

# Maggie Taylor

## Dream weaver

Artist Maggie Taylor creates narrative, still-life collages using scanners and Adobe® Photoshop® CS software



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If only her hands had the gift, Maggie Taylor would paint. But she has successfully developed and pursued her artistic vision all the same, using flatbed scanners and Adobe Photoshop software to create unique digital images that transport viewers to “dreamlike worlds inhabited by everyday objects.”

A broken bottle. A bird egg. A battered doll. Taylor’s studio in Gainesville, Florida, contains flat-file drawers, walls, and shelves full of quirky 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs, taxidermy specimens, mounted insects, vintage toys, sea shells, feathers, and other artifacts she finds at flea markets, online auctions, and in her own backyard.

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If an item is rusty, cracked, chipped, or faded, all the better. “I’m not interested in sparkly things,” says Taylor. “I like objects that have wear and tear, a past, a story to tell.” In turn, she tells stories of her own by combining and recombining these treasures in photographic still-life collages, a personal style she developed while earning her master’s degree in photography at the University of Florida in the mid-1980s.

#### Scanner as camera

Early on, Taylor physically laid out her compositions, using an old 4-by-5-inch view camera and natural light to capture the collage on film. She went digital in 1996. Now she lays the objects one at a time on the glass of a flatbed scanner—lid up to prevent damage and achieve a solid, dark background—and saves each file as a layer in Photoshop.

Taylor makes her own backgrounds, coloring with pastels on crumpled paper, roughing up a piece of metal or fabric, or taking a photograph of passing clouds with a digital camera. These scans become a base layer that she enhances in Photoshop with textures, outdoor scenes, and other effects, to which she then adds the scanned objects.

One of Taylor’s finished pieces might contain 30, 60, or more layers. But, she says, “I don’t like lots of transparency. I want the final image to have a cohesive look, like a watercolor or drawing.”

The blending options in Photoshop CS help her achieve that goal. “What ends up looking like one layer,” she says, “can really be 10 or 12.” Adding to the illusion is Taylor’s skill with the software’s artistic brushes, which she uses to “paint” in grass, leaves, hair, and other details.

“With Photoshop CS, I can precisely edit and retouch layers in 16-bit mode. The larger tonal range gives me richer color and more realistic highlights and shadows, and I can make as many changes as I want without degrading the image quality.”

Maggie Taylor

Taylor believes that every artist has his or her own color palette. Photoshop CS gives her the freedom to fine-tune her own, which she describes as a more muted "1940s" look.

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## Supporting the way an artist works

Most cameras and scanners, including Taylor's, store images in 16-bit mode or higher. "In Photoshop, I used to have to convert my images into 8-bit mode right away in order to access my favorite features," she says. "But with Photoshop CS, I can precisely edit and retouch layers in 16-bit mode. The larger tonal range gives me richer color and more realistic highlights and shadows, and I can make as many changes as I want without degrading the image quality. Now I do all my scanning and initial compositing of backgrounds and foregrounds—about one-third of my process—in 16-bit mode."

Taylor also appreciates the new organizational tools in Photoshop CS. The nested layer sets help her manage her complex images. "I can store each component in its own folder, such as 'Left Girl,'" she explains, "and then store folders within it, such as 'Arms,' 'Legs,' 'Face Color,' and 'Face Features,' each up to five layers deep." Storing files this way also makes it easy for her to prepare workshop presentations, where she walks students step by step through the building of a collage.

Similarly, Taylor uses the enhanced File Browser to inventory hundreds of scans, which she keeps for possible changes or for application in future collages. "I work on three to five images at once," she says. "And I don't mind if something takes a long time. Over a period of months, I make lots of decisions. I'm hardly ever happy with a pose or article of clothing. I might change a rock floating in space to a hornet's nest, for instance."

## Not just another pretty face

Taylor's playful spirit, as well as her love of folk art and the natural world, come through in her work and contribute to its wide acceptance. Since 1987, her images have appeared in more than 60 solo U.S. exhibitions and are in the permanent collections of 15 museums across the U.S. and Europe. She received State of Florida Individual Artist's Fellowships in 1996 and 2001, and won first prize in the Santa Fe Center for Photography's 2004 Project Competition.

## Company

**Maggie Taylor**  
Gainesville, Florida  
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## Challenge

Enable a fine artist to create complex, still-life photographic collages that have the look of watercolor paintings.

## Solution

Use flatbed scanners as cameras and Adobe Photoshop CS software as a virtual darkroom.

## Benefits

Taylor can experiment freely and realize any vision with high-quality results while easily managing hundreds of scans and multi-layered files.

## Tool Kit

- Adobe Acrobat®
- Adobe GoLive®
- Adobe InDesign®
- Adobe Photoshop CS
- Apple Macintosh G4 computer
- Epson Perfection 2450, Expression 1600, and Expression 836XL scanners
- Microtek ScanMaker 9800XL scanner

For her "Man Who Loves Fish" piece, Taylor scanned an 1870s' tintype portrait, an old drawing of a fish, and a black-and-white photograph of water, then enhanced the images in Adobe Photoshop CS, coloring the clothes, skin, and fish scales, and adding dampness effects. She created the outdoor background, trousers, and breathing tubes for the fish from scratch.



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Although she is primarily a fine artist, Taylor devotes about 10% of her time to creating cover images for books and music CDs. Her commercial clients include Warner Brothers Music and Penguin Publishing.

In spite of their whimsy, however, Taylor's images are hardly all sweetness and light. She has described them as “ambiguous and even a little disturbing or uncomfortable.”

“I don't want to just make things that are pretty,” she says. “My images are dreamlike, but not all dreams are good—some are bad, some are funny. I want my images to mean different things to different people, to make viewers feel or imagine something new.”