

From www.studio.adobe.com

Simulate the Polaroid transfer effect, digitally

Most readers will probably be familiar with Polaroid instant picture products – you push the button and the print is ejected and develops right before your eyes. For many years professional image-makers have been using the unique features of this technology to create wonderfully textured images. The process involved substituting watercolor paper for the printing surface supplied by Polaroid. As a result the image is transferred onto the roughly surfaced paper and takes on a distinctly different look and feel to a standard Polaroid print.

Much acclaimed for its artistic appeal, the technique was not always predictable and much to the frustration of a lot of photographers, it was often difficult to repeat the success of previous results. There were three main problems – dark areas of an image often didn't transfer to the new surface, colors and image detail would bleed unpredictably and it was difficult to control how dark or light the final print would be. I know these problems intimately as it once took me 16 sheets of expensive instant film to produce a couple of acceptable prints.

This success ratio is not one that my budget or my temperament can afford. So I started to play with a digital version of the popular technique using Adobe® Photoshop® CS2. I wanted to find a process that was more predictable, controllable, and repeatable. My first step was to list the characteristics of the Polaroid transfer print so that I could simulate them digitally. To me it seemed that there were four main elements:

- Desaturated colors.
- Mottled ink.
- Distinct paper texture and color.
- The Polaroid film frame.

To duplicate these characteristics on the desktop would mean that I could capture the essence of the Polaroid process.

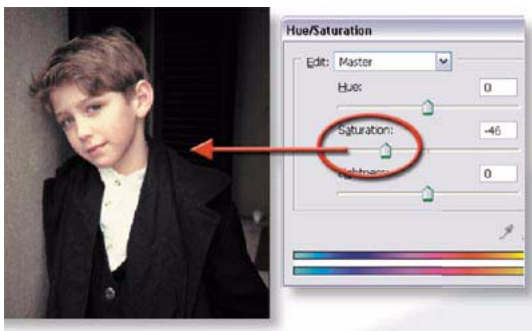


Re-create the Polaroid transfer effect using Photoshop CS2 and a digital photo.

Note: Three images are used in the following procedure; the original photo, a photograph of watercolor paper, and an image of a Polaroid edge. You can perform the following technique using your own images, or download those used in the tutorial from the book's website at www.photoshopessentialskills.com.

1 The Polaroid technique requires the watercolor paper to be slightly wet at the time of transfer. The moisture, while helping the image movement from paper to paper, tends to desaturate the colors and cause fine detail to be lost. These characteristics are also the result of the coarse surface of the donor paper.

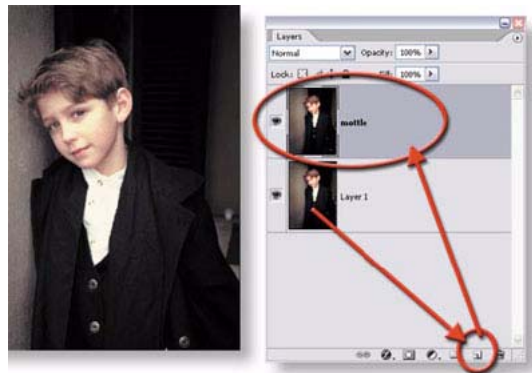
So the first step of the digital version of the process is to desaturate the color of our example image. In Photoshop this result can be achieved by using the Hue/Saturation dialog box (Image > Adjustments > Hue/Saturation). With the dialog box open, carefully move the Saturation slider to the left. This action will decrease the intensity of the colors in your image.



Use the Saturation slider to decrease the intensity of the colors in the image.

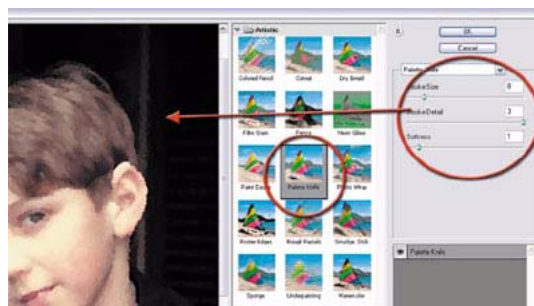
2 The distinct surface and image qualities of Polaroid transfer prints combine both sharpness and image break-up in the one picture. To reproduce this effect digitally, I copied the original image onto a second layer. My idea was to manipulate one version so that it displayed the mottled effect of the transfer print while leaving the second version untouched. Then, using the blending modes or opacity features of Photoshop's layers, I could adjust how much sharpness or mottle was contained in the final result.

In practice, I started by duplicating the image layer. This result can be achieved by selecting the layer to be copied and then using the Duplicate Layer command located under the Layers menu. Alternatively you can drag the layer to the New Layer button at the bottom of the layers palette.



Create a new, duplicate layer using the Duplicate Layer command, or by dragging the layer to the New Layer button.

3 With the uppermost layer selected, I then needed to find a method to simulate the mottle of the transfer print. Though not exactly right, I found that by combining the effects of the Paint Daubs and Palette Knife filters I could produce reasonable results. When using these filters yourself, keep in mind that the settings used will vary with the style and size of your image. Use the ones in the example as a starting point only. This part of the process is not an exact science. Play and experimentation is the name of the game. You might also want to try other options in the Artistic, Sketch or Texture selections of the Filter menu.



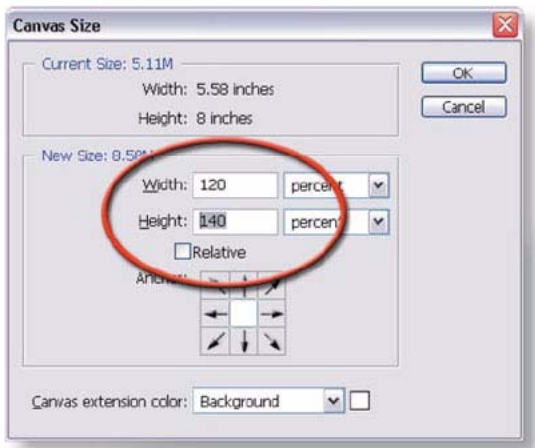
Experiment with various filters to achieve a mottled look.

4 The last step in this texture stage is to combine the characteristics of the two layers. This result can be achieved by either changing the blending mode of the uppermost layer or by adjusting its opacity, or both. For the example image simple opacity change was all that was needed, but don't be afraid to try a few different blend/opacity combinations with your own work.



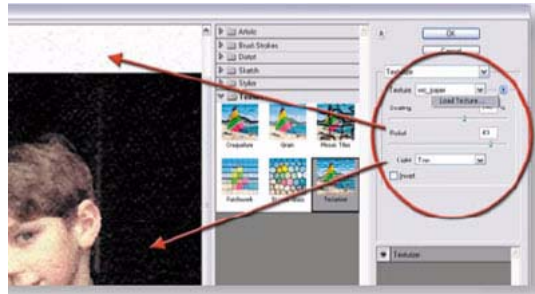
Adjusting the opacity of the uppermost layer.

5 The paper color and texture is a critical part of the appeal of the transfer print. These two characteristics extend throughout the image itself and into the area that surrounds the picture. For this to occur in a digital facsimile it is necessary to provide some space around the image using Photoshop's Canvas Size feature (Image > Canvas Size). Unlike Image Size, this option allows the user to increase the size of the canvas that all image layers (including the background layer) are sitting upon without changing the image itself. In the example the canvas width was increased to 120% and the height to 140%.



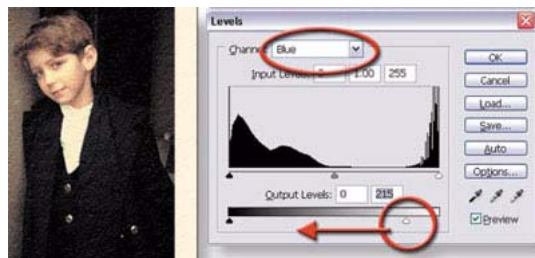
Choose Image > Canvas Size and then extend the canvas using the Width and Height boxes.

6 To add the texture to both image and surround I flattened (Layer > Flatten Image) the two image layers and the white background into a single layer. Next, I photographed a section of watercolor paper to use as a customized texture with the Texturizer filter (Filter > Texture > Texturizer). You can download and use this very file from the link mentioned above or pick one of the options from the Texture pop-up list.



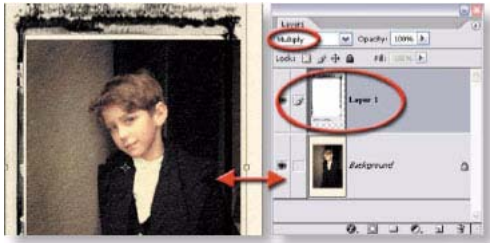
Choose a texture from the texture menu.

7 With the texture complete, I played with the overall color of the image using the Levels feature (Image > Adjustments > Levels). I altered the blue and red channels independently and concentrated on the lighter tones of the image so that rather than the paper being stark white it took on a creamy appearance.



Adjust the color of the image in the Levels dialog box.

8 The last part of the process involves combining the final image with a scan of a Polaroid film edge. You can make your own edge image by scanning a Polaroid print and then removing the picture, or you can download the image I used from the book's website mentioned above. Open the edge file as a separate document. Click onto the edge picture and drag it onto your picture. The edge will automatically become a new layer on top of the existing image layer. With the edge layer selected, change the layer's blend mode to Multiply. Notice that the white areas of the layer are now transparent allowing the picture beneath to show through. Finally, use the Scale command to adjust the size of the edge to fit the image.



Change the edge layer blend mode to Multiply to allow the picture to show through.

Adapted from "Photoshop CS2: Essential Skills" by Mark Galer and Philip Andrews © 2005. Used with permission from Focal Press, a division of Elsevier. To buy this book, visit www.focalpress.com.

Find more tools, tips, and resources for Adobe software in the Adobe Resource Center at www.studio.adobe.com.



Adobe, the Adobe logo, and Photoshop are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.
© 2005 Adobe Systems Incorporated. All rights reserved.