

Melissa Miller Nece demonstrates step by step how to create **texture** beneath **colored pencil**. In this tutorial, she shows how to start with an alkyd underpainting over a textured clear gesso layer for a looser, luminous colored pencil look. Don't forget to scroll down to see how she adapted this technique to colored pencil with acrylic paint and gesso.

By Melissa Miller Nece

Colored pencil is a great medium on its own. Artists who employ different techniques can produce colored pencil works that look polished or sketchy, linear or tonal—or that even resemble paint or pastel. Colored pencil also plays well with other art materials, and I'm constantly looking for ways to expand my own use of colored pencil.

There are four steps in the process that I used to develop *Let's Make Her Into a Mermaid!* (below):



To create Let's Make Her Into a Mermaid (colored pencil and alkyd oil, 15x19), Nece first sealed her pencil drawing with clear gesso on art board. Next she brushed on an alkyd oil tonal layer and then added color and detail in colored pencil.

Step-by-Step Colored Pencil Texture Demo

1. Do Pencil Outline Drawing (see image below)

My first step is an outline drawing on watercolor hot-pressed art board. I like to include a lot of detail in the base drawing, but you might prefer to keep it simple. Most important is simply to indicate where the dark and light patterns will be. After laying out the drawing, use a kneaded eraser and tape to remove excess graphite so it won't smudge in the next step.

2. Seal With Clear Gesso (see image below)

Then seal the drawing with clear gesso, at the same time creating a random texture with the brushstrokes. An old, sturdy and stiff No. 12 acrylic brush is great for pushing around the gesso. There's no need to thin the ground, but it helps to dampen the brush slightly with water before beginning.

It's a good idea to brush all the way to the edges so there's no worry if paint gets in the margins. Just be generous in applying the gesso and have fun with the brushstrokes. Also be sure the working area is completely covered with the gesso so that no stroke of paint will touch unprotected paper. Check the area after it dries and touch up any possible gaps.



3. Apply Alkyd Oil Tonal Layer (see image below)

Once the gesso ground is dry, the process gets interesting. The base drawing is clearly visible but safely sealed so it won't smear or rub away. With a small amount of transparent earth red Gamblin FastMatte alkyd oil color and a lot of Gamblin Gamsol (odorless mineral spirits), do a monochromatic tonal painting over the gesso. Other colors will work but, for this subject, the warm brown of transparent earth red made a rich, unifying base for the figures and a contrast for the cool shadows in the sand.

Establish basic value patterns; don't make the darks as dark as they'll be in the end. Small, soft brushes work well for this step, while a stiffer brush, paper towels and a color shaper can be used to adjust and smooth out the tones. You don't need to be exact in following the outline, as you can make corrections in the fourth step. The alkyd is fast drying, especially when applied so thinly and, thanks to its matte finish and the texture of the gesso, it will readily accept the next layers. On this surface, even if the paint is thinned so much in areas where little oil binder is left, the toothy gesso will hold the pigment in place.



4. Apply Colored Pencil (see two more step images below)

As soon as the paint layer is dry, which doesn't take long when the paint layer is so thin, you can apply full color over the brown base tones. Any kind of colored pencil will work, but I recommend using only the most lightfast colors from each brand.

On the toothy surface, soft pencils build up quickly, while harder pencils act a bit like pastels. When the harder colors get too powdery, push them in with a blending stump or ink eraser—or even with your finger. Covering the surface with the pencils brings out the brushstroke texture of the gesso layer, giving a lively, loose quality to the piece. You may need to sharpen the pencil to work into some of those grooves.

Sometimes the texture might push a stroke in an unintended direction, but mistakes are easy to correct, and you can smooth and blend colors with a tool like my favorite, the Perfection ink (typing) eraser from Faber-Castell. An electric eraser will remove color quickly without damaging the surface, but tape and a kneaded eraser are also handy for making changes. Colored pencil could completely cover all of the underpainting, but there's nothing wrong with letting the base show through here and there.

In applying the colors, I advise first laying in complementary colors to establish the shadows for each shape (see image immediately below). Here, the brown paint already on the board is a natural complement to blue, so putting in the dark blues of the polka dot bathing suit was an obvious place to start. (It doesn't hurt to get what might be the most boring part of the project out of the way early!) I then moved into blues for the body shadows on the two younger girls and developed their skin tones. Soft pink and yellow glazed over the basic skin colors provided the golden sunset glow that made this subject so appealing to me.



Before finishing the figures, I started work on the background so I could evaluate the colors in context. The oldest girl's head, with foreshortened features obscured by blowing hair (see next image, below), was a challenge, but putting in the shadows first helped me find a way through it. Shadows led me through the background too; I established a rhythm putting in the blues of the sand, balancing them with white, French Grey 10% and the same pinks and yellows from the skin tones.



Reviewing the Process

Despite the multiple steps, this process is fast, easy, effective—and fun. You can take full advantage of the best properties of each medium involved. (See the finished painting at the top of the article.) The clear acrylic gesso layer first secures the drawing and, in the end, forces a looser style that many colored pencil artists seek but can't quite get. Next the fast-drying alkyd oil layer for the underpainting gives a unifying base tone and quickly establishes the structure. And lastly, colored pencils provide the full color and details. (Pastels would also work for the top layer, with or without colored pencil.)

With multiple choices of paint colors for the underpainting, you can adapt this process for exciting effects with all kinds of subjects. Variations of this technique are going to keep this artist inspired for some time!

Keep scrolling down!

After my color and materials sidebars, you'll learn how I adapt the previous colored pencil techniques to applying colored pencil over clear gesso that has been applied over acrylic paint.

Colors

Here are the specific colors I used in *Let's Make Her Into a Mermaid!*:

- Caran d'Ache Pablo: ultramarine, gentian blue
- Caran d'Ache Luminance: violet, manganese violet, orange, anthraquinoid pink
- Derwent Signature (discontinued): ultramarine light, manganese violet, light and dark grey
- Faber-Castell Polychromos: white, ivory, Delft blue, dark indigo, light ultramarine, sky blue, emerald and grass green, flesh (light, medium and dark), cinnamon, cream, bistre, raw and burnt umber
- Lyra Rembrandt Polycolor: black hard, flesh (light, medium and dark), cinnamon, cream, rose carmine
- Prismacolor: canary yellow, peach, light peach, burnt ochre, light and dark umber, sienna brown, powder blue, aquamarine, light aqua, cream, French grey 10% and 20%, indigo blue, cadmium orange hue, white

Materials

- Surface: Arches watercolor hot-pressed art board (Canson and Arches offer the art boards in multiple surfaces and colors; other sturdy boards or paper also work.)
- Gesso or primer: Winsor & Newton acrylic clear gesso (Alternatives include Liquitex acrylic clear gesso, Colourfix clear primer, Golden acrylic ground for pastels.)
- Oil: Gamblin FastMatte alkyd oil paint (For this piece I used transparent earth red.)
- Medium: Gamblin Gamsol (odorless mineral spirits)
- Brushes: small soft synthetic brushes for oils (No. 6 filbert, Nos. 2 and 6 round); natural bristle brush for oils (No. 4 bright); synthetic stiff brush for acrylics (No. 12 bright)
- Colored pencils: Caran d'Ache Pablo and Luminance, Derwent Signature (discontinued), Faber-Castell Polychromos, Lyra Rembrandt Polycolor, Prismacolor
- Other: Electric pencil sharpener, electric eraser, kneaded eraser, Faber-Castell Perfection ink eraser, paper blending stump, clear tape, color shaper

Try Adapting My Process by Using Acrylic Paint and Gesso



For Hello, Sweetie! (above; colored pencil and mixed media, (9x8), I chose a variation on the technique I've explained above, using acrylic paint under the gesso instead of oil paint on top.

The bright orange "Phenomenon Shell" paper has an unusual pearlescent shell emulsion coating. Knowing I couldn't draw directly on the shiny surface, I did the outline with white transfer paper, and reversed the gesso and paint layers.

First, I used white acrylic paint to define the light areas and make a base for the brighter colors of the candy toppings. The shell coating mixed with the white paint, so two coats were needed.

Then I brushed on the clear gesso. This diminished the pearly shine but would hold the colored pencil layers. The white acrylic that showed through was very subtle, and a lot of white colored pencil was needed to bring out the cupcake forms, but enough orange of the paper showed through as background color.