

Photo Remote Learning Assignment: Abstract Photos with Oil, Water, and maybe a Little Dish Soap

Oil and water are like chalk and cheese. They just aren't the same are they? But despite their seeming incompatibility, each brings out the qualities of the other. As photographers, we love a good juxtaposition. There's nothing that creates balance better than imbalance. We're going to use that "imbalance" to create some abstract photos.

For this assignment, we are going to create a body of images that look as if they come straight out of a chemistry class instructional... or a 60s liquid light show. With two philosophically opposed household items, several more amicable components, and a camera. The process is simple and the results are abstractedly beautiful and a little trippy too. Intrigued? Check it out below.





Things you will need to do this:

- Camera (Phone)
- Something like...
 - A small sheet of glass or plexiglass
 - A mirror (make sure it can get wet)
 - A small clear bowl or a drinking glass that you can put clear wrap across the top of it
 - A clear bag that you can cut off one side and place it over the top of a small clear bowl or drinking glass. See if this is secure; you might need to use clear tape to tape it down so it does not move.
- Two objects to set your glass on, for example, milk crates, empty Amazon boxes, chairs, and/or even stacked books can work well. I just put my bowl, with clear wrap on top of it, on a white platter.
- Towel
- Some colorful materials
- Oil (it doesn't really matter what type, I used vegetable oil)
- Dishwashing liquid soap or bubbles from the dolla store
- Water
- Eyedropper or spoon

Find a background material

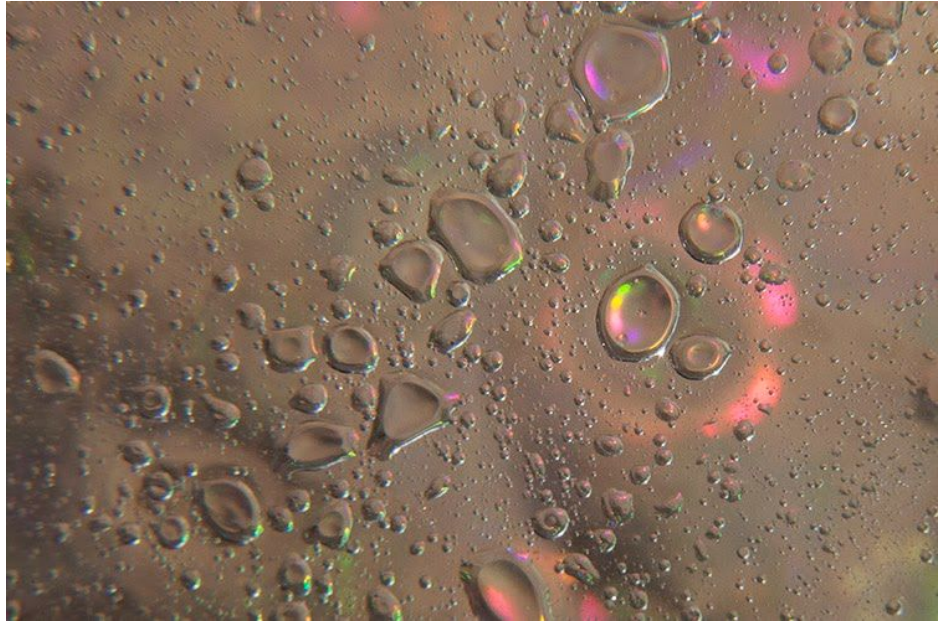
First, you'll need to gather a few materials for the background of your image. You are looking for colored cardboard, magazines, posters, cloth, scraps – anything with a bit of color that won't be missed if it gets coated in a little oil or dishwashing liquid. Duller toned materials like brown or black won't reflect light as readily, so aim for brighter colors to begin with.

Don't worry too much about intricate patterns or details as they won't show in the final image. While you are scouting for materials, grab an old towel too, it'll come in handy later.



For my abstract oil project I selected a cardboard gift bag I had around the house and a reflective folder I flattened out. The bright color combinations of the bag will create smooth, vibrant gradients. The reflective sheen of the folder will guide a greater amount of light up through the image, but the holographic flowers can yield surprisingly subtle results.

The reflective cardboard I used for this image directs small specks of light up into the splotches of oil. The overall grey tone of the cardboard contrasts with the flecks of colors to create a surrealistic, rainy atmosphere.



This is an image with the Happy Birthday bag as a backdrop. None of the details are discernible, but a soft gradient separates the image into soft hues

Setting up

Once you've assembled a neat pile of colorful bits and pieces, it's time to set up. It depends on what type of supplies you have found in your house...

Set-Up Option #1: Clear Wrap w/ a small bowl or drinking glass.



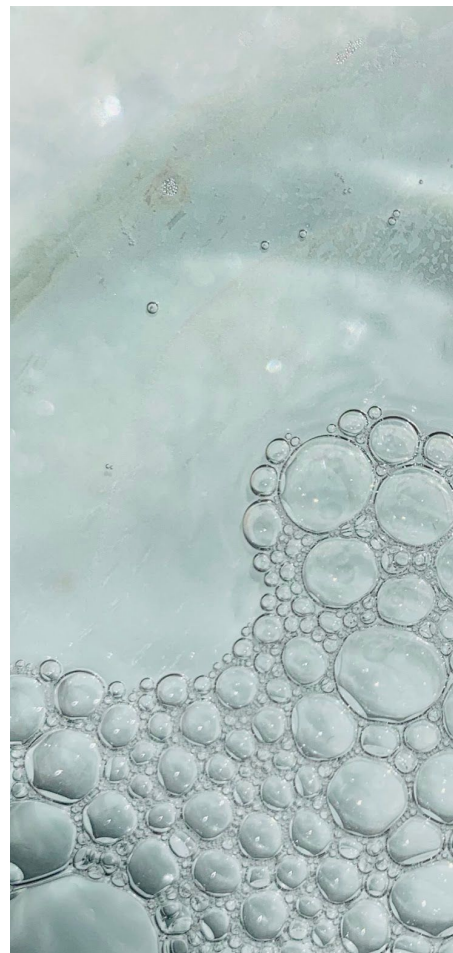
Place the plastic wrap over the clear small bowl. Pour some water on top of the plastic wrap and add a small amount of dish soap or oil. Mix it with a spoon or your finger to create bubbles. Experiment with different layers of soap and oil, take some pictures, experiment again, take some pictures...etc. etc.

The picture on the left is the original picture. It is not complete, because it is showing the side of the bowl and the plastic wrap on the side. The camera in your phone will only allow you to get so close before the picture becomes blurry. This means when taking these pictures, you need to pull back a bit until the bubbles etc. are in focus, then take the picture. Because pulling back will show things you do not want in the picture (see example #1), you have to then take that picture and enlarge it in your phone. Fool around with the picture by making it bigger/smaller, move it up and down, side to side within the frame of your screen to find the perfect composition / placement of your bubbles. Take several screenshots as you are doing this. Then go back to your final pictures and edit them even more by changing the exposure and placing different filters on the picture to see what it looks like (see example #2). Try to use all the tools your phone allows you to use, it is amazing how much better your pictures will look.

Before



After Editing



Set-Up Option #2:

The aim here is to construct a bridge of sorts for your sheet of glass to sit on. To reduce the impact of a potential oil-spill, I set my rig up outside. Wherever you choose to set up, just make sure you work on flat, even ground. Grab your milk crates (or chairs, etc.), set them down a little distance apart and set the glass between the two. Now take a few of the colorful materials you've selected, and position them on the ground, directly under the sheet of glass.



The above picture shows a piece of glass between two milk crates with the cardboard birthday bag in the space underneath.

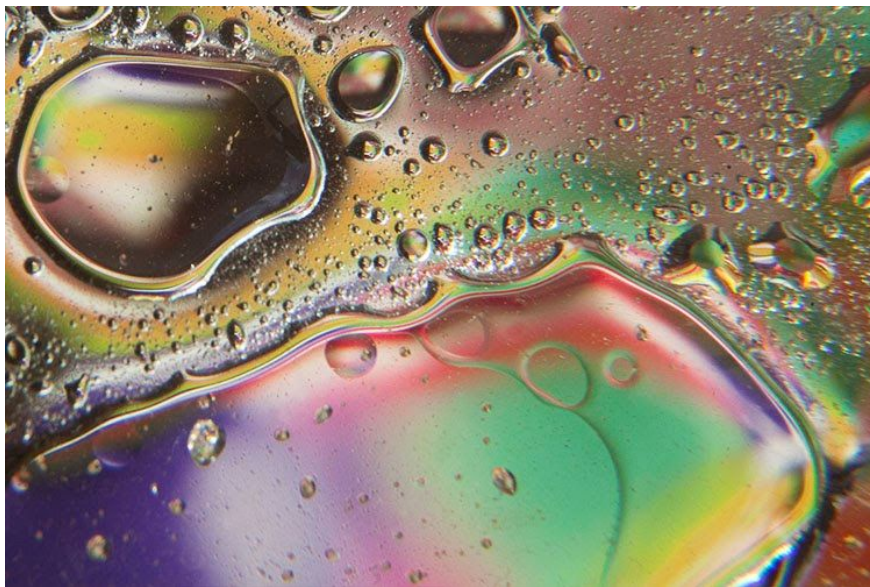
NOTE: Even though the picture shows a professional camera on a tripod, you will only be using your phone. A tripod would be so much more extra than you need.

Time to start cooking

Gather your water, dish washing soap, oil, spoon (or eyedropper), and towel so that you will have them within reach. Begin by adding a small spot of oil to the glass. To build up layers of liquid, add dots of water or dishwasher liquid to the center of the oil. As the liquids span out over the glass, add in new droplets of the different ingredients. Alternating between ingredients

takes advantage of their natural resistance to each other, delineating shapes and patterns more readily. If you like, you can use the tip of your spoon or eyedropper to manipulate the shape of the growing bubble.

That's about it really! The rest is totally up to you. You can't mess up, so don't worry if you aren't getting perfect circular bubbles or patterns. Allow the medium to take shape as you cycle through your three ingredients. Try running a spoon through the middle of the concoction to create smaller clusters of bubbles. Or use a greater ratio of dishwasher liquid to oil to enhance the spider-web look of the cleaning chemicals. Even spritzing mists of water over the glass can make fascinating reflections.



Experiment with the background and elements

While you are watching the details unfurl beneath the camera lens, don't forget to experiment with your background too! Add or remove materials, layer new colors, add materials which have a greater or lesser reflective surface. Use a flashlight (torch) to illuminate different areas in the image or shine the light up into the bubbles suspended on the glass.



There are no hard and fast rules – the more you experiment the more you'll discover. And, once all your liquids have inevitably pooled in a messy, semi-clear river of goo, grab your towel, wipe down the glass and start again! A word of caution, however, this project can become an addiction in itself, not only because it looks good, but because each result is so elusive and unpredictable.

Abstract Photos w/ Oil, Water, and Maybe a Little Dish Soap Rubric

5 different abstract pictures using the technique of oil & water and editing in your phone

Self-Critique / Reflection (at least a paragraph)

4 points total



This smooth effect was created as the oil and dish washing liquid slowly spread over the surface of the glass



The delicate strands in this image is a result of the dishwashing liquid being spread across the glass surface with a spoon



This image was photographed with a single color background. The consistent color illuminates the beads of oil and water in the light







