



THE MAKING OF “HALF HER HEART’S DUET”

BY CYNTHIA SHEPPARD

OBJECTIVE

In this demo, I'll discuss the compositional planning process, symbolism, color choices, and digital painting techniques that went into creating the piece “Half Her Heart’s Duet,” for the purpose of demonstrating digital painting start-to-finish.

Software: *Photoshop CS or higher*

THE MAKING OF “HALF HER HEART’S DUET”

TELLING A STORY

Before starting in on the technical aspects of creating *Half Her Heart’s Duet*, I want to talk about an often-overlooked aspect of the creation process—storytelling. As artists, it’s easy to get caught up in our technique and forget to ask ourselves critical questions like “why would someone want to look at this?” or “what will people take away from seeing it?” The relationship between the composition and the story it expresses can develop either way; I typically start with an image in my head and the story evolves around it. The important part isn’t how you begin, but realizing how elements that exist outside of the canvas influence the context, mood, and the effect of the piece.

By creating a deeply personal internal story, you paradoxically make the work more accessible to a wider audience, who can then create their own internal stories. *HHHD* captures a moment in the character’s life that seems to be the calm after a recent rough transition.

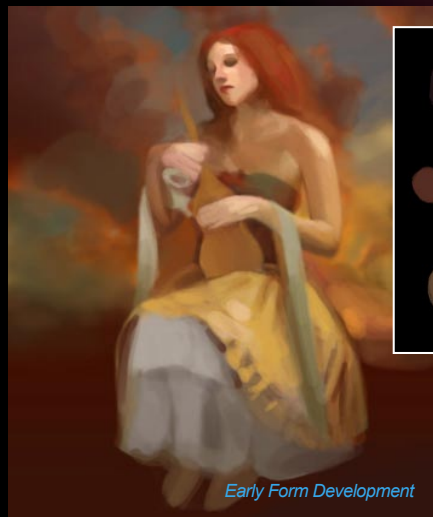
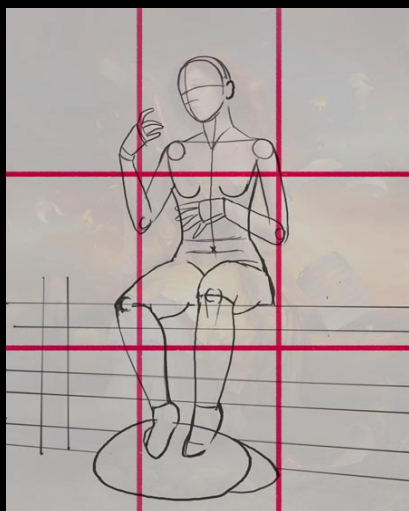
The symbolism is a synthesis of classic archetypes and personal significance. The key elements of the piece are easy to relate to: a human figure, the portrayal of song as a method of catharsis, and the suggestion of an agrarian lifestyle. These elements are the foundation on which the detail of personal symbolism rests. My hope was to find a balance between the cliché and the esoteric—too universal and it’s trite, too private and it’s inaccessible. These considerations, I think, helped make *Half Her Heart’s Duet* a successful piece.

COMPOSING THE SCENE

This piece has a very simple composition. When divided into 9 quadrants a la the classic *rule of thirds*, we see the figure seated in the central plane, and the horizon line between the fence and sky resting about on the bottom third. This technique has been used for centuries from the awareness that it creates a mathematically eye-pleasing format.

For this particular scene, I chose to make the figure central because being able to clearly see the expression on her face is vital to understanding the mood of the piece.

Like with most of my artwork, I began by blocking in basic forms with a large hard round brush. At this stage it’s futile to worry about being a perfectionist (note the “mitten hands” in the Early Form Development slide), but you want to concentrate on getting spacial relationships between the different elements in your piece as close as possible to what you want in the finished art. One trick is to zoom out until the canvas is tiny, and see if you can sense all the shapes in the final image at the reduced size. If something looks off, try reworking the area at this beginning stage so that you don’t carry that awkwardness with you throughout the piece.



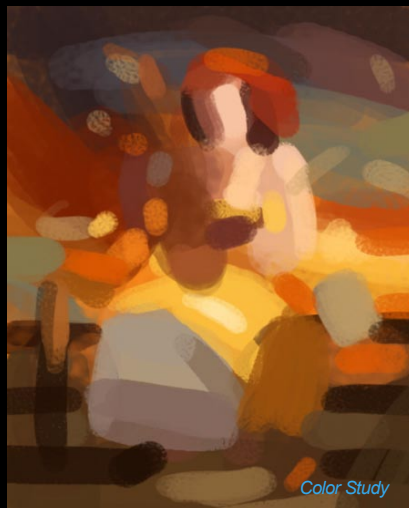
CREATING A COLOR PALETTE

A lot of different idioms came to mind during the first stages of this piece, such as “fire in her heart,” and “heart of gold,” so to me, choosing an analogous warm color scheme was obvious. Warm colors can create many different moods, but all of them strong—urgency, danger, love, and wrath, to name a few—and to portray an emotional conflict in the character, I wanted all of those moods together.

Using a colorful sky let me create a relationship between the colors in the figure and her surroundings. As you see in the simple color study below, the sky picks up colors in the dress, hair, skin, and ground helping to “bounce” the viewer’s eye around the image.

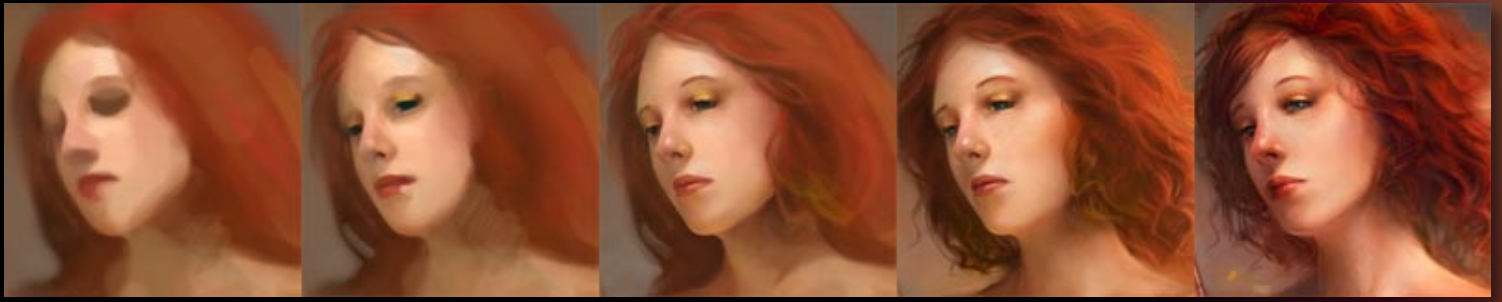
REFERENCES

When you’re doing something highly realistic or detailed, photo references can be a blessing if used properly. First, whenever possible (and it isn’t always), you should take them yourself. That way YOU are in control of the quality, lighting, and (if a figure is involved) the pose. It’s also easy to let a photo make color, texture, light and detail choices for you, but remember that you should ultimately decide what works best for the piece. Try to treat the photo as a guideline rather than a rigid structure. For *Half Her*



Heart’s Duet I used 4 original photos for different pieces of the scene; One for the general shape of the clouds, two for the hands and arms, and one for the shape of the dress and feet (the actual fabric was matte and pink). Other parts, such as the hair, torso, instrument, and background were done from imagination, and I used actual notebook scraps strewn around my studio for the curling shape of the paper. I prefer to keep my photo references open beside my canvas and paint by sight, as if they were real life subjects.

THE MAKING OF “HALF HER HEART’S DUET”



THE FACE

Achieving an expressive face was crucial in making this piece work, so of any single element, I probably reworked the face the most. I considered several things based on the girl’s perceived personality. I used red hair and fair skin pulling from the rural American “farm girl” archetype. I gave her a strong jaw to show her strength, and a reddish nose to suggest that she may have recently been crying.

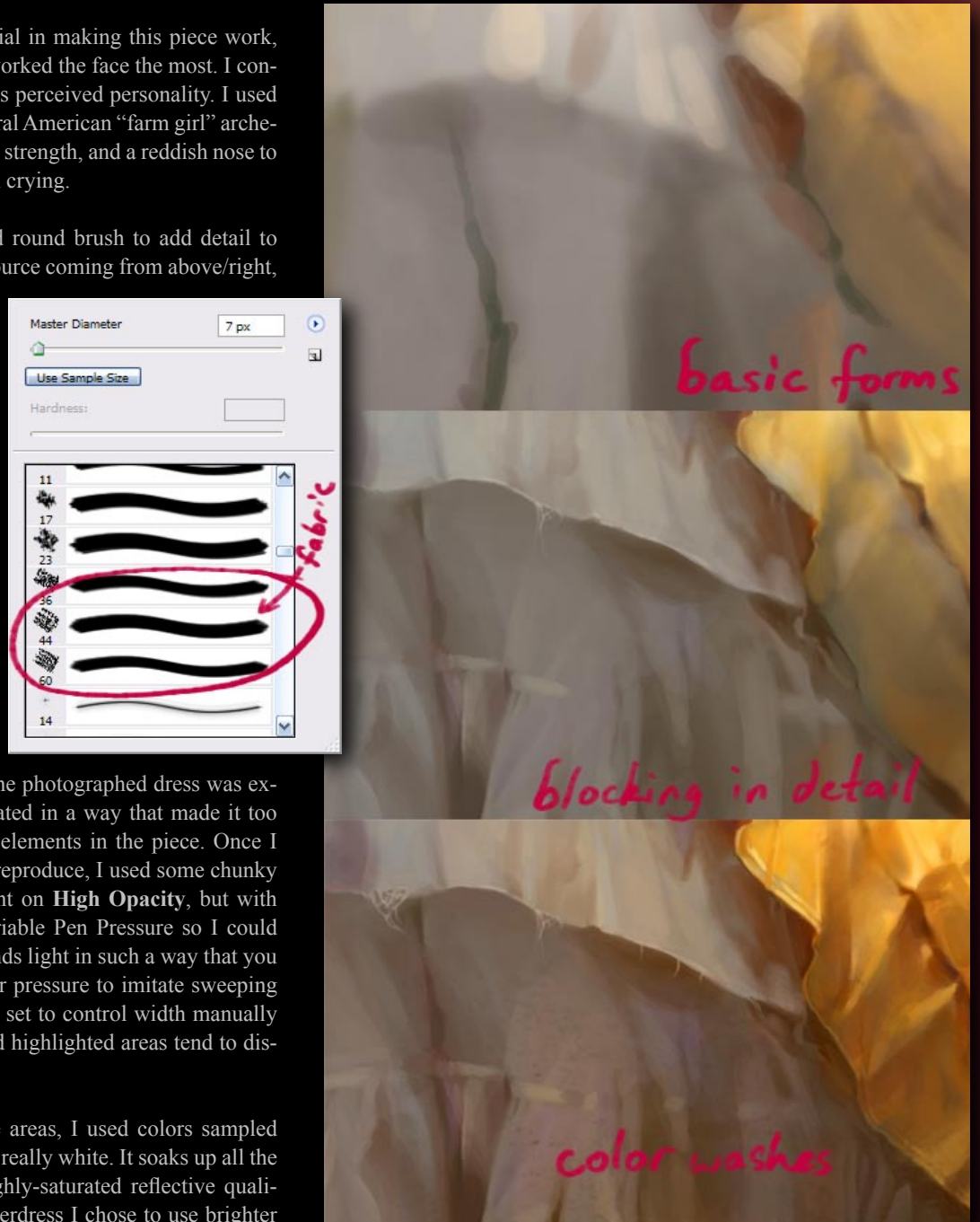
To paint the face, I started with a hard round brush to add detail to my basic forms. Considering the light source coming from above/right, I kept the brightest highlights on the forehead and cheekbone. On a separate **Overlay Layer** I lightly painted warmer reds and purples over the far side of her face to darken the shadows once I was satisfied with the form.

THE FABRIC

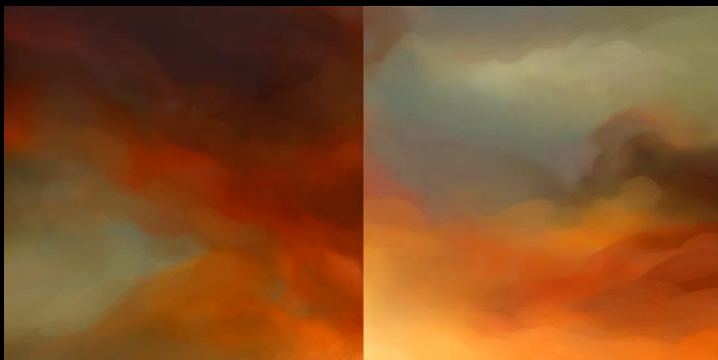
Creating the dress textures was one of the most challenging, yet rewarding parts of making *Half Her Heart’s Duet*. As mentioned earlier, I used a photo for reference, so using it as a guideline I created the major shapes with a hard round brush.

Next, I carefully assessed which wrinkles and folds were most important—the photographed dress was extremely wrinkled from storage and pleated in a way that made it too busy to look at compared to the other elements in the piece. Once I decided which areas were important to reproduce, I used some chunky brushes like the ones shown at the right on **High Opacity**, but with the **Flow Jitter** set to change with variable Pen Pressure so I could control the opacity manually. Fabric bends light in such a way that you constantly need to use softer and lighter pressure to imitate sweeping curves. It also helped to have the brush set to control width manually based on pen pressure, since shaded and highlighted areas tend to disappear into points.

When working with color in the white areas, I used colors sampled from all over the picture. White is never really white. It soaks up all the colors around it and has extremely highly-saturated reflective qualities. So directly underneath the gold overdress I chose to use brighter oranges as if the white fabric was a mirror capturing what was on the reverse side of the gold fabric. I used a similar concept with the gold fabric when I decided to make it reflective— closer to the ground I dulled the yellows into greens and greys as if they were reflecting the ground itself. The other trick to reflective fabric is increasing the contrast between the highlights and shadows. I used the **Dodge Tool** sparingly on several of the lighter areas to help boost the contrast.



THE MAKING OF "HALF HER HEART'S DUET"



THE SKY

The mechanics of painting the sky are a bit difficult to explain because it was a somewhat random process. There's no one way to paint anything, and that doubly applies to skies since they can take on just about any color and shape. I kept a few things in mind from the beginning, like where my light sources were and where large areas of color would be— I tried to select colors and values that would push the figure forward without being too desaturated...

...that said, I studied a picture I took of the sky at sunset to get an idea of how the edges of clouds work, then decided on using a very large speckled brush with a hard edge (below) to create the crisp crests and the flat color areas at the same time. Using long twisted strokes I was able to create a cloudlike texture that worked for the piece.



PLAYING WITH LIGHT

Lighting is probably the most important tool of all when it comes to setting a mood. It can make or break a piece of art— even the most gut-wrenching dramatic scene can look very boring without interesting light playing off of it. That said, I borrow a lot of techniques from model photography when planning my light sources... and often I use "off-canvas" light sources as a compliment if something needs to stand out. In *Half Her Heart's Duet*, I used roughly 3 sources of light.

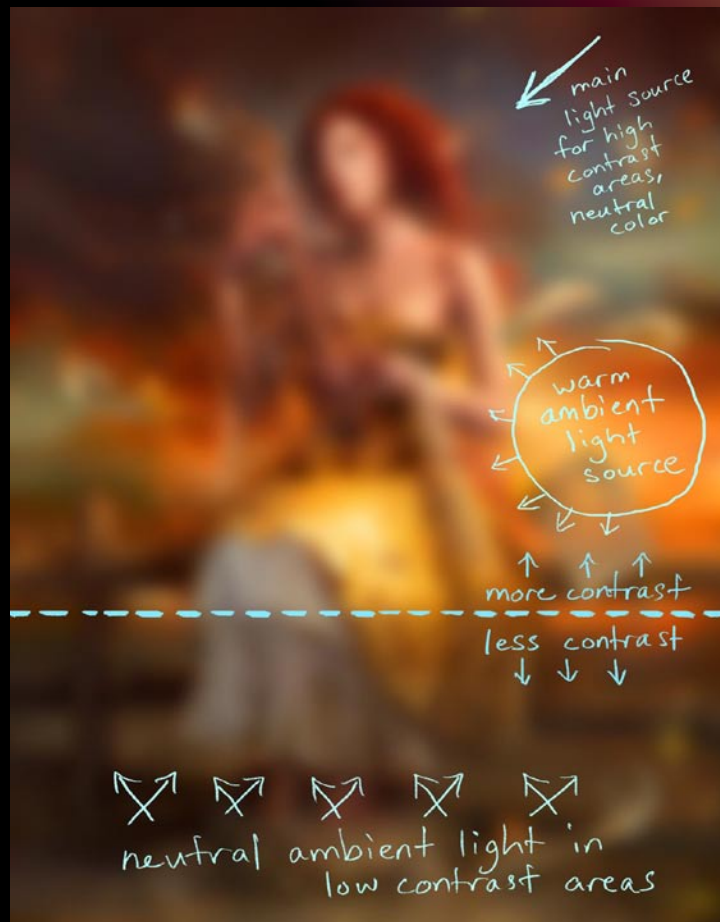
1. Light from the Sky (MAJOR SOURCE):

In photography, the role of the sky would probably be played by a diffusion box or soft spotlight. In this case, since the colors in the sky and costuming are so dramatic, I wanted a neutral color for the major light

source. That way, it would make all of the objects' native colors stand out without being blown out by a colored light source.

2. Setting sun reflecting off the clouds (MINOR SOURCE #1).

Often times you see major/minor source lighting on movie posters for heightened drama. Creating a minor light source from behind your



main focus gives you the freedom to create a color halo around it, as you see with the orange sort of outline around the hair, arms, dress, and fence. Would it look like this in real life? Probably not, but for the purpose of making the image dynamic it works wonderfully.

3. Ambient light from the ground (MINOR SOURCE #2).

One way of making a figure look enclosed without drawing actual walls is using shadow to imply there's more outside the canvas. If, for example, the hint of treeline around the edges continued past us, it might cast an amorphous shadow across the ground. Using this thinking I made everything below the fence line slightly darker in value and lower-contrast, and changed the light from directional to an ambient glow from all directions.

As an afterthought, I added an additional tiny light coming from one of the burning strips of sheet music on her right arm, to define the edge. If I didn't feel the arm needed definition, I probably wouldn't have put it there, but that's just it— as artists we get to make those decisions without consulting a camera! To get a better idea of how light reacts on different types of materials, just be a casual observer when you're not busy painting.

—THE MAKING OF “HALF HER HEART’S DUET”—

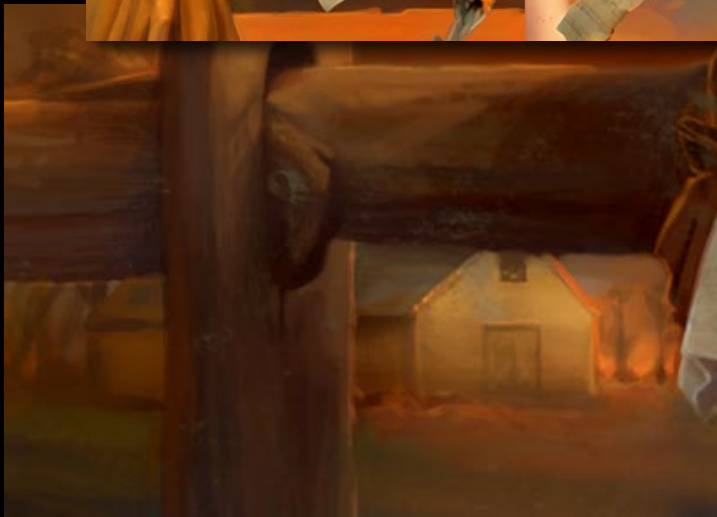


USING SYMBOLS

Sometimes the non-focal elements of a piece can be just as important as the subject. In the case of *Half Her Heart's Duet*, I used background elements to tell the viewer a bit more about the girl's life. Every farm has to have a crop, so I painted a glowing strawberry-shaped fruit on a thorny vine—a difficult harvest. And there's only one clearly showing, another partially faded on the ground, suggesting that it's been a bad year. The vines seem almost incidental, but I probably painted them over 3 times to get them to look that way. In an older version I had glowing fruit everywhere, but you could barely see what it was, and with the paper everywhere it looked busy and didn't fit the mood.

To paint the vines and the farmhouse, I used a hard angled brush similar to the one I used on the fabric. I pulled a lot of oranges from the sky and dark hues from the fence to mute the areas against the vivid figure. Afterward I textured the whole area with a large grungy pattern to give it an earthy feel.

The burning sheet music was not only symbolic of the girl's catharsis, but an element that added motion to an otherwise quiet scene. For the large sheets of paper I loosely drew patches of color and erased around the edges with a hard brush to create the rips and tears. For the burnt edges I painted using a darker color and enhanced it with the **Burn Tool** set to **Shadows**. The Burn Tool simultaneously makes things dark and enhances color, so I made sure the dark color had a red cast for that “freshly-singed” look. The fire was a bit more random, created by making strokes of highly saturated oranges and yellows, then going over them with the **Dodge Tool** on **Highlights** for maximum luminosity. After everything else was finished and I'd flattened my canvas, I added a little glow of yellow using an **Overlay** layer.



I hope this has been an enjoyable and informative tutorial. Thanks for reading!

—Cynthia Sheppard, www.sheppard-arts.com
sheppardarts@gmail.com

