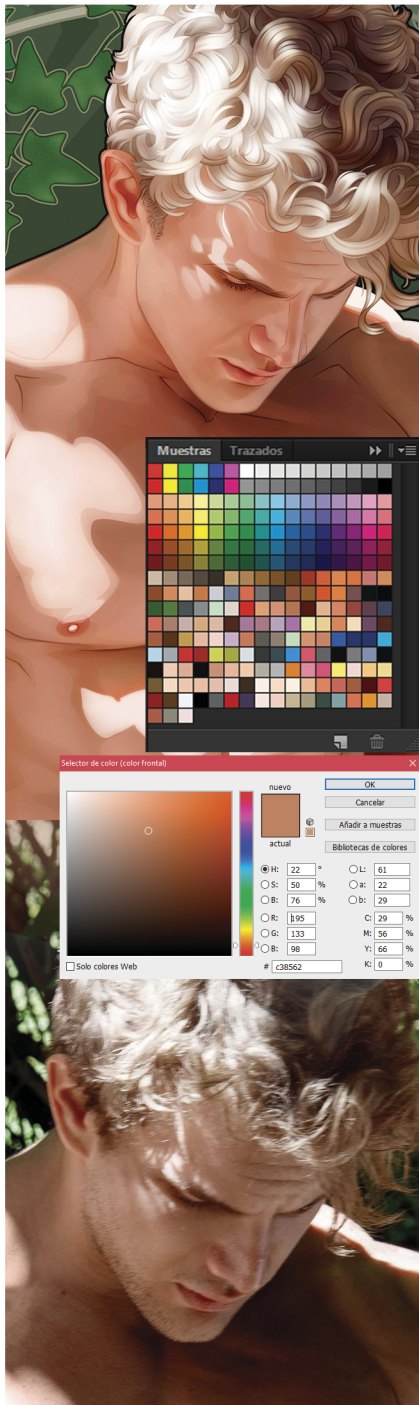


The Führer's Journal

Entry 4

May 2019

Dear reader I want to thank you for taking the time to read this journal, I'll do my best to keep it interesting... In the fourth entry I'm going to discuss the highly requested **Coloring Process**.



One of the things I get more compliments for is my coloring technique, everyone likes it, artist or not, and it's very flattering. But a very scary truth is that I don't really know how to explain my coloring process; it's never the same, I've tried to make it consistent, even write things down, but it always changes, there are some obvious factors influencing this change like the subject and purpose of the illustration, but my mood also affects the work flow, is almost impossible to keep track on all the steps, and sometimes they're not even necessary.

Take my fuhrerdoodles content for example, it's like a big art collection with a consistent style and approach, very different than what I do for my day job, if you take one of my earlier posts and compare it to the latest you can see a clear difference, but in my mind they were treated the same.

I guess is one of those things you just can't describe, I'm a self-taught artist so is difficult to explain what nobody taught me, sometimes I think I've discovered a very cool trick and then I see someone on YouTube doing it but better, and sometimes I think I'm doing something very obvious and turns out nobody heard of it before. So instead of trying to make any sense of my process I'm going to share some tips and tricks, kind of randomly but I think they can help, I know I was very happy when I first discovered them...

-The starting palette: When working on a human subject I always prioritize the most recognizable elements, like the skin, if you deliver a nice organic looking skin you can get away with very little in the other areas, like the fabrics or background, actually I always start with the skin then I'll develop the rest of the piece around it.

Many variables influence the starting colors for the skin, like ethnicity, age, the atmosphere in the artwork, and of course you want to make sure it looks "alive" so I recommend using references from the real world, make some research on the subject, get as much reference pictures as you can. I use the eyedropper tool, try to get some neutral skin tone samples, and then twitch them a little.

When I like a color sample I save it to use it again later, but try to make some variations in the hue, not all skin looks the same, remember the Gil Elvgren rule: noses, cheeks and elbows are red-ish, man's jaws are blue or gray-ish and hands are in a different jurisdiction.

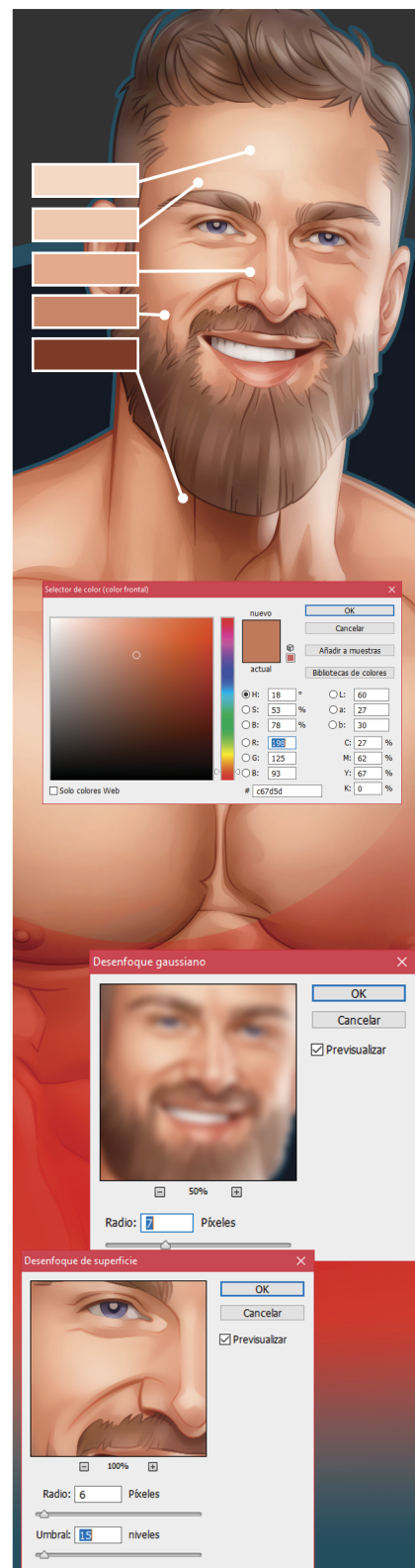
I always start with a rather unsaturated base, but not too much, we want it to be neutral enough so the high lights pop without the need of going *“too bright”* if you start with a vibrant color as your base, the end result will look very fake and unnatural, like those cartoons on the cereal box, the starting color can look a little dull at first but it'll make sense later, just look at your own skin in neutral lighting, it's not that vibrant right?.

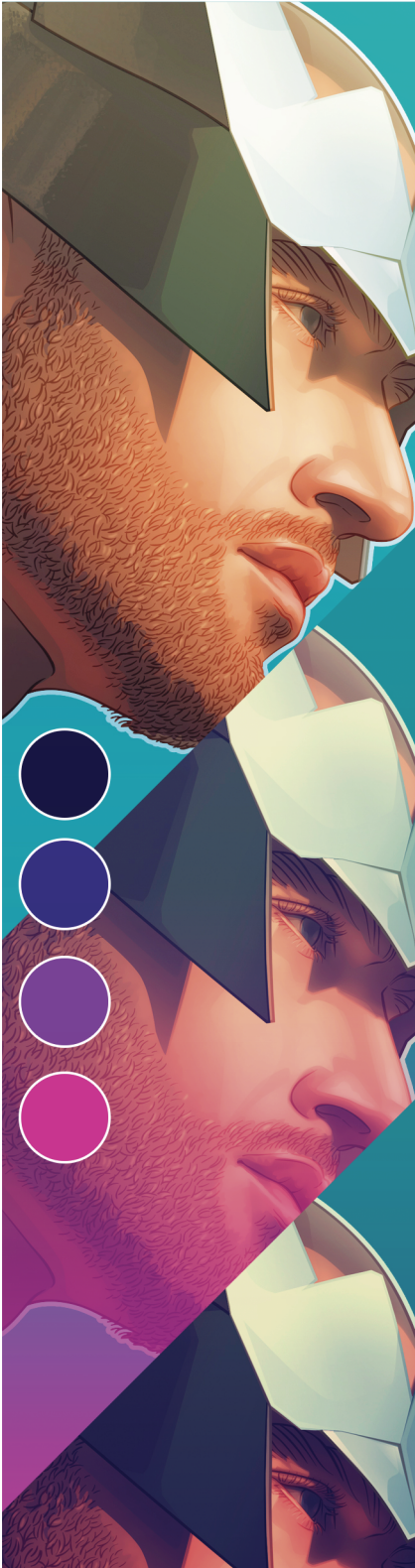
-Now move around: Once you've picked your base you can start shading and creating volume, think of it as sculpting, for the shadows I always go for a little more purple hue, the darker I go, the more saturated the color will be, the same goes for the high lights, instead of going up to the lightest shade, try move a little to the right, add some vibrancy little by little and save the lightest shade for last, also try to avoid the ever so popular *DODGE* tool, it can look nice because is adding that vibrancy and saturation at the same time that is brightening, but is very easy to overdo it, in my opinion the least you use it the best, instead try some adjustment layers...

-Level up: Have some adjustment layers that you can turn on and off, lower the opacity or merge them to the base if you need to, I always use them with masks that I create in the **Quick mask mode**, the levels adjustment layer is my favorite, I usually add the effect and then lower the opacity to 60% to get a more subtle finish. And you can heighten the heights and lower the lows as much as you want to, I personally like to go 1 or 2 points at the time.

-Mask for mask?: one thing that really change my game was to make nice, clean selections, we all have our personal way to isolate the different elements of the illustration, some people like to use the eraser tool, others prefer the lasso tool, I really like the quick mask mode, in there you can combine the lasso with the gradient tool and the eraser to create a smooth selection that will save you a lot of blending.

-Blending: I usually blend with a *transition color*, with the brush tool in a very low opacity, around 12% and 14% flow, picking up samples of the colors that I want to blend together. The *gradient tool* is very useful too, again in a very low opacity you can add some gradients to soften some hard edges, very often I'll create a selection in the quick mask mode and then use the gradient tool to add color in a very controlled smooth way, and... If you find yourself struggling to smooth out something, but you don't want to add any more colors, or the gradients make things look flat, or it seems like you're undoing all your hard work, **try this:** create a selection of the area you want to blend, then smooth the edges of the selection (command+f6 / control+f6) just to make sure is seamless; then go to the filters and try the **Gaussian blur**, start with 7% and see how it looks, I never go higher than 12%. That's my favorite one but there are many blurring filters to try and play with.





-Build it up: I like to think about my digital coloring as **watercolors**, a buildup of many translucent layers of color mixing together to create a rich, live like surface, with Photoshop we have a lot of advantages to further enhance this effect, I use a very low opacity in my brush when painting, from 9 to 17% and the flow never goes higher than 15%, also I use separate layers when I feel like I need more room to maneuver, you can have as many layers as you need and merge them together when you need to blend.

Building the color slowly gives a very polished yet organic finish to the skin, for other materials like hair, fabric or any objects; I can be more liberal and raise the opacity to 20 or 25% to save time.

-After effects: Remember that nothing is definitive, you can get some awesome results and learn a lot in the *“post-production”* stage, try using layer effects, color filters, photographic filters or any plugins that you like, I personally use the default Photoshop layer effects and the lighting FX filter, the ones the I love the most are adding a color filling layer with a dark indigo blue, then change the blending mode to *EXCLUSION* or *DIFFERENCE* and lower the opacity to 20%, it almost looks like a nostalgic Instagram filter... Try your own combinations and don't forget to duplicate layers or save dupes in case you need to merge everything to add a filter, you should always have a way to go back and compare the different versions.

-Check your values: A very important thing that I tend to omit talking about is the values; you have to make sure that the dark/light ratio is coherent by itself, when you're working with different hues and saturations the image can look very rich and colorful but flat, don't forget that we also want to create visual depth and volume, so add an adjustment layer with the Black & white effect. I just place it on top of all the other layers and I turn it on and off to check how's it looking, if you notice some areas loose depth in gray scale you can go back and fix it with the levels or curves tool.

In digital illustration/coloring there are as many methods as there are people to try them, no one has figured out an ultimate process, we all are forced to make mistakes with every new project and change our ways, so have fun with it.

Ironically as I'm writing this entry I'm feeling the urge to try something different in a couple of drawings, I'll let you know how it goes in the next one.

Thanks again for reading and don't forget to comment or message me what topics you would like to see in future entries. Take care.

Martin.