

Creating a textured background

When you start a painting, the first step is usually to prime your surface by applying an acrylic gesso. Typically, you apply a few coats to ensure that the paint will adhere evenly and generally the aim is to make sure you have a nice flat surface ready for your painting.

Or you can make it a bit more fun.

My work tends to have lots of layers with interesting details and to create this depth, I start incorporating those details right from the priming stage. So rather than just applying several even coats of gesso, I use different tools to various textures and interesting marks right from the initial layer (well, maybe the second one - probably good to have one even layer to begin with). (NB. you can also follow this process using moulding paste on top of a primed canvas)

- 1. Select your chosen surface (e.g. canvas, wood panel...) and apply a thin coat of gesso using the tool of your choice.** You may opt for a brush, a sponge, or a roller - or my personal favourite is a silicon wedge. Unlike the aforementioned tools, it will not absorb any primer itself so you don't end up washing any down the sink (much better for the environment). Wait for this layer to dry.



- 2. Apply a second layer of gesso** - a bit thicker this time as you are going to press things into it. For this layer definitely go for a tool that won't absorb the primer (as you want to keep it quite thick) - a silicon wedge, an old credit card or a palette knife.

- 3. BEFORE the second layer dries**, add it some small blobs of paint in maybe 2-3 different colours. Then, using the silicon wedge, GENTLY move these blobs around. You don't want to mix in the paint in completely; you just want to create some interesting marks. It's a bit like in baking when you fold in an ingredient rather than mixing it vigorously with a spoon (or so I'm told, I'm rubbish at baking so maybe that's not the best comparison).



- 4.** By now, your surface should still be mostly primer with just a few glints of colours; if you have been a bit too heavy handed in the previous step, leave it to dry and then add more gesso.

- 5.** Again, working quickly and before the gesso dries, grab some tools and start making some marks in your gesso.

Top tip

Run your finger around the edge of your surface after each layer to avoid gloops of primer accumulating as it overflows from the top. If you forget, you can sand these down at the end but if you remove them as you go it will save you the hassle.

Turn to the next page for some suggestions of tools to use...

Tool suggestions

Stencils

Press your stencil into the wet gesso then scrape a silicon wedge over the top. Lift off your stencil and then use the wedge to smooth down some parts of the stencil, so it doesn't look too perfect but instead more natural. I generally prefer to use stencils that have irregular shapes (e.g. flowers) rather than regular patterns, but a bit of both can result in some interesting contrasts.



Tulle

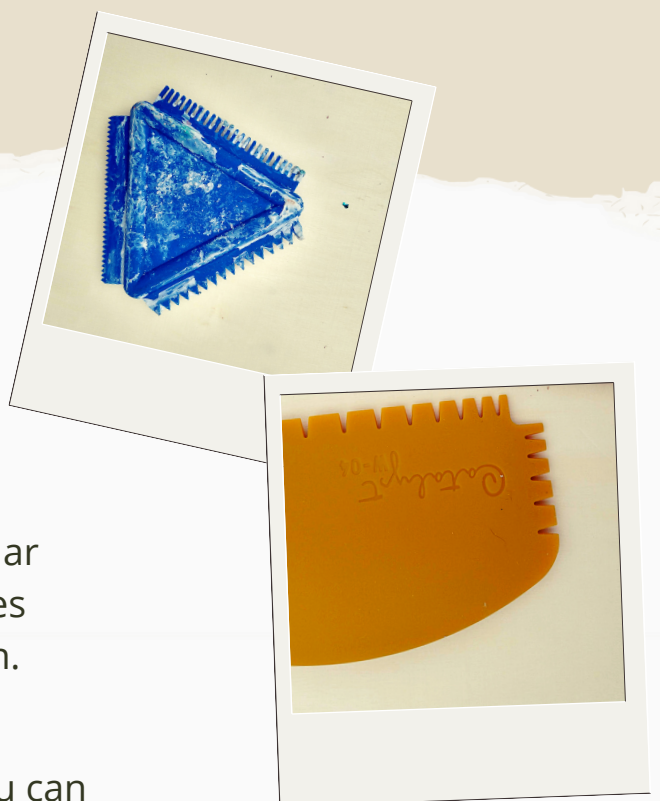
Yes, this is the stuff that tutus are made out of. Who knows why I happened to have some lying around but I tried pressing a bit into gesso one day and it remains unrivaled as one of my favourite tools. It creates some lovely tiny bumps that the paint will catch in a few layers time.



Things with a ridged edge

I have a ridged silicon wedge and this triangular comb thingy. I use them to create straight lines and also drag them round in a circular motion.

See what else you might have around that you can press into your gesso for interesting marks...



Finally, leave the gesso to dry. Now look and see if there's any areas that might look more interesting if you sand them back (sandpaper or wire wool) or scrape through with a palette knife).

What's next?

I use these textured backgrounds as a base for most of my work. After this stage I often go on to add collage elements, such as patterned tissue paper, and then use different mark-making tools. Look out for future publications to learn more about these processes!