"I wanted to end up with a warm painting, as well as a painting that looks and feels like a piece of art, rather than a manipulated or distorted photograph."

aretha franklin

making of by Jason Seiler

We are pleased to present an exclusive article on the making of Jason Seiler's Aretha Franklin caricature. Jason takes us step-by-step through his painting process in Photoshop, from sketch to final piece, and we will also be welcoming him back to 2DArtst later this year for an interview – that'll be a treat for sure, as his portfolio contains some of the most stunningly painted caricatures you could hope to find!

making of
aretha franklin

Created In:

Photoshop

Introduction

These are the steps I took while painting my recent caricature, 'Aretha Franklin'. The sketch was drawn in Photoshop (**Fig.00**), using a small round brush. For the painting I used Photoshop CS and a Wacom Cintiq; the size of the final painting is 13 inches wide by 14.5 inches high, at 300 dpi resolution.

Step 1

After I finished my sketch, I chose Select All, copied that layer and pasted another copy of the sketch above the background layer, one above the other. I then switched to my background layer, hit Select All again and deleted the sketch from the background layer. I then selected Layer 2, which had the sketch on it, and set that layer to Multiply.
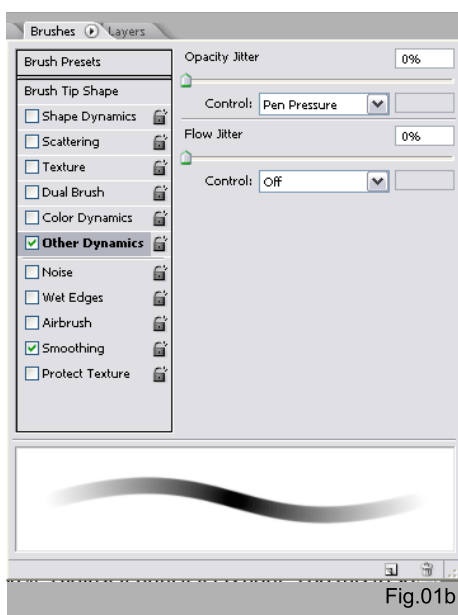
"I rarely start with the same colours twice"

I painted in a flesh tone directly under the sketch layer so as not to lose my sketch lines.

Fig.00
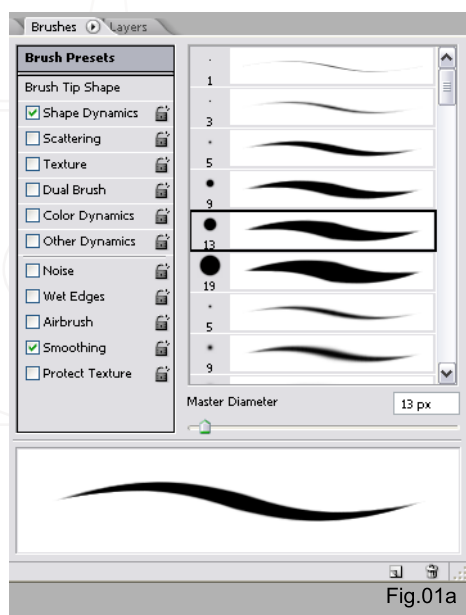
The brush I started with was a size 13 round brush (**Fig.01a – 01b**). I made sure that Other Dynamics was turned on and that the Opacity Jitter was at 0%; Control was set to Pen Pressure, Flow Jitter set to 0%, and the Control

below the Flow Jitter was turned off. These settings gave me the control that I prefer. I usually paint with my Opacity set to 85-90% and my Flow set to 100%, although this sometimes differs depending on effect.

I made sure that Shape Dynamics was turned off. The flesh colour I chose to use in RGB Mode was R: 190, G: 124, B: 104. I don't always start with this colour. In fact, I rarely start with the same colours twice because each subject I paint presents a new mood or feeling that I want to capture.

My photo reference had unnatural lighting and felt too pink. I knew from looking at my reference that I wanted to go in a different direction; I wanted to end up with a warm painting, as well as a painting that looks and feels like a piece of art, rather than a manipulated or distorted photograph. So I chose a violet red colour (R:

Fig.01a

Fig.01b

98, G: 17, B: 25) that I essentially filled the background with. I didn't want any whites in my painting just yet. Because I tend to paint from dark to light, the background here was used as a foundation to build from.

I created a palette layer at this point (**Fig.01c**). It's important to create a colour palette that has harmony. My main priority was getting the values right and I knew that if I could succeed in that, I could do just about anything with the colour. When I paint, I usually create a variation of red, yellow, and blue. With these three colours most colours can be created. You'll notice that in this painting my colours are very warm: reds, oranges, browns, violets, and greens.

To create my palette, I made a new layer that would remain on top of all the layers from this point on. This layer was used as my 'palette layer'. I selected my Eyedropper tool and picked a red-brown colour from my background. I then clicked my colour picker and chose a few more reds based off the red-brown that I chose, and then I created a small grouping of flesh-like reds
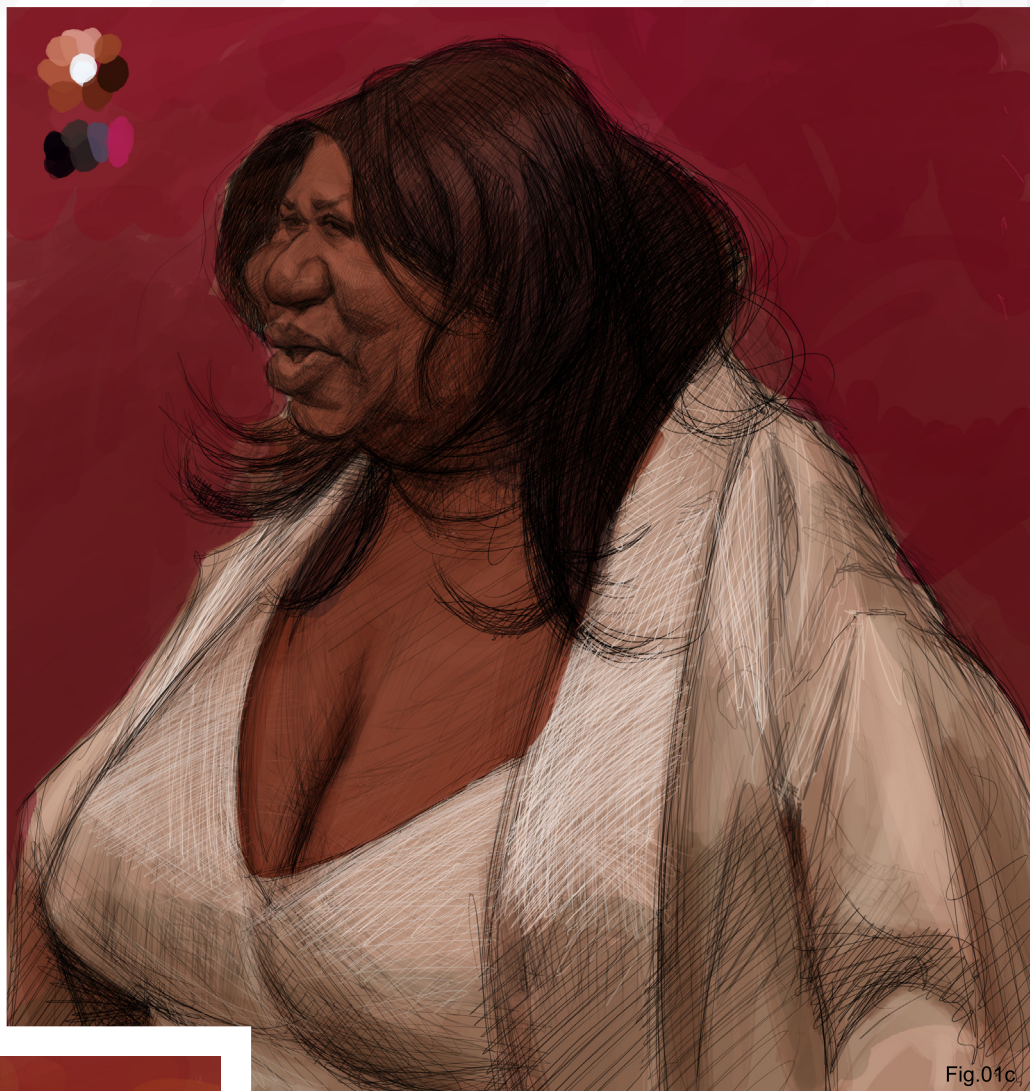

Fig.01c

Fig.02a

and browns. I did this by squinting my eyes while looking at my photo reference, and then choosing colour according to the values I saw while squinting my eyes. When I looked at my photo reference through squinted eyes, I saw reds, greens, violets, and blues, but I knew that I wanted a warmer painting for my final. So I create those colours and mixed my red-brown colour into all of them, creating harmony. This technique was similar to the 'pigment soup' technique that I sometimes use when painting with oils.

> ### "Think of it as if you are sculpting, chipping away small pieces"

Step 2

What I typically do at this stage is use my Eyedropper tool to select the colour I've created for the background, and then use that colour to begin my block-in (**Fig.02a – 02b**). At this stage of the painting, I was mostly concerned about painting the correct values. It was also important, at this stage, to not zoom in too close. I chose to paint from a distance and used large brushes. This way I could focus on capturing shape and values, and merely suggest detail.

Fig.02b

Next, I created a new layer on top of the other layers and began to slowly paint over my sketch lines. By this point I'd created enough form and structure that I no longer needed my sketch lines. I also began to block in a bit of the background as well. The background was important to establish early on in the painting; it had to complement the portrait. The colours and values of the background will affect the colours

and values in your portrait, so it's important to work back and forth between the portrait and background while blocking in. Think of it as if you are sculpting, chipping away small pieces until the form appears.

I usually save my bright highlights and whites for later on in the painting and start first by establishing my darks and working lighter from

there. This stage is simply for me to create a balanced foundation for my block-in. Steps one and two take five to ten minutes – at most – to complete.

Step 3

I created another layer that would go directly under my "palette layer" but would remain on top of all the other layers. I began to paint on top

of my block-in; everything up until this point was used as a guide for me to follow as I built up layers of colour.

Next, I needed to establish my darkest darks and block those in. There was no need to zoom in; I worked at a distance and continued to use a large round brush. My technique when painting digitally is very similar to how I would paint traditionally with oils: start with bigger brushes, blocking in the largest shapes of darkest colour and value; as the painting progresses, I use smaller and smaller brushes. Also, I never stay in one area for too long. Painting from a distance with larger brushes helps you cover more ground in less time.

I established my darkest darks and at this point began to paint lighter values on her face and chest (**Fig.03**). I also started adding lighter, almost pure white value on her clothing. Notice

Fig.03

that I have not yet added any such values to her face, as I saved those highlights and reflective lights for later on. It's easy to become impatient and want to paint in highlights right way, but it's better to not get distracted by them and wait.

The reason I painted the almost white values on her clothing was so that I could later compare the lighter values in her face to the values on her clothing. I knew that there should not be any area on her face that shared values as white as those which exist on her clothing.

Step 4

As I continued to block in the painting, I found myself unsettled with the composition. This is one of the great things about painting digitally. With the Crop tool, I selected the entire canvas and then added a bit more to the bottom, giving Aretha additional girth (**Fig.04**).

Step 5

As the painting developed I continued with the same approach, squinting my eyes and mixing

Fig.04

colour to match the value and temperature that I desired for the piece. Still using a round brush, I began to zoom in to paint details. I then started to refine the mouth, eyes, nose, ears, and hair. You can start to see a softer transition on edges between values (**Fig.05**).

Step 6

I removed the palette at this stage because I had enough colours in my painting to work with. If I needed to change the value or saturation of a colour that I already had, I simply clicked on the colour picker and mixed or adjusted my colour there. Not much here has changed since Step 5 (**Fig.06**).

I began to use my favourite Photoshop brush, #24 (follow the brush settings mentioned in Step 1). Brush #24's marks and strokes feel more like a natural paint brush and I use it as such. This

Fig.05

Fig.06

was the brush I used to finish the painting, with the exception of a soft round that I used for hair.

Step 7

I began to focus my attention on Aretha's face (**Fig.07**). Adjustments were made to her nose

and right cheek, and I noticed that I could exaggerate her mouth a bit more, so I painted away the mouth and re-painted a new mouth lower on her face. This added more space between her nose and mouth, which is what I wanted. I also extended her mouth and bottom lip out a bit further, which enhanced both the likeness as well as humour. I continued to soften edges, adjust values and introduce additional lighter values to her face and clothing. I also began to soften her chest and hair.

"Squint your eyes for value, and open your eyes to see the colour"

Step 8

At this stage I freely zoomed in and out – zooming in for details, zooming out to have a look from a distance. It was important to often step back from the painting. With this painting it was not my intention to copy the colour I saw in my references. Instead, I wanted to focus on values and colour temperature. Squint your eyes for value, and open your eyes to see the colour.

I basically finished the face at this stage, and started to detail her chest and clothing (**Fig.08**).

Step 9

The painting was all but finished in this final step, with the exception of the hair and minor details of clothing and composition. For the hair, I created a new layer. This way, if I needed

Fig.07

to erase a section of hair that didn't feel right, it didn't ruin the rest of the painting. I painted the large mass of value and shape that I saw while squinting my eyes. I then blocked in the basic form or design of the hair a little bit darker than it needed to be. This way, when I painted smaller hairs on top, in a lighter value, it gave the illusion of depth. To add to this illusion, I also changed the size of my brush to differ the widths of the hairs. I used a Soft Round brush with a tapered point to paint smaller hairs. Keep it simple: study what hair does and then make it more interesting.

My goal with this painting was that it would feel more like a traditionally painted piece, rather than a digitally painted image. To get a more traditional look for the piece, I selected some texture from one of my oil paintings and dragged it on top of my painting. In my layers window, I selected Hard Light and set it to 47%. This effect changed my colours slightly from the previous step. Truthfully, this was something I've never done before; I enjoyed the look I was getting and decided to keep it. Don't be afraid to experiment with some of the tools to see what they can do, but be careful to not abuse

Fig.08

the computer. I feel that digital paintings look best when they're not so obviously digitally created. That's my preference anyway.

The painting was almost finished here and I felt once more that the composition could be better. So I selected my Crop tool and cropped a bit off the right side of the painting. For the final finishing touch, I wanted to add some noise and additional texture to the painting, so I selected a mid-tone grey, created a new layer and filled that layer with grey, making sure this layer was on the very top. I then selected Noise in the Filter menu and chose Add Noise. When using this tool you'll need to adjust the settings until they look good to you. I then selected Blur More in the Blur settings. I did this to soften the texture of the noise a bit. And finally, I changed my layer to Soft Light and brought the Opacity down to about 17% (**Fig.09**).

Final Thoughts

Well, that's it. Remember to have fun. Sketch, draw and paint from life as much as you can. Keep it simple. If you look at the design of my portrait you can see that my shapes and forms are basic and simple. When I combine strong values and colour to my basic design, the final appears more complicated than it really is.

Fig.09

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