

Tuesday, June 1, 2010

How - To: Making Your Own Stamps!



(Hearts Afire, 12" x 12", hand-carved stamps on heavy watercolor paper, 2007)

Every artist needs primary source material. Primary source material is original images, sketches, drawings and photographs that the artist herself has generated without the aid of any outside sources. In other words, the shot you snapped of light reflecting off water, the sketch you made of your kitty, or the watercolor landscape you painted a few years ago is your primary source material.

Finding PSM becomes challenging (and often disheartening) if you're an artist like me who doesn't draw. I probably could draw. I've certainly doodled enough; I even took a face-painting class once and wasn't utterly mortified by my results. But generally speaking, I know next to nothing about drawing, shading, light sources and all the other mysterious, magical elements figurative artists must understand to create art capable of moving us.

That very fact alone nearly stopped me dead in my tracks years ago, when the desire for making art began to bubble inside me in earnest. I knew I needed original source material, I wanted it; from the beginning, I have been loathe to use anyone else's images or ideas in my own work. It feels wrong to me on a profound level, despite the intellectual understanding that there are "angel" companies out there that invite you to use their images, designs and artwork in your own artwork.

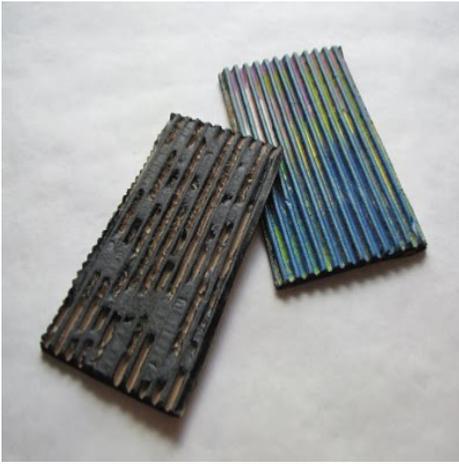
So how does an artist who can't, don't, or won't draw get original imagery into their art? Stamps, of course. And the best part is that they're easy to make, use and clean. Storing all the wonderful stamps you're likely to create in your lifetime is up to you, though- it's still something I struggle with myself!

Let's get to it. We'll start with one of the easiest and cheapest stamping materials you can use...

Corrugated Cardboard Stamps

What You'll Need:

- [3-ply corrugated cardboard](#), recycled from old boxes or purchased in cut sheets at a local shipping store.



My favorite cardboard to work with for making stamps is 3-ply, which means it has three layers of flat, brown paper sandwiched between two layers of corrugation.

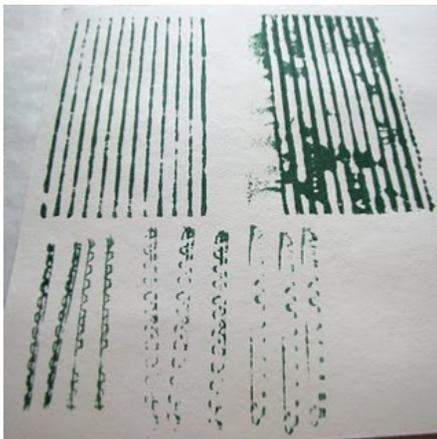
What You'll Do:

- For simple, clean line work, carefully peel off all the paper from one side of the cardboard only, revealing the corrugation underneath. For something a little messy and edgy, leave some areas of the paper intact and unearth only a little of the corrugation.

- To preserve these stamps for years (yes, literally years), paint them on all sides with a couple of thin coats of Gesso or acrylic craft paint. It will help stiffen the cardboard and also make the stamps cleanable with a slightly

damp cloth (I keep baby wipes next to me in the studio at all time for jobs like this- and don't throw them out when you're done cleaning up- treat them as any other painted textile and use them in your work!) When the stamps eventually start to break down, celebrate their noble disintegration and continue using them... these are texture tools and any texture they give is a gift.

- To use: with a craft stick load a small sponge with craft or textile paint and gently pat the paint into the stamp. (The best sponges for this are sold in the automotive department and are usually large- use scissors to cut them down to any size you want- and yellow. These sponges can be important tools in your arsenal because they stay soft when dry despite repeated usage, but can also be used very effectively when damp.)



- Press firmly onto dry or damp paper or fabric and lift straight up. If you want a less crisp image, use your sponge to blur the image a little, rubbing over it very lightly until you're satisfied.

- Try using the backs and the edges of your cardboard stamp, too!

- And for something really fun, cut out simple shapes from cardstock or copy paper and place them down on the paper or fabric you're going to stamp. Load your stamp with paint as described above and then stamp on top of the shapes. The shapes will probably stick to the stamp, so peel them off, turn them over onto your fabric, and use them to take a "monoprint"!



To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth

Continuous Roller Stamps



Some of my favorite stamps to make and use are continuous roller stamps. A continuous roller stamp can be made out of any sturdy cylindrical object (except glass, please- safety first!)

What You'll Need:

- "Fun Foam" self-adhesive sheets
- "Fun Foam" self-adhesive shapes (sold in buckets in the childrens' aisle at the craft store.
- Scissors, sharp craft or utility knife, hole punches with various shapes.
- Cardboard mailing tubes, old acrylic brayers and rollers (used for rolling out poly clay), recycled lint rollers, wallpaper seam rollers, even old rolling pins from the thrift store!

What You'll Do:

- Make sure your roller is free of dust and lint by wiping with a damp cloth.



- For pre-cut shapes: peel the paper backing off the shape, exposing the adhesive, and press onto your roller in any pattern or configuration you like. Press firmly to ensure adhesion. I know it seems like these little foam bits will never remain stuck to your roller stamp, and on rare occasions one will pop off, but in general they adhere incredibly well and will stay put for years of usage.

- For fun foam self-adhesive sheets, simply cut any shape you like and stick it to your roller, pressing firmly. You can get remarkably fine detail and narrow shapes with the foam if you cut it with a very sharp blade.

- For use with hole punches, simply cut off a piece of fun foam from a sheet and start punching holes into it. Preserve each small piece as it comes out of the punch, peel the backing off each one, and firmly press them onto your roller.





- I use tweezers to pull the release paper off the back of the fun foam shapes. And if getting the tiny shapes out of your hole punch is as much as a challenge for you as it always is for me, use a pair of pliers to snap off the "lid" of the chamber that holds the scraps.

And don't forget to save the fun foam out of which you punched your shapes! Adhere it to a piece of cardboard or foamcore and you have a whole other stamp!

- To "ink" these stamps up, load a dry sponge with paint as described above and then "roller" over it until your stamp is wet with paint.



To Clean: roller gently on a damp cloth

Foam Printing Plates



What You'll Need:

- Scrap foam core board OR,
- Recycled styrene meat plates
- Pencil or ball-point pen
- Sharp craft or utility knife

What You'll Do:

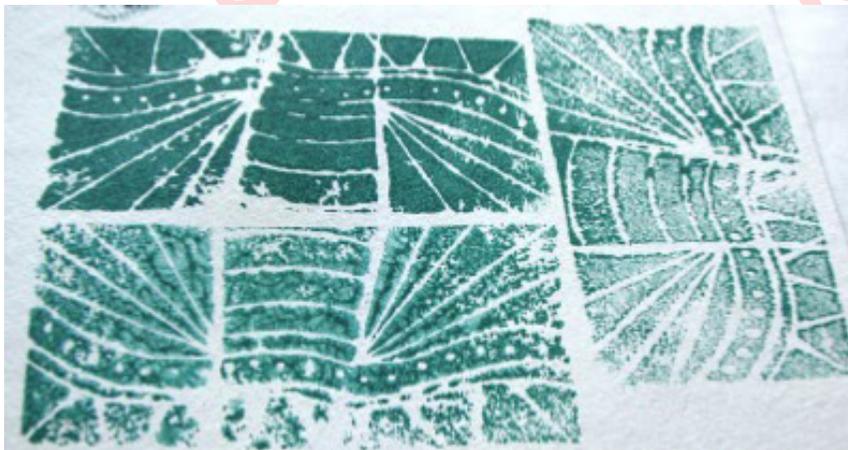
- If using foam core (recommended for its durability and strength), cut a piece the size of the stamp you want to carve and remove the paper from ONE side only of the foam core. If the paper is stubborn, you can soak it with a little water, but usually the paper just peels right off. You'll be cutting into the foam side of your altered foam core board.



- If using a foam meat plate (the kind the grocery stores use under hamburger meat and steaks, etc), cut the plate to the desired size.

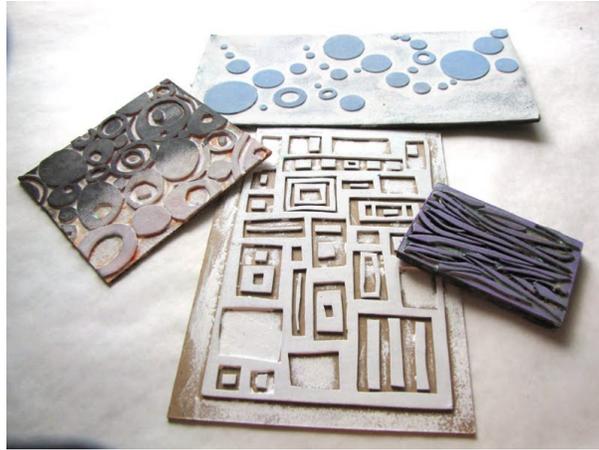
- Once your foam plate or foam core board is prepared, use a pen or pencil to lightly score the surface of the foam in the design you want. You can do this freehand, or you can print your favorite design on copy paper, cut it to the same size as your foam plate and hold it on top of the plate and score lightly through the lines into the foam below. If using a template, remove it and using your score lines as a guide, carefully cut with the craft knife into the foam along your score lines, deepening them. Be very careful not to cut all the way through the foam core paper backing or the stamp may fall apart!

- Load with paint and stamp!



To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth

Foam Core And Fun Foam Stamp



What You'll Need:

- foam core board, OR heavy cardboard, OR heavy bookboard, cut to any size and shape you like
- self-adhesive fun foam in pre-cut shapes or sheets
- sharp scissors or craft knife

What You'll Do:

- When using pre-cut shapes, press shapes firmly onto form core board or cardboard. That's it!
- Remember: you can cut up the pre-cut shapes and configure them in any way you like- a heart doesn't have to be a heart, it can be a curvy abstract shape... and large shapes can be "hollowed out" by cutting into them with a sharp craft knife and removing some of the foam!
- When using sheets of fun foam, cut any shape or design you like, and press them firmly to the foam core board or cardboard.
- If you like, you can prime these stamps with Gesso to help with their longevity, but I've always found that just using them with acrylic paints is enough to strengthen them.

To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth

Foam Core and Hot Glue Stamps:



What You'll Need:

- **Foam Core Board** or Cardboard
- **Hot Glue Gun** (low melt is also fine)

What You'll Do:

- Cut foam core or cardboard to any shape and size.
- Heat hot glue gun and load with a glue stick. (NEVER TOUCH THE BUSINESS END OF A GLUE GUN WHEN IT'S HOT!)
- If you prefer, sketch or transfer a design on the foam core.
- Once the glue is molten and flowing easily, slowly trace your sketch lines, or free-hand a design in glue onto the foam core.
- Let cool until set and use!

To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth

Magic Foam Stamps



What You'll Need:

- **Magic Foam Sheets** OR Magic Foam Shapes (Please note! This is NOT the same product as Fun Foam! Magic Foam and Fun Foam are NOT interchangeable!)
- **Craft Heat Gun**
- **Sharp Scissors**
- **rubber bands**, twist ties, bubble wrap, plastic mesh, or anything you can think of!



What You'll Do:

- If cutting Magic Foam sheets, use sharp scissors to create any size or shape you like.
- On a solid surface, arrange your rubber bands or other items in whatever way pleases you.

- CAREFULLY warm the Magic Foam with the heat gun. I move the heat around on the Magic Foam for about 30 seconds.
- Without delay, press into your arranged items with the warmed side of the foam. Hold the foam in place, keeping steady, strong pressure on it without shifting it around (which would create hesitant, insipid marks), for about 20-30 seconds.
- Lift Magic Foam off arranged items. Your stamp is now ready to use.



- The wonderful thing about this product is that when it's re-warmed, the impression on it will disappear, leaving you with a fresh surface on which to impress another design! They can be re-used like this endlessly.
- Try impressing the magic foam with one of your own carved stamps for a reverse image!



- Here I started with an old Magic Foam impression I was ready to change. I heated the foam and pressed it into the wood block stamp. Voila! A new stamp!

To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth

Wood Block And Fun Foam Stamps

What You'll Need:

- plywood scraps in any shape or size
- Fun Foam self-adhesive sheets or shapes
- Sharp craft blade



What You'll Do:

- If using foam shapes, simply place the shapes in any configuration you like. The stamp is ready to use!
- If using foam sheets, peel the release paper off the back to reveal the adhesive and adhere to the wood block. The wood doesn't need to be sanded or primed for this, but it should be dust-free.
- Carve into the foam, creating any design or shape you like, and peel off any unwanted pieces of foam. This will dull your blade after a while so if you're doing a large stamp, you may need to change blades!



- If at any time you want to change your image (and I've even done this YEARS after creating a stamp), use a new, sharp blade and cut away any of the image you don't want. Peel off the unwanted bits and discard.

To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth.

MasterCarve Stamps



What You'll Need:

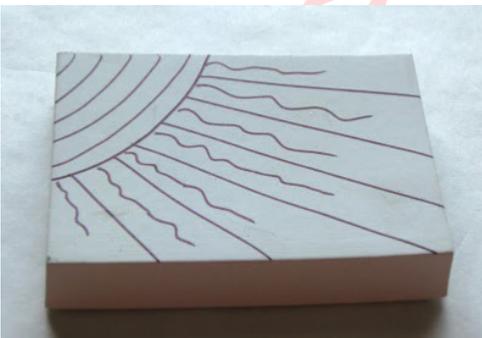
- **MasterCarve** Artist Carving Blocks, OR Lino Printing Blocks, OR inexpensive gum erasers in any size or shape.
- **Carving tools** or a sharp craft knife.

What You'll Do:

- Sketch or transfer an image to the Carving block using pencil or pen.

- **IMPORTANT!** Read the material packaged with your cutting tools to learn how to change blades safely! They are incredibly sharp tools that can cut very deeply, very quickly!

- Using a "V-shaped" cutting blade and being very careful to always PUSH the tool away from you rather than pulling it towards you, sink the blade into the rubber block and begin carving. If you want to print an image of the negative space around your design, cut along the lines. If you want a positive image of your design, cut outside the lines and remove all excess material.



-(Here, of course, I carved a stamp to print the negative space around my design.)

- If you want to carve letters and words, be sure to transfer the design (or sketch it) onto your block backwards!

To Clean: wipe gently with a damp cloth.

Helpful Tips

- Take care of your stamps, but don't obsess about keeping every speck of paint or ink off of them. The more acrylic that builds on them, the more interesting the texture they produce. Just keep the negative spaces clear of paint build-up!

- I demo'd all these stamps on white paper, but they work beautifully on fabric, as well- even already printed commercial fabrics!

- Try spritzing your paint-loaded stamp (or even your paint-loaded sponge) with a little water and see what kind of image you get.

- Try **NOT** re-loading your stamp with paint in between impressions. Some of the neatest texture comes from stamps that have almost no paint on them.

-Do NOT worry if you don't get crisp, clear images on every stamp- the idea is to add texture and build layers with these stamps. If you want clean images, go for it, but mostly, use these freely and stress as little as possible about making something "perfect".

- Layer your stamping and change colors frequently. Work intuitively and with a sense of fun and curiosity.

- Create masks with cut shapes, flat items, or masking tape and stamp on TOP of them. When you remove the masks, you'll have interesting effects.

- Use your stamps with thickened MX dyes on soda-soaked, dry fabric.

- Play, have fun and worry less- you can't make mistakes here because all you're really looking for are more tools in your arsenal that create depth and texture with paint, dyes and ink!

I hope this tutorial helps to fire your imagination. The possibilities for stamp creation are endless, once you realize that nearly everything can be turned into a stamp!

Happy stamping!

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