

DIGITAL ALCHEMY

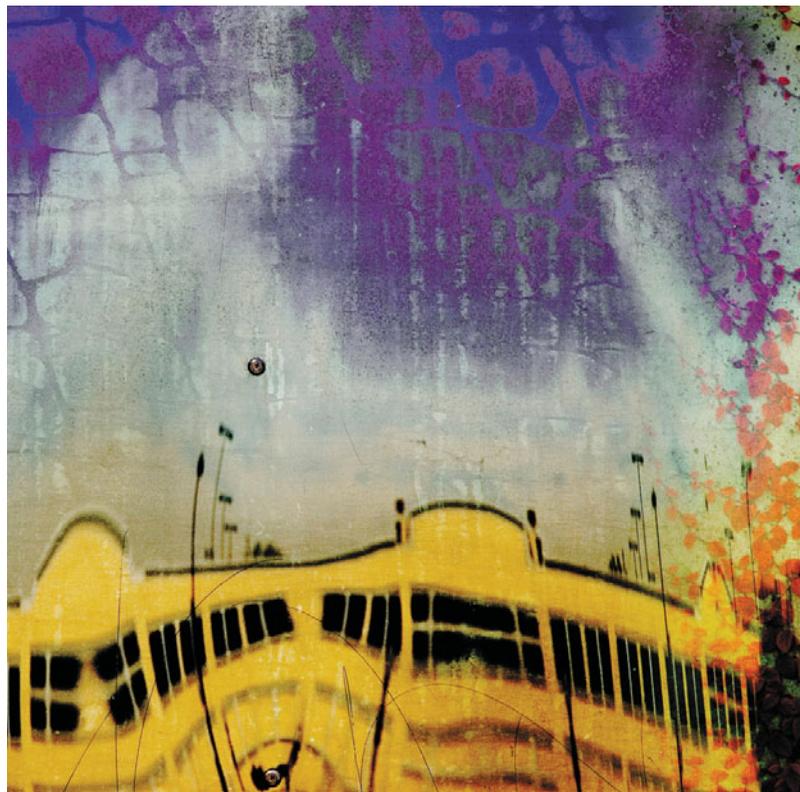
Printmaking techniques for fine art, photography, and mixed media

Bonny Pierce Lhotka



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**New
Riders** VOICES THAT MATTER™

Digital Alchemy: Printmaking techniques for fine art, photography, and mixed media

Bonny Pierce Lhotka

New Riders

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This book is dedicated to my mom and dad, who are no longer here to see it reach completion. Their creativeness in finding value in junkyards, collecting useful ephemera, and frugality learned during a lifetime of running a small business have directly impacted who I am today. Thanks Mom and Dad—this one's for you.

About the Author



Bonny Lhotka graduated from Bradley University in 1964, where she majored in painting and printmaking. In 1986, she added a Macintosh computer to her studio tools, and today continues her innovation with new approaches to her work.

Her artwork is commissioned by, or is included in, several hundred collections including Consumer Electronics Association, Lucent Technologies, United Airlines, Johnson Space Center, Vestas, Crickett, Qwest, U.S. Department of State, Charles Schwab, the City of Denver, Wells Fargo, The Boeing Company, American Society of Clinical Oncology, and a large number of private collections. Her work is shown internationally and appears in numerous books and articles featuring experimental media. She is listed in *Who's Who in American Art* and *Who's Who of American Women*.

In 1997, Bonny organized “Digital Atelier: A printmaking studio for the 21st century” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and was an Artist-in-Residence there for 21 days. She is the recipient of the Smithsonian/Computerworld Technology in the Arts Award.

Bonny worked with a group of curators to help them envision the potential of digital printmaking in “Media for a New Millennium,” a work-tank/think-shop organized by the Vinalhaven Graphic Arts Foundation. As one of three artists of the Digital Atelier, Bonny was invited by Marilyn Kushner of the Brooklyn Art Museum to show a selection of work and demonstrate how to create and combine original digital prints with traditional printmaking and photographic processes.

Over the past decade, Bonny has continued her work as an experimental artist, inventing new processes, materials and technologies, and combining them with classic fine art materials and techniques. Aside from many one-artist exhibitions, she is in demand as a speaker, educator, author, and artist. Recently, she has worked with major corporations to explore fine art applications for their products. Within this book, Bonny assembles a collection of those techniques that you can add to your own studio.

Artist Statement

Time is a fluid medium to be manipulated the same as paint. My art explores the continuum of time. I gather images by looking closely at them in an historical aspect. I look for surfaces that reflect the passage of time. Creating the equivalents in paint and pixels is a process of exploration as I allow the spontaneous layers of painting to dictate the direction of each piece. By layering images, I integrate meanings that invoke a response by the viewer. By looking at the past and responding intuitively, I explore the future by applying knowledge of the present. I use deep rich color to express my excitement over the process of creativity. I reinterpret everyday objects from the past and present to create new meaning. Some of these objects are from flea markets or the remains of my own earlier work.

Through life, I gather memories and communicate my emotional response through the use of textural surfaces, real and implied. My art is a continuum. It is a non-identical reflection of who I am. Each day adds to and changes my past. My art is who I am. Without it I would cease to exist. It is a passionate and compelling reason to live. It is the excitement of not knowing what new image will appear that takes me to the studio. Each day is a gift. I paint for myself and hope someone else gets my message. It is like sending a message to the universe hoping someone will see.



Acknowledgments

This book is the product of many years of my own research and development, but it wouldn't have happened without the additional efforts of a great team standing behind me.

I'd first like to thank my son Doug Lhotka, who took my rough thoughts and shaped them into a logical whole that I could submit to Peachpit Press. He kept me focused on organizing 20 years of experiments and inventions, and kept me from adding new ones as we were writing. He knows my work and how I think, and he has always been an honest sounding board (and great ghost writer) for my creations. Without his help, advice, and attention to detail, this book would not be in your hands.

Doug and I would both like to thank Jan Seymour, Nikki McDonald, Glenn Bisignani, Mimi Heft, Hilal Sala, Kim Scott, and the rest of the Peachpit crew. They took our manuscript and turned it into the gorgeous book you hold in your hands. Their efforts made this a wonderful creative process, and I've learned to respect their talents and advice.

The enclosed DVD was a collaboration with my son Greg Lhotka. As a sound engineer, he was invaluable in providing his editing skills for the entire suite of DVDs, which formed a foundation for this book. His passionate response to my work has been a source of joy throughout my career.

My husband Joe has been incredibly supportive over the years, and understands when the kitchen blender disappears into the studio, or the garage fills up with found treasures!

I continue to be thankful that I started experimenting with this technology in the early 1990s. Since then, many corporations have provided access to their software, hardware, printers, lasers, and materials to experiment on. I'd like to thank Adobe Systems, Hewlett-Packard, Encad, Epson, Mutoh, Roland DG Corporation, and Universal Laser Systems, among many others. Please check the book's website (www.digitalalchemybook.com) for links to the products that I've used—those companies directly supported the creation of these processes.

Since those early days, I've been blessed by my fellow founders of Digital Atelier, Dorothy Simpson Krause and Karin Schminke. From collaborating on processes, to participating in our tenure at the Smithsonian, I value their passion, minds, and friendship. Without their participation, paintable inkjet precoats would not be on the market today.



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Preface

The Value of Atoms *or* Print is Dead—Long Live Print

Alexis Gerard

I first came across Bonny's work in the fall of 1999 on the floor of the late lamented Seybold show—in those days *the* place to be in order to see the very latest in printing technology. Whereas a bevy of other exhibits, mostly from printer manufacturers, strove mightily to demonstrate that digital printers could at last match the quality of photographic printing (in fact they could not—yet), Bonny and her Digital Atelier colleagues Dorothy Simpson Krause and Karin Schminke were showing something completely different: stunning prints of images that appeared to extend both forward and backward from the two dimensional plane, achieved through a pioneering combination of digital printing and lenticular technology. They were, without a doubt, the highlight of the show from my standpoint.

Eleven years later, the significance of that exhibit stands out in (pardon the pun) even greater relief. The ability for digital printers to match traditional photographic output is now beyond question. The broader picture, however, is that the ability of print to simply display a two-dimensional image is, for the most part, rapidly becoming irrelevant.

Ever since the invention of paper, its purpose has been simply to display markings—text or images—better than any other physical support. Today, it is being supplanted in that basic role by billions of web-enabled displays. Their viewing quality can, for all mainstream uses, match paper. They're also capable of displaying moving images, and they are infinitely "reusable" with new content. It started, of course, with personal computers, but the real driving factor is the advent of smart phones. Just a few days ago Apple and Google announced they are each activating over 200,000 new devices *per day*. And the trend toward electronic viewing will further accelerate now that Apple has dreamed up and successfully implemented the right concept for a tablet, whose larger screen makes it much more suitable for image viewing—with competitors sure to follow.

Much as film, once the uncontested medium for recording images, is now largely relegated to one-time-use cameras, with digital cameras becoming the mainstream instrument for capturing photographs, physical printing—or hard copy, as it's called in the technology industry—is being displaced as the mainstream method of displaying images by electronic displays which show virtual—not

physical—images. Physical displays where the image is not separable from its support are in effect becoming what could be called *one-time-use displays*. And that is where a stunning transformation, one that can indeed be called a *Digital Alchemy*, occurs: Far from becoming obsolete as a result of these trends, physical printing is taking on a whole new dimension of value that is based, precisely, on its physical, tangible, non-virtual nature.

To understand how and why, we need to step back and examine a key distinction the digital age has introduced in our lives: That between atoms and bits. MIT Media Lab head Nicholas Negroponte, who popularized the notion in his best-selling *Being Digital* book, cites an anecdote where, when visiting the headquarters of a large electronics corporation, he is asked by the receptionist to declare the specifics of the laptop he's carrying with him—model, serial number, and value. “Roughly, between one and two million dollars,” I said. ‘Oh, that cannot be, sir,’ she replied. ‘What do you mean? Let me see it.’ I showed her my old PowerBook and she estimated its value at \$2,000. She wrote down that amount and I was allowed to enter the premises. The point is that while the atoms were not worth that much, the bits were almost priceless.”

Just as the value of information—a virtual entity—can be completely divorced from the value of the hardware that carries it, an object such as a print can acquire, by virtue of its physical medium, a value that goes far beyond that of the image it displays. The property that is rising to the fore is *object-ness*, which can confer tremendous value if cultivated with technique and artistic sensibility. Bonny's work and her teachings are once again at the leading edge of that transformation.

Eleven years after the Seybold show I mentioned in my opening sentence, Bonny's lenticular prints, which have evolved as new software techniques and hardware materials have become available, are still state of the art: they can't be matched by any electronic display commercially available today. And she has pushed into fascinating and powerful techniques that enable printing on metal, wood, linen, marble, plexiglas, and other materials, thereby creating beautiful hard-copy objects where the substrate and the process are equal partners with the image in creating value. These techniques are the universe whose door is opened by this book.

About Alexis Gerard

After holding executive positions in new technologies marketing with Apple Computer throughout the 1980s, Alexis Gerard founded imaging think-tank Future Image, Inc. in 1991. From 1997 to 1998, he also held the positions of president and executive director of the Digital Imaging Group (DIG), an industry consortium founded by Adobe, Canon, Eastman Kodak, Fuji, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intel, Live Picture, and Microsoft to promote the growth of digital imaging, now merged into the International Imaging Industry Association. Gerard chaired the inaugural conference of the Digital Imaging Marketing Association (1995), then launched the Mobile Imaging Executive Summit (2003), now renamed the 6Sight® Future of Imaging executive conference. He is co-author of *Going Visual: Using Images to Enhance Productivity, Decision Making and Profits* (Wiley, 2005). His opinions have been quoted at various times in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *International Herald Tribune*, *USA Today*, *Financial Times*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, and other leading business and technology publications.

A passionate photographer since his twenties, Gerard is a member of the International Advisory Council of the George Eastman House. His photography has been published in *JPG Magazine*, and in *Photo Op: 52 Weekly Ideas for Creative Image-Making* (Focal Press, 2010).

Foreword

Alchemy for Everyone^{© 2010}

Dr. Carol Pulin

Bonny Lhotka's transfer prints are absolutely magnificent. That's a direct visual observation. Her subjects drawn from the natural world, from garden views to the close-up of a particular plant or the configuration of a flower, turn into richly detailed artworks of sophisticated beauty enhanced by their clear, modern presentation. Glittery postmodern architectural structures become gorgeous odes to the interplay of light. The relationship between the picture and its expression seems perfect every time. Bonny uses her response to the scene, her attention to memories that affect its emotional meaning, to determine the composition. Her excitement in developing contemporary ways to communicate that impression shows. The intellectual meaning reveals links to past and present, the progression of time, and a particular, defined location. Her combinations of traditional and experimental techniques, of illusion (the printed image) and reality (the art object), balance perfectly.

I'm a print curator. Why am I so passionate about these artworks based largely on photographic imagery? It isn't just that the images have been manipulated in ways that change the expression from capturing and reproducing a specific delimited segment of the real world into an expression of the artist's view of it as reflected in the continuum of her own life and work. For me, it's inextricably bound up with symbolic and conceptual theories about the way our minds process content, transferring spontaneous impressions onto the background of previous experiences, creating the intricately layered prints that are our memories. Similarly, Bonny's reworking of her photographic files reveals her printmaker's aesthetic—the mark-making, the quality of line, the shading and modeling, the graphic expression of values. Add the complexity of layers of translucent and opaque color to control the compositional emphasis, and you'll begin to see the reasons why I'm immediately drawn to these works, and why I come back to them again and again. But the most significant reason is how the transfer—for me, the essential quality of all printmaking—visibly alters the imagery, style, form, and meaning, the synthesis that creates a successful work of art. Bonny's creation of new transfer techniques allows the distinctive characteristics of printmaking to enrich both drawn and photographic

imagery, both traditional and digital, with a wonderfully expanded range of materials, and the results really do expand the idea of print.

Computer languages evolved quickly from binary code to a graphical interface, and output from magnetic tape and punch cards to pen plotters capturing diagrams. Dot matrix, laser, and inkjet printers soon followed with color in dye and pigment inks. Jagged, pointillist blocks of color resolved into smaller and smaller pixels until the ink droplets became too fine to see. Yet artists, curators, and connoisseurs who saw the potential for computers in printmaking still complained about the sameness of the slick surface on the only useable papers. We missed the toothy textures of hand-made sheets and the swirling fibers of Oriental papers. We missed the ink standing up from the incised lines of an intaglio plate, floating over the surface from a litho, flooded through a screen, pressed deeply below the surface by a relief block. We missed the grain of the wood itself pressing its texture into the sheet; the contrast between areas flattened to silky smooth and the velvet of ink absorbed into the pricked fibers from a drypoint or mezzotint. Relatively recently, inkjet printers improved to accept somewhat thicker and rougher paper and other types of sheets. Now, Bonny shows you processes to transfer ink to a full range of papers using release films and gels, and what's more, she has also developed techniques and environmentally-safe chemistry to let printmakers transfer imagery to porous and nonporous materials of almost any shape.

No wonder artists want to know, "How did she do that?" It's alchemy, the construction of all complex entities from the simplest parts. Yes, the ancient alchemists sought to identify the most basic elements (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water) and explain their transformation into all the materials of the world. Later alchemists who tried to turn lead into gold kept their work secret, knowing that gold would still glitter but not be as valuable if easy to come by. Printmakers, on the other hand, are among the most sharing people in the world—right up there with gardeners, who readily share seeds that will magically transform into a whole world of plants. Bonny not only answers those people who ask about her techniques and materials, she actively seeks to disseminate information. She knows that no two printmakers will interpret an image in the same way, so that each person using these methods will create notably different works of art. And that's the fun part, seeing what different artists do with these media, how their personalities and styles alter their viewpoint and how they use transfer techniques to infuse those interpretations into their prints.

Some of you come to this book looking for a way to create on paper (or cloth, wood, metal, plastic, etc.) a print that actually has the characteristics you already see

in your mind's eye. Other artists want the techniques to spark their imagination and inspire them to see their pictures in new ways. In either case, remember that the greatest joys in printmaking come from letting the printmaking process itself inform the work. Each method brings with it a different set of qualities, a resonance with the materials that changes the appearance of marks and lines, colors, textures, even the reflectivity of light. Each affects the additive layers differently, requires compromises that strengthen the composition or expand the options. Each offers ways to turn a straight "realistic" photograph into your own personal commentary, or change a drawing from a depiction of shapes into an exploration of the qualities of marks. The more you think of the transfer as an essential aspect of the creation of the artwork, the more you think like a printmaker, the more you'll transform the captured image into your own individual, freely translated expression of personal and universal values.

So now it's up to you as artists. To learn the craft so that you can count on these techniques in your toolbox, and in fact be ready to experiment with them to invent new methods that allow your images to appear as you imagine them. You need to consider which type of transfer will modify your initial photograph to focus attention on the reflective surface that first caught your eye, or echo the shimmer by incorporating mirror or metal. Altering a grainy texture by manipulating the resolution can play just right against a surface that is actually smoother or rougher, waxy or pitted. Or maybe it's a question of echoing the deep rich color of a backlit leaf by transferring ink to a transparent substrate, then adding softly translucent or darkly opaque layers. And then there's the whole realm of atmospheric effects on the dry, chalky surface of fresco. The combinations of printed ink and actual textures are endless, allowing the subject and object to interact in the real world.

I'm eager to see the variety of expression, the pairing of message and imagery, the synergy of ideas and materials, that each individual artist will develop using these exciting printmaking techniques.

About Dr. Carol Pulin

Dr. Pulin is director of the American Print Alliance, a consortium of non-profit printmakers' councils in the United States and Canada. She is also editor of *Contemporary Impressions*, the journal of the American Print Alliance. Dr. Pulin has previously published articles and written about Bonny Lhotka and the other artists in the Digital Atelier, Dorothy Simpson Krause and Karin Schminke; see the index for *Contemporary Impressions* at www.PrintAlliance.org.

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4

INTRODUCTION TO GEL AND SUPERSAUCE

Until recently, artists could use Polaroid transfers to create a unique form of art. A Polaroid transfer is created by developing the image, peeling off the backing, and then applying the image to a paper substrate—transferring the photo emulsion to the paper. The artist was then free to alter the image as desired. Unfortunately, with the demise of Polaroid film this technique is largely unavailable to most artists, so I set out to develop alternatives. The result gave me processes that keep the emulsion liquid for long enough to manipulate it, much like what was possible with the Polaroid film.

For these alternative processes, you'll use mediums containing alcohol to dissolve and encapsulate the inks as they move from the transfer film to the substrate.

One of the transfer mediums is alcohol gel, and is used as-is out of the alcohol gel container. It's ideal for use on porous waterleaf paper. With the other transfer medium, SuperSauce, you add the alcohol to it and you can then apply it to most any surface you choose.

Alcohol Gel

HINT: Stick with brand-name Purell, as I've found that generic brands may or may not work. It's not worth the risk of failed transfers and ruined substrates.

Alcohol gel is most commonly known as hand sanitizer. I was grounded once on an airplane in Chicago during a thunderstorm and was so bored I started reading the labels on the things in my purse. The ingredient list on the bottle of Purell Instant Hand Sanitizer gave me an idea that, since it contains alcohol, it might be a good solvent for inkjet inks. On arriving home, I gave it a try, and just as I surmised it worked wonderfully as a transfer medium. In Chapter 5, I'll show you this alcohol



FIGURE 4.1 Alcohol gel remains liquid on a nonporous surface.



FIGURE 4.2 Choose a paper that quickly and evenly absorbs the alcohol gel.

gel process. Since it's so easy, everyone who works with it likes this process, and it's a great foundation process to start down the road of alternative printing techniques.

One of this gel's properties is that if you put it on your hands, it almost immediately disappears, but if you squirt it on a nonporous surface at room temperature, it will remain there for quite some time. Therefore, make sure you always wear protective gloves when you work with it. In addition, you'll want to use a roller, old credit card, or soft scraper to spread it on your substrate—that'll further help keep it from evaporating too quickly (**Figure 4.1**).

***CAUTION:** Alcohol gel contains, well, alcohol. Make sure you have sufficient ventilation, and don't dry these prints in direct sunlight or under heat.*

The transfer works best on waterleaf paper, like the easy-to-find Arches 88. If you dip this paper into water, it immediately absorbs the moisture and tears very easily. That's what allows the alcohol gel to soak into the paper quickly and evenly. You can also use Arches hot press paper, but it takes longer to absorb the alcohol gel. You can pre-soak several pieces and store them in a plastic bag. As long as the bag is sealed and kept in a cool area, the paper can last for weeks (**Figure 4.2**).

Many other printmaking papers are also waterleaf, and will work as long as they are smooth to allow good contact with the film. The new eco-friendly bamboo papers from Legion Paper work very well with this process. Bamboo is a highly renewable resource, and is the fastest growing plant on earth—up to 3 to 4 feet per day. I'm starting to use this paper in my own work with great success.

SuperSauce

I originally developed DASS SuperSauce as an inexpensive way to do proofing while using flatbed printers at print shops. But it's turned out to be a great medium in many ways including creating an image that resembles a Polaroid emulsion transfer. You can use *SuperSauce* to transfer an image to nearly any flat surface that you can imagine (compared to the alcohol gel that needs an absorbent surface). SuperSauce Concentrate is sometimes used as a primer, and then activated with the SuperSauce Solution (usually on nonporous surfaces). Other times you just apply the solution directly (usually on porous surfaces). I've since discovered that SuperSauce allows you to collage images directly onto canvas, paper, metal, or even walls! It works great up to about 3' x 4' by yourself, but for anything larger you'll probably want an assistant.

Instructions for applying the SuperSauce are different for each type of substrate and are covered in Chapters 6–8. We'll use SuperSauce as a transfer medium on a variety of surfaces including metal, plastic, wood, paper, and fabric. Included on the next page is the procedure for making a solution from the concentrate. As always, be sure to read through the entire procedure before you begin. And remember to work in a well-ventilated area away from heat and any ignition source. These steps are also included on the enclosed DVD.

CAUTION: *Never pour left-over SuperSauce Solution down the drain. If it picks up any water, it will form a thick glob and clog the plumbing. Instead, while working outside, pour the solution on newspaper, let it evaporate, and then place the dry newspaper in with your solid trash. Leave the solution's jar open until dry, and then put it in the trash, along with the brush. Do not attempt to wash and save the jar or the brush.*

HEALING LAYER

After you've made a SuperSauce transfer to a nonporous surface and have let it dry completely, you may notice some surface imperfections. You can carefully apply another layer of SuperSauce Solution to the image using a sponge brush, which will heal and fix most minor problems. Note, however, that this is different from using the solution as a postcoat (see Chapter 22).



FIGURE 4.3 Add the concentrate to the alcohol—not the reverse!



FIGURE 4.4 A jar of SuperSauce Solution ready for use.

CAUTION: Isopropyl alcohol and SuperSauce Solution are flammable. Follow all safety instructions on the alcohol and SuperSauce Concentrate labels, and only store the products or work with them in a well-ventilated area away from heat or ignition sources. Label all your jars and keep well away from children and pets.

HINT: Never add water to the solution—otherwise the solution will turn gummy, and you'll ruin the batch.

To make SuperSauce Solution from SuperSauce Concentrate:

Make sure to wear eye protection and appropriate gloves as well as a respirator if you're sensitive to alcohol.

1. Pour a 16-ounce bottle of 91 percent (70 or 99 percent will not work) isopropyl alcohol into a dry, wide-mouth 1-quart glass canning jar.
2. Shake the SuperSauce Concentrate, and then add 4 level tablespoons to the alcohol. Do not put the concentrate in the jar first—you must *add* it to the alcohol (**Figure 4.3**).
3. As you pour the concentrate in, you'll notice that it gets lumpy and falls to the bottom of the jar. Stir the solution right away, and then tightly cap the jar.
4. Cover the jar with a disposable cloth (in case it leaks) and gently shake the solution every 30 minutes for the first four hours. If you can't do this, it will dissolve overnight on its own. When fully dissolved, the solution will appear as a thin, slightly translucent syrup (**Figure 4.4**).
5. Place the supplied SuperSauce Solution label on the jar. Keep the solution stored in the jar with the lid tightly closed to keep the alcohol from evaporating. If you place a piece of plastic wrap or sandwich bag between the lid and the jar, it will be easier to open. If it thickens over time, you can add additional alcohol and re-mix the solution.

HINT: In this section's process chapters, we'll apply the solution with a sponge brush. I recommend storing the brush in a second jar, along with enough 91 percent isopropyl alcohol to cover the brush. If you attempt to wash it in water, it'll turn gummy and ruin the brush. Make sure you label the storage jar, too!

Conclusion

As I'm writing this chapter in late 2010, I'm still investigating all the potential uses for SuperSauce. **Figure 4.5** shows the SuperSauce used over an acrylic painting lift-off technique using aluminum as the substrate. This uses a technique that isn't ready to include here, but I thought it might generate some inspiration to do your own experimenting!



FIGURE 4.5 Created using an experimental technique with SuperSauce, this 24" x 24" piece is titled *Wizard*.

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