

Making Art and Giving Birth

The Five Stages of a Painting

So often after completing a work of art, I find myself likening the process to childbirth. You may (or may not) be able to relate, but either way, here I'd like to share with you the five stages I see many of us experiencing during the process of creation—from conception to delivery—and the unique challenges and solutions I've developed along the way.



Stage 1: Conception

No matter the genre you choose to express your creativity, your work begins with conception—having an idea that you want to develop. Staring at a blank white canvas can be debilitating. Obstacles at the beginning phase of art-making include the fear of messing up, having too many ideas, not knowing where to start, and having limited knowledge to execute the plan.

Calisthenics; described by Wikipedia as “a form of exercise that consists of a variety of motor movements, often rhythmic...” are a great way to overcome the fear of the blank canvas. In each collage workshop I teach, I get the students loosened up by challenging them to a five-minute collage exercise (detailed in the book). Once the hand, brush and brain are in motion, it’s much easier and less intimidating to begin working.

In the past I’ve overcome the freeze effect of the blank canvas simply by painting it a different color. I call this step “Do Anything.” Take a brush and swish color across the canvas, grab a piece of charcoal and scribble, once the white has been broken it is much easier to begin.

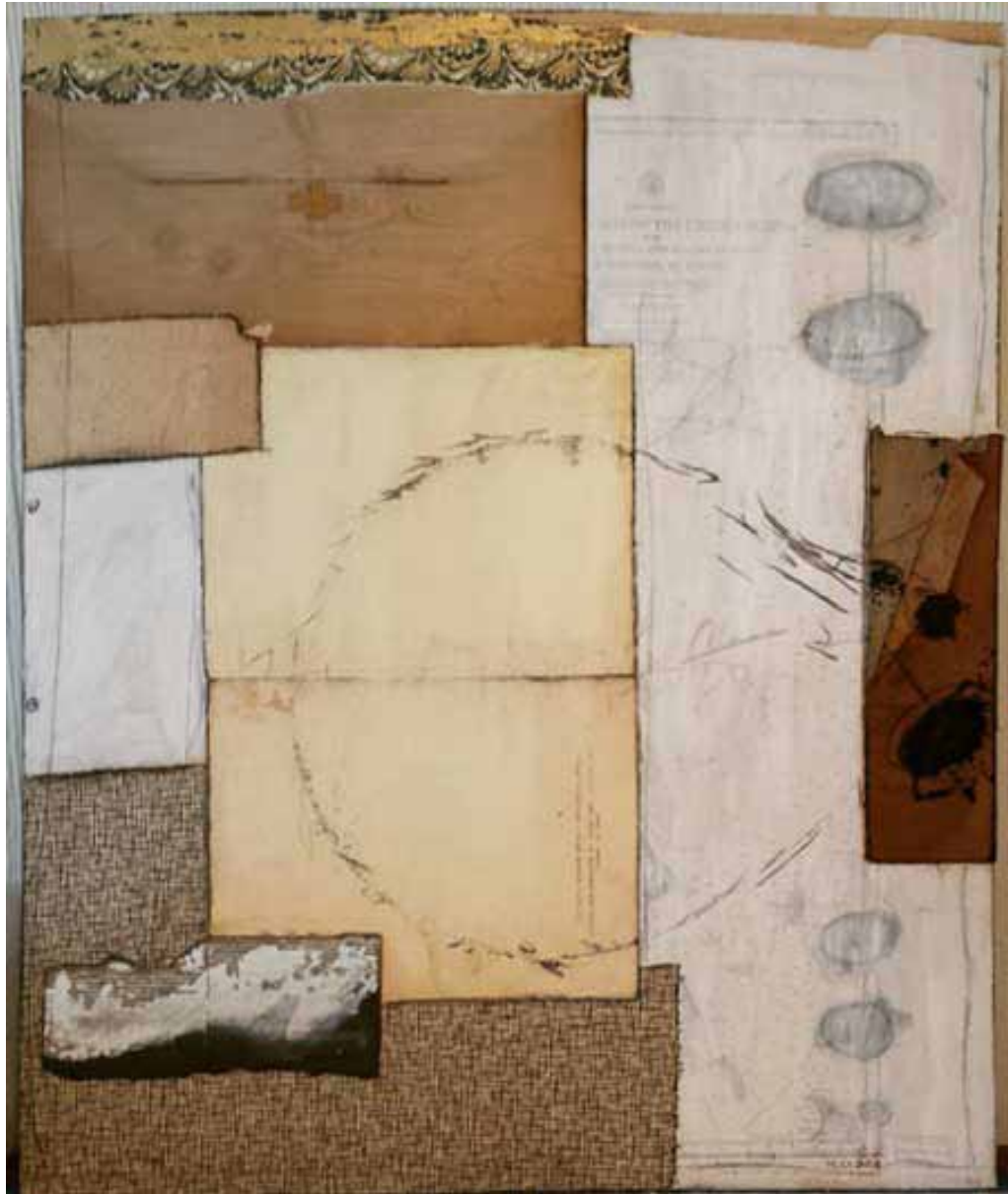
Still feeling uninspired and need a little extra inspiration or experience? Sign up for a weekend workshop, take a trip to your local galleries, or spend an afternoon online watching tutorials or finding image that speak to you.



Stage 2: The First Trimester

After moving beyond the blank-canvas step, you are now happily humming along making art. You've completed the first layer and you're feeling pretty good about it. This is the stage I liken to the first trimester of pregnancy: Not a whole lot is happening to the casual observer. If the first stage is the blank-canvas stage, this second stage might be called the *bland*-canvas stage . . .

In the example photo, I have a good composition, there is harmony to the elements and some exciting things are happening, but it just doesn't have a "wow" factor. This is a good time to step back and take a good long look at each area on the canvas, but keep moving forward. Each decision will inform the next. You don't have to know exactly where you going yet.



Stage 3: Labor

Many layers later, things are beginning to heat up! At this stage you may be loving the work and thinking you're nearly done. You've experimented with techniques and added some elements that have a little pizzazz! In this stage trial and error is both the problem and the solution.

Not unlike true labor, some works take longer to birth than others and having an objective viewpoint is helpful. You may need to step out of the studio for a while and come back later with fresh eyes. You may even need to ask a trusted art friend for her opinion. As a nurse assisting the patient, you may wish to be done and find out you are only half way there. Trust the process. Keep going!



Stage 4: Transition

Over the number of years I have been creating collage, I have learned that there is a point in the development of an art work that I can only describe as “transition” and it is best not to fight it. So now you have been laboring over the canvas for hours, days, weeks even, and suddenly there is no end in sight. You think to yourself (or out loud) *I hate it! I hate everything about it! I want to throw it out the window and go back to my old life as a Project Manager! Who ever convinced me that I was an artist?!*

I see my students hit this stage in my workshops and tongue in cheek, talk about that stage in labor where you are grabbing your husband by the scruff of his neck, telling him you never want to see him again. If you have been through it you know exactly what I mean. It hurts! And you just want it to be over already! Take heart, there is a purpose to this pain. My friend Seth Apter tells his students “You are only one layer away from magic!” Indeed.



Stage 5: Delivery

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to completing a work of art is being overly attached to certain areas. In this collage there were two areas that I wanted to preserve and finally had to let go of to find the resolution I was looking for. The first was a tiny amber colored cross created from a two pieces of scotch tape attached to one of the collage elements at the top of the composition (see the Stage 2, bland canvas image). I could not find a way to preserve it and make it work cohesively with the entire work, so I replicated it with paint.

The other area of consternation, was the center element, an old menu from a Chicago area restaurant that I'd lightly washed with yellow paint. I loved the color and the fact that you could still see the name of the restaurant and the address, but I finally had to let it go.

The piece finally came together when I found a piece of rice paper laying nearby that I had used to practice mark-making. Gluing it directly to the now white background of the menu was my light bulb moment. Sweet relief at last!

Keys to success at this stage: Let go to receive and keep in mind that the solution may be right under your nose. When you find your own light-bulb moment, you'll be thrilled with your new baby!

