this on top of your kitchen table if it fits. You can also work in your driveway or on the floor.

Chapter 3 - Create Painting

Start applying paint

- You want to set up your workspace so that when you're applying your paint, you're dragging from top to bottom toward you, this is the motion we're going to be using. So if that means that your piece needs to be able to move or you need to be able to move around it, you just need to pick one and that's fine, you don't want to be stuck where you feel like you're having to make awkward

movements with your hands, this is like I said a whole body process, we're going to use our body almost like when you're pulling a print with printmaking. I've put some of my paints out on my wax paper sort of like a pallet but I can also apply paint directly to the board as we're going and I'll probably switch back and forth between the two. In general I like to use a rule of thumb with starting with my lightest color and then working to my mediums and then into my darks but then I'll probably go back and assess everything as I'll be doing along the way and I might go back and add more light color. So there's not a really hard and fast rule about that, but it's nice to put down your light colors first because you can always go on top of them with dark color once you really get a sense of how things are looking, it's much harder and nearly impossible to lay down something super dark like an indigo or a black and cover it up later. You're not going to get the same liveliness in your colors if you do that. If you are working off a pallet, these craft paints tend to be a little more runny, you can scoop up paint, you want a nice little ridge of paint on your credit card. You just have to pick a place and start, this is going to be the most intimidating to make that first mark, but just go for it, you're going to respond to what you lay down. I would only say don't start right in the center, pick something left of center, right of center, pick something on an edge until you feel comfortable and see how the colors are working. To apply the paint, you're just going to press and drag. Go over the same spot until most of the paint is off. These lines that are creating a really nice edge are perfect, these lines at the bottom with a little variation are great, I want to avoid too much of this really spottiness, so I usually go over an area right to the edge, go right off the edge. I don't want to make a perfect box with my shape, I want things to have a nice weight and a nice edge so I'm looking for a balance. This angle here is repeated with this angle but it's not identical because we have this little chunk missing here. You may consciously think about those things but they may just happen as you go. We're going to keep working with this color. Move over here. This is pretty close to center so I'm going to work this shape to the left. And you can see because we're using an unfinished panel that in some places the paint acts almost like a stain, which is nice I like this clean wood grain showing through I think that's pretty. If you get an edge like that, that actually looks nice, there's no reason to correct it, but if you wanted something with a harder edge, you can come in knowing that your credit card is going to make that really clean line and fill in with paint. And then you can go back over and drag from top to bottom. I really like this patch and I want to make it bigger. I want to avoid creating polka dots essentially I love polka dots, don't get me wrong, but we're not creating an exact pattern here. If you look at this larger piece I made, we are using a lot of different colors and the patches are going to vary in size and so we want to have some patches that are much larger and some patches that are smaller. So even though we're using so many colors, our eyes can travel across instead of just reading it as this crazy polka dotted kind of pattern. I'm using that polka dot loosely. You can apply the paint right onto the canvas and I'll start in an area I already have paint. This patch on the left is starting to look too similar to the patch on the right, they're very similar in shape and they're almost directly across from each other on the canvas, I want to switch that up, I want to avoid that, so I'm going to make this shape on the right much larger and probably bring it down toward the bottom of the canvas, and I'm just going to work until I use up this paint. Let's swap out our color, you just give this a quick baby wipe it doesn't have to be perfect. And then do the neon which is actually probably the lightest color but these ones are close, these are my two yellows and because this is starting to dry already and absorb into the wood I can actually squeegee right over it and it's not going to drag any of that color, it's going to keep my ochre still really nice and square. This is why working lighter to dark is better because if this had been an indigo and I had dragged my yellow across the top, I would've got this weird green thing that had happened and I

don't particularly care for that. Good. Add a little more here. Let's add some yellow up here. Again I'm working really large. Going right over that ochre. Sometimes I like to just make a tiny little patch that's almost the width of the credit card, just like a little tiny little reference there. At this stage you might be thinking what are these colors. I totally understand that, so I've just paired an ochre yellow with this bright neon yellow and I have my mother's voice in the back of my head saying that's the most hideous combination from 1970 that she can imagine. But really the combination of those two colors is what's going to activate and make your bright colors pop. So you need something that's a little more neutral or a little more muddied or toned down to activate your bright colors. My ochre is going to act that way for me and I've got a coral-y kind of peach almost nude tone and it's also going to act that way. If that is not your thing and you want to do all bright colors you're more than welcome to do it you can really experiment and play with your pallet, but if it's looking a little crazy right now that's why. I really enjoy that awkward juxtaposition between a sort of muddy color and a bright vibrant color. Here's that blush color I mentioned, we're just going to scoop this up and it might be helpful so that the paint is all the way across the credit card so you can pick up two little dollops there. I'm going to do a really large patch in this area. Right now everything else that we've got is almost like small to medium. And this actually looks really pink on this canvas which is fine too, this will work. So I'm going to fill in this space here. These marks also kind of remind me of buff marks which are the rolled paint that covers up graffiti on your average public building or space. So you can channel your inner graffiti artist. These marks here I don't mind, I don't mind that there's a little bit of that blushy pink color coming down. But this mark up here, that is somewhere in between the two I don't care for as much so I'm just going to redo those. If you need to move your painting around you can. I'm going to fill in a little more of this space up here. I've unintentionally created this perfect like staircase here which I do not want to keep I want something that looks a little more random so I'm just going to make a new mark on top. Just fill this in. If you weren't working on a rigid surface like this wooden board or even if you had a drop cloth on a wooden table you would get this nice resistance that allows you to create that springy action with the credit card. So you want to make sure you're working on some kind of surface that's going to give you that resistance. The other thing that's going to keep this from looking totally chaotic is we're relying on the credit card itself which is about two and a half inches wide to give us a fairly clean edge when we drag down in that stroke. And you want to make sure that those are fairly upright at a 90 degree angle. They don't have to be perfect by any means, but if you start to make a lot of slanting marks, we're already using a ton of color and if you start to create marks that are too irregular, then it's going to look a little more chaotic. These are just things to keep in mind but this is really supposed to be fun and about playing with color and just making some huge piece of art that you've never done before. So give yourself some freedom. I've got this massive patch of Pepto Bismol pink here and I want to add just a little hint of it on this bottom right corner so that we have a reference, I'm going from a very large shape to a very small shape for that reference color. Just going to add that narrow band there for the color, let's move on to a new color. Just generally wipe that. I'm going to pick up this baby blue, again it's a color that's mixed with white, so it's going to be more on the muddy side which I really like for this. Figure out where we want to put this, I've been avoiding the middle I think maybe now's the time. I like that 'cause it's one of the few really vertical bands let's add some more blue over there. You can draw down on top of your previous color, depends on how you want to maintain the shape. If you want to maintain the ochre shape then you should squeegee your paint just to the edge but you can also just draw right over it if you don't care about the shape as much. You could leave some of the natural wood showing through, I always think I'm going to

and then I wind up covering it all up. It's okay to make decisions like that, I originally really liked that verticality of that one line, but now I feel like I want to fill in that space and I'm okay with that, just be okay with it. I think that this blue is looking a little darker than it looks on the pallet, I'm going to add some white on top. I don't have to actually mix the colors on the pallet I can just squeegee on top of it, because I'm going to switch to the white paint, I'm really just going to wipe off this card with a baby wipe. And the cool thing about using the white paint because you're using craft paint it's going to be somewhat transparent which means this is the best way to preserve the wood underneath in the sense of leaving white open spaces is by using white paint on top. So I'm going to put that in this area. And I can squeegee right over my blue. If I drip and get a blob somewhere it's fine, you can squeegee over it and sometimes forcing you to make new marks is one of those happy accidents that you wind up liking better anyhow. I think I'm going to fill in this space with the white. White is easy because once it dries, if you want to go over it with another color you totally can. That little tiny pink spot is so cute it's like a little skip in the matrix so I'm going to leave it. A little more white. Because this is so transparent I'm getting a lot of these ridges and things in there, I'm just going to try to go and add a little more paint and clean up some of those lines that's created by pressing really hard when I'm dragging with my credit card. I don't want a ton of those little ridges. I don't like this almost perfect line here so I'm going to add more white paint here. It's a case where I got a little drip. I want to add another reference of this white I think I'm going to do it in that corner and I'm actually going to rotate my canvas to do that. So I can really access this spot, I'm going to be working in the opposite direction now across the width of the piece which is fine. Adding our white. I'm actually working with the wood grain here. It's quieter when I scrape the paint, it's nice to work with the wood grain, but since I want this to be a horizontal piece in its final spot. I was working in the opposite direction, so I want to avoid this. This little roll of pink paint is not dry all the way so as I'm wiping the white it's mixing with the pink, I don't want to mix colors on my board, overlapping them is different, this is actually creating a new pink and I don't like that, so I'll probably cover it up somehow in a minute. You can also wait for things to dry but I tend to be impatient. Just go all the way to the edge here.

Finish painting

- While we've got it in this position, we're gonna just keep rotating it. And let's work on it so that it's upside down. Really, this is abstract, so it may not have an orientation yet. This may allow you to see something that you couldn't see when it was the other way around when you were working on it. Really walk around your piece. I mean, don't be afraid to move things up. It doesn't have to be perfect in one spot, and if you can't reach it, then rotate. I'm going to switch colors. I want to add indigo because it's my darkest color. Right now, I've got a lot of raw wood, and I want to think about the other colors, because I want to do my darkest last or close to last. Because it's gonna be in this area, I want to cover up some of this naked space, so I'm gonna use a little more of that neon yellow to do that and I can always paint over it, especially since it's my lightest color. And look, you get this awesome weird tertiary color, this neon green from the neon yellow going over that baby blue. I really like it. Those are the unexpected things that you really can't predict until you paint them. I'm gonna get some color play here with the white and the neon yellow too. It really changes the saturation there. I really liked that unexpected color that happened. I'm gonna maybe do some yellow in here too, and then we'll go indigo. Good. I think this is gonna be my indigo patch in here. So clean off my card. Scoop up that indigo color. Yeah. That's nice. On the wood this starts to look kind of like a denim color, which I really like. I think I'm gonna add some more of that indigo in this

little other naked spot right here. It's gonna be a nice reference, one patch is larger, the other is smaller. They're close to each other, so they're gonna be nestled on this side of the canvas. Oh my God, I love that weird unexpected thing that happened right there. Where that neon yellow ridge kind of came through and the blue didn't even hit it. I'm totally gonna keep that. It happened again here. That's cool. Oh the joys of painting. With a credit card. We've got two little nude spots on that corner, and on that corner. You might be tempted to just put blue in both of those and call it a day, but then we'd wind up with this kind of perfectly triangled composition, all the corners are indigo. That is way to convenient. I'm not letting you do that. I am going to put indigo in this corner over here, and then we're gonna bring out our surprise pop color, which is already on our palette. So clean this guy off just a little, 'cause the paint was starting to dry on there, and move our canvas. Because I've moved the canvas I'm now going to be pulling this way, which is opposite to the way I've been stroking the entire time with the exception of that one little corner, which is fine. That's okay. I know this is going to be indigo. Again, now I'm working with the grain of the wood, which feels so nice and buttery. This mark right here is looking kind of piecey, and all my other marks are going this way. So I'm just gonna restroke that. Add more paint somewhere it you need to. Okay, I think we're gonna go back to that last little naked corner. So rotate your canvas. Clean off your credit card. We're gonna add a new color. We're gonna add that little pop of neon red or coral red color. It's also gonna play off that Pepto Bismally pink, especially in this corner, because it's gonna be paired right next to it. Oh, yes, that is lovely. I'm just gonna drag it down the side here. Perfect, just a little hint of it. I'm gonna put a reference point so it's not all by it's lonesome over there. Let's find another place for it. We could overlap it somewhere here with the baby blue, 'cause I really like how this neon red looks over the baby blue. We can do a very different shape somewhere on the opposite side of the canvas. You could pair them together in their own little corner. I don't want to put three equally sized equally spaced little pockets of that color. That polka dot effect I'm trying to avoid. But I do want the eye to move around the canvas. So where shall we put it? That is the question. I think somewhere in here is nice. I think location wise this could be good, but knowing what color, I think I might like to get a little bit of that white in here, because that's gonna change the saturation. Let's see. Let's make that a little bigger. Yeah, I like that. Let's play with the shape a little bit until you find something you like. Cool, I like that. You may have heard that artists always do things in odd numbers, which is actually pretty true. For whatever reason, three is always a good number. Five is a good number. So right now I have a pair. I just have two little spots of this popping red. I want to three. It's also my favorite number, it just happens to be. But we're not gonna do that triangle thing I talked about where we've got them evenly dispersed over the canvas. Instead, we're gonna put that second pocket or third pocket into a pair with this one that we just did. So we're gonna place it right here. And again, it's laying right over that Pepto Bismal pink, which before the neon red was there looked really bubble gummy, and now it looks way more mauve and toned down, because it's next to juxtaposed right next to that neon coral. It's also dried a little bit which can make it appear a little darker. That looks awesome. There's just one more little thing I want to do. As your colors overlap and dry you're gonna see those third colors appear. Remember when we got the neon yellow over the baby blue we got that electric green which looked awesome. There's one spot where I had baby blue over one of the first initial patches of ogre I laid down. I don't really like how it looks, so I'm gonna add a little more ogre on top to kind of flush out that shape. Just right here. The shape is fine. I just want to go over those marks, just because I'm not crazy about that. It's not really adding anything. It's not a big deal though. You're more than welcome to leave those weird little anomalies in the process. I'll just clean up that edge there. Of course now that I'm

working back in the ogre, which is my first color I'm seeing some other places I might want to add a little bit. It's hard to tell when your painting is finished. It's not necessarily when the entire surface is covered. It's just until you feel you're ready to stop or you're happy with it. Sometimes you're never finished and that's fine. It could be evolving. So add some ogre up here. I kind of want to go there, but I think that's too close to the middle. So I might just do a little bit right here. Those little white dots I'm getting, that's 'cause there's a ridge of paint under there. If I want to cover them up I can use my finger, 'cause the card is gonna scrape away the paint there. Again, we've got that muddy ogre against that popping red, which I really like. I think I just want to clean up the edge of this a little. I got this weird skinny white line, which actually I really like. I'll use up my extra paint. I think that's done. I love it. I love the colors. It's really funny. You can put out the exact same colors, work from the exact same palette, and on two different days you can make two totally different paintings depending on the proportions that you use, the combinations of colors, how you use those colors. That's what's so seductive and so addictive about this process is it's really a full body thing. You get into it and you play with the colors and you respond to what you put down and you never know what you're going to get. I made a smaller piece earlier. I had all the same paints on the table. I was working in a smaller scale, and you see how different this looks. I wound up using the teal in this one, where I didn't use it on this larger piece. I didn't include any white here. This neon yellow played with the blue in a really different way. I have the ogre over the dark blue here, which I really liked and I left, that neon coral over the light blue, which I also really like, this third tertiary color it created. This is something I started doing on a really small scale, just in bookmaking and altered journals. Then I moved it slowly onto the canvas, onto wood, and even to something as this massive drop cloth behind me. You can really play with this. A lot of this is about confidence. Just put your colors out on the palette and respond to what you're working on. Don't be afraid. Don't over mix things. You saw we put things right on the canvas, or right on the wood as it came out of the bottle. You don't have to overthink it. Just gravitate toward the colors you would naturally have and in no time you'll have a really dramatic eye-catching piece that'll be the focal point of any room.