Building a picture: *Twilight swim*

The idea for Twilight Swim begins with a postcard from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The card depicts a simple mannequin modeling a silk dress and long gloves from the museum's collection. "It is a very simple gown that was like a blank canvas," says Taylor, recalling what drew her to this particular costume. "And it's also light, which is kind of unusual, because in the old tintype photos I have, everything is dark, black, or formal looking."

FIGURE 3.5 V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Taylor knows she wants to make an image of a woman standing in water, a concept she's worked with often in the past. "I like the idea of people dealing with their environment in a strange way," she says. "There's no one single meaning behind it. It could be with the sense of being a fish out of water, or that you're in an unfamiliar environment. It puts a different psychological spin on the image of the person, I guess. And in this case I want to revisit that idea."

Taylor scans the postcard into her computer and begins trimming the image of the dress from its background. Easy enough to do, given the simplicity of the picture. Next, she uses Photoshop's eraser tool to remove the woman's head from the figure.

With a rudimentary protagonist in place, it's time to begin building the background of the image. Like most of Taylor's backgrounds, creating this one will be a complex process ultimately involving a composite of seven layered images of water

FIGURE 3.6

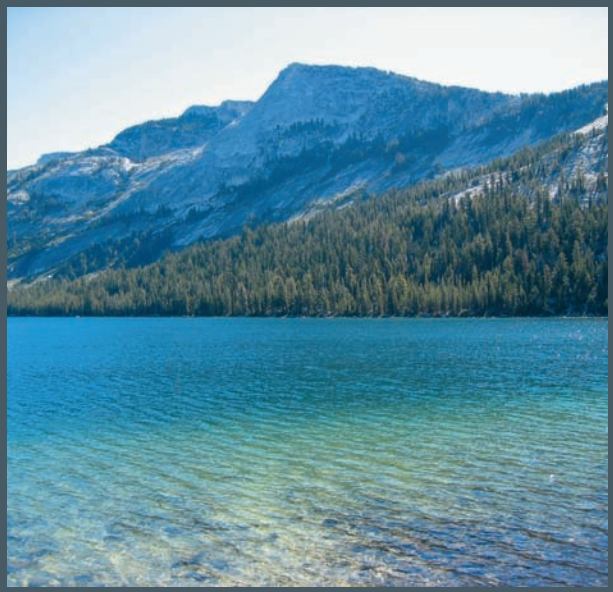


FIGURE 3.7

FIGURE 3.8

photographs and several images of clouds and sky.

"I took one of these images of clouds with my digital camera at the beach. [In Photoshop] I put a hue and saturation adjustment layer over the photograph that affects it, but not permanently, so I can go back and change it if I want." Another overlay of clouds from a second photograph adds another color to the sky, and a warmer tone near the horizon.

The lower half of the image is composed of several photographs of water, taken with Taylor's four-megapixel Canon Elph at California's Mono Lake and Yosemite National Park. "There's a snapshot of the shore of a lake, that's why you're looking down at some rocks. I've made that layer partly transparent, so that you can see through to a different lake, because I thought by layering two snapshots of the lakeshore together, one being partly transparent on top of the other one, it kind of gives it a dreamlike effect that you're looking through somewhat murky water."

Taylor now adds a layer mask to the skirt of her figure, giving it a watery transparency, or as she describes it, "a little more visual confusion." She also makes some color adjustments with yet more layers.

At this point, Taylor has essentially completed the basic background of her image, a total of 11 layers, some of which contain actual pixel information, while others are only used for adjusting the color or opacity of images already in place. It's taken nearly

FIGURE 3.9

FIGURE 3.10

two full days of work. Other artists might now collapse the layers to make the file less cumbersome, but Taylor keeps her options open.

"I have a hard time making decisions, and I want to have the option to be able to go back still and tweak the color and change it. So I don't want to merge together all that background in the image at this point because I may go back and raise or lower the horizon line, for example, change the composition. As long as I have enough memory that I can deal with it in the computer—and I'm sometimes pushing the boundaries of that—I try to keep all the layers separate, to have the freedom to move them around. Because invariably, I come back after making a proof print and want to change it around again."

Next, Taylor paints in a thin white line at the point where the woman's body meets the water and begins to prepare another water layer to place on top of the woman's lower half. This time it's a photograph of a ripple in a Yosemite lake.

Taylor also fills out the woman's skirt by making a copy of it and stretching it out to the sides, as if the fabric has been caught and unfurled by a current. "In Photoshop you can change the dimension of something," explains Taylor, "and the stretched skirt is partly transparent—it's only 80 percent—so the effect is not too overwhelming." She also adds a darker layer around the woman's waist, like a watermark, where her dress has absorbed moisture.

Next Taylor paints in a moon and stars, and

FIGURE 3.11

pastes in a fish swimming to the woman's left. In the past she has scanned actual dead fish from Petsmart, but in this case the fish comes from an 19th century hand-colored etching that she scans and retouches. The final fish is a composite of several layers—some sharp, others blurry—to give it the appearance of watery motion. Still, it's not quite working. "I was concerned that the woman was maybe a little too off to the right and the fish was a little too big, and I just wasn't sure how they were working together. Also at this point I needed a head for her."

A good head is hard to find. Taylor looks for faces that are clear and easy to read. Often, if a face in an old photograph is too blurry or damaged, she'll blur it further, both as a time-saving Photoshop measure and as a depiction of self negation or confused identity. For *Twilight swim*, Taylor wants to use a woman's head with an expression ambiguous enough to adapt to her setting, which, like many Taylor settings, will come to include an element of lurking danger. Luckily, these poker-faced figures are common to 19th century photography, a consequence of primitive photographic technology, which required subjects had to sit frozen in place for a period of time.

After experimenting with several faces she

FIGURE 3.12

Taylor's digital alchemy allows her to postpone decision making indefinitely. Until Taylor "collapses" her layers—a step which is ultimately necessary to shrink the file to a manageable size—every decision is elastic. The only point of no return for Taylor is when a print has been sent off to a gallery.

scanned in and extracted from old photographs, Taylor settles on that of a young girl from a 19th century tintype she bought on eBay. "I ended up liking this moony round quality of this face, but she didn't have good hair so I knew I'd have to add hair or add something else."

That problem spawns another day of work as Taylor labors to create a bathing cap that matches her memories of the 1960s rubber swim caps she saw (and used) in her youth. Taylor's first step is to draw the outline of the cap and then use a combination of Photoshop's pattern tool and distorting filters to create a wavy swim-cap pattern. But the result is too precise, too perfect. "I became kind of obsessed with it," she tells me later. "In the end, I hand-drew it, then used the Liquify tool to go in and work the individual lines a bit so that it's not perfect."

Also missing, by Taylor's estimation, is an element of uncertainty that will elevate this image from simple illustration to narrative. "I really need something in the distance, something to imply a certain danger, or something going on in the distance that you aren't quite sure about."

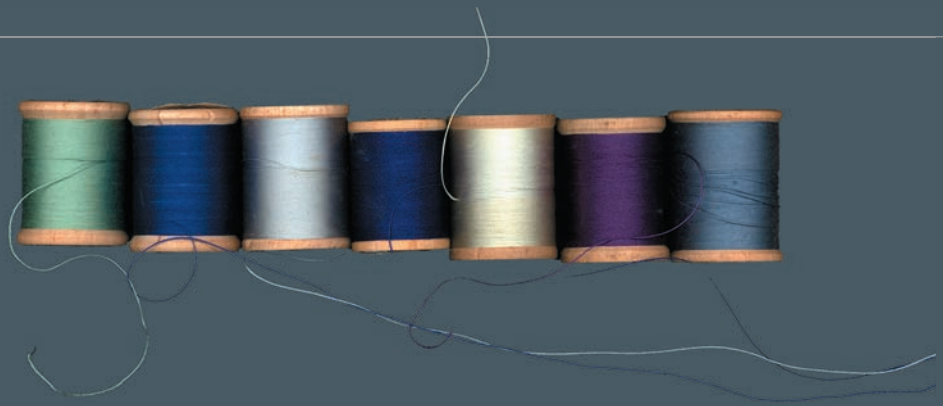
This is the risky juncture, says Taylor, where Photoshop's freedoms can start to overwhelm and an image gets "too junked up." She adds several jumping fish to the background, along with two fish hanging like epaulets from the woman's shoulders. Using a new adjustment layer, Taylor then adds shading and color to her face, and some darkening around the picture's edge to give the image a more nocturnal feel. Next, she adds a seaweed necklace for the woman and gives the fish a pearl necklace.

"I feel like there needs to be some sort of dynamic relationship between the woman and the fish. I'm trying to understand her relationship to the water. I think maybe she needs a seaweed necklace, something as if she's just come out of the water, like she belongs in the water. Not quite a mermaid, but kind of like the idea of the mermaid."

"It just makes sense that if she's got some water elements, then the fish should have some dressy human elements, but I don't want to put a human face on the fish. I tried the necklace, but at that point I realized it was just too busy, too much going on and

FIGURE 3.13

FIGURE 3.14



I needed to simplify. These stages are a struggle, but they have to happen."

In an effort to simplify, Taylor shrinks the fish, turns off the layer of its pearl necklace, and eliminates the jumping fish in the background. She evens the color on the woman's face to give her a moonlit look, and begins to re-think the image. To her mind, it's still missing that critical element of drama. The challenge is to add narrative without adding obviousness or cliché.

One solution that comes to mind is replacing the jumping fish with shark fins. To that end, Taylor uses Photoshop's drawing tools to draft a master shark fin and then three slightly different iterations of it, flipped to appear as if circling the woman. The shark fins, each with its own drawn shadow and a "little white ripple where it hits the water" take up another 18 layers on the image. With this much laboring, she finds herself growing attached to the fins, despite some ambivalence over the direction the image is taking. "It's scary, because you don't want to make things that are too cliché or too corny or too much like an illustration. So in a way I like the version of this image without the shark fin. But in the end I have to decide which one I want to make a finished print of." Later she says, "I ended up liking the one with the shark fin. Still, it's a very hard decision to make."

Next, she adds another necklace of seaweed, built from the scans of real seaweed that Taylor has brought home in a cooler from Longboat Key.

But there remains one unresolved problem with the image: "If the shark is that big, shouldn't you see a shadow or part of the body of the shark?" Well, maybe, or maybe not. But the idea is worth exploring, which Taylor does, then comes to a decision: "I won't show the bodies of the sharks, instead, I'll add a fin to the underwater fish. That will put a new spin on it."

With that one small adjustment *Twilight swim* is complete. Taylor prints it and sends it with a batch of images for a show in Houston. Looking at the piece a month later, she's pleased at how that final, small adjustment both completed and changed the image. "Putting the fin on the fish makes it less menacing, maybe. But you still don't know. You don't know if these are real sharks and this fish is just protecting himself, and therefore, if she is still in danger. Or, if all the sharks are not so bad and that's why she's so nonchalant; they're all just fish with fake shark fins." It's just the kind of ambiguity Taylor was after all along.

{ Twilight swim, 2004. }