



THE ILLUSTRATION

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CONCEPTUAL THINKING

Designing to a brief

Follow a leading illustrator and *Photoshop* pro – Pixelsurgeon's Richard May – through the process of meeting an editorial brief...

Creating a spot illustration to accompany an editorial piece requires much more of the illustrator than the creation of a pretty, aesthetically-pleasing, ambient image. It's extremely easy, especially when illustrating technology articles and features, to fall back upon the same old painful clichés: wireframe grids, glowing monitors, reams of zeros and ones. If the article (or, as is often the case, the art director) specifically calls for such an approach, then so be it — you have a job to do and a deadline to meet — but wherever possible, try and engage the brain. We know you have one.

Photoshop Skills isn't a tutorial in the traditional sense — we're following Richard May through the creative process behind the opening illo. The brief? To illustrate a piece on the pros and cons of switching from traditional photographic techniques to digital cameras. *Photoshop* has been

used due to its almost limitless flexibility, but bearing in mind that it's still just a means to an end for any good illustrator. It's a time-saving piece of digital magic, but it won't sit there for you at two in the morning and start jotting out ideas as you catch forty winks. It certainly won't, despite the wishes of many designers, communicate with clients on your behalf.

So make a brew, put your slippers on and dive in. If you're following this tutorial step-by-step, in front of your computer with a blank canvas staring back at you, you're not so much *missing* the point as driving by it at 200mph in your *Kai's Power Tools* hotrod. Slow down, and put your conceptual thinking cap on...

Artwork and expertise by Richard May, [w] richard-may.com.

Part 1: The groundwork

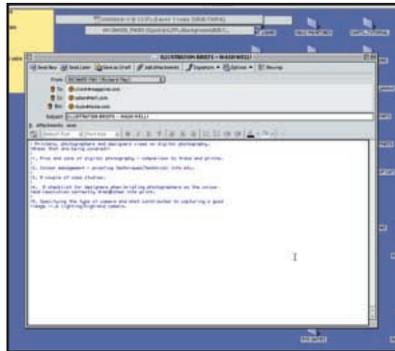
Make some sketches, think about visual metaphors and rifle through your image library – the first stage is all about ideas...

Overcrowding

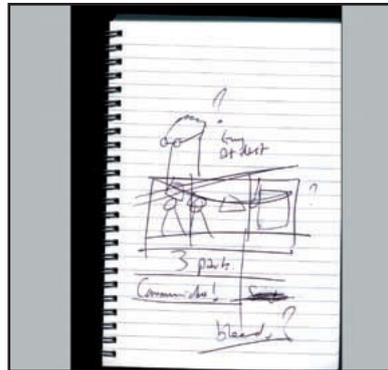
"I try, whenever possible, to divide my illustrations into three or four basic elements," Richard explains. "Both thematically and visually (often the two are inseparable). Crowding the image with a million focal points rarely works, only serving to confuse. It's almost like admitting that you don't have a good idea, only lots of little half-hearted ones."

Image credits

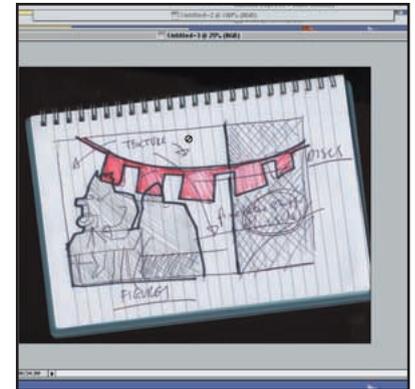
Images of Zip disks courtesy of Iomega. [t] 020 7365 9527. You can buy Iomega products online at [w] www.iomega.co.uk. A version of this illustration originally appeared in *Design Week*.



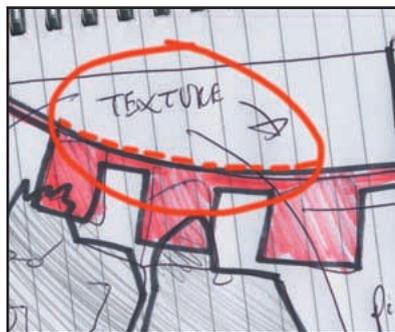
1 Our illustrator's opening advice: "Sit down with a sketchpad and a copy of the brief from your client. The more time spent as an illustrator, the more visual shorthand techniques you'll develop, often cutting this stage to five minutes or so as you quickly rack your brain for visual metaphors, but it really depends on the job."



2 This particular brief is ostensibly a simple one: a straightforward guide to the pros and cons of switching from traditional photographic techniques to digital cameras and associated gubbins. There are no complex themes or subjects, so it's up to you to be creative with the message.



3 The article calls for an illustration that conveys the essence of the subject matter with a quick glance. It may be more informative than entertaining, so enticing the reader with a pretty image is also a consideration. The best of both worlds.



4 Briefly onto the background. "I wanted to represent, as simply as possible, the transition from darkroom dwelling to digital development. The background needs to be relatively neutral area for later juxtaposition, but it also needs to say something." The best solution was a transition from texture into pixels; tactile scratches and marks into clean blocks of colour.



5 Richard May had the idea of a photographer sitting at a table, fiddling with his camera, back-turned on an open doorway filled with pixelated light. This alone could possibly convey the wrong message – as though the article centred on the photographer's reluctance to move on. Hence the need to introduce a third element and focal point.



6 If you have your own photography library, start sifting through it for potential images to scan. Failing that, Google Image Search [w] www.google.com is your best friend. It's a good source of obscure visual reference. Just be careful when saving images to disc and using them in your illustrations. Clever photo montage is one thing, a lawsuit is another. "Be creative. If your design is for publication, appropriate and modify. Basically, use at your own risk!"



7 "What could I take (so to speak) from a darkroom and have a little fun with, almost creating the visual equivalent of a play on words? The drying line (used to hang wet prints) seemed a good choice – maybe I'd peg a few disks on there. You'd need to look twice, but it would be another way of illustrating the metaphorical bridge between old and new."



8 Scan in the Zip disks (or CDs, if you're so inclined) and bang the contrast right up, then desaturate. Cut them out to white and save them for dragging and dropping onto your main canvas later. "I wanted a completely lo-fi feel to this illustration, rendering the usual anti-aliasing concerns pretty much null and void. This kind of look may not suit your way of working, so it's up to you. Whatever you do, unless you're being paid by Iomega, remove the Zip logo. It's unimportant, and you don't have permission (see step 6)."



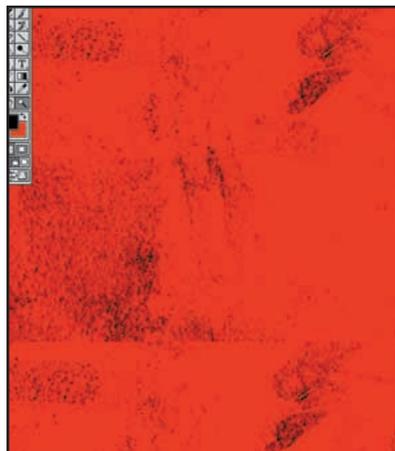
9 Now, before you begin work, double-check and make sure you have at least the basic elements of the image sorted out and ready to go. It's often the case that you'll have a bright idea at the last minute, but don't rely on it. If you're working to a deadline, you need to have the basic concept under control.

Part 2: Form and function

Next up is adding to the background, using scanned-in textures and multiple layers...

Keeping perspective

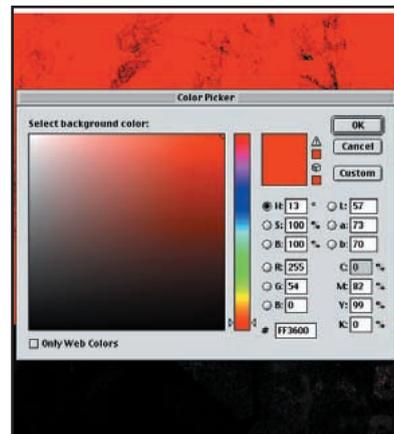
It's good to retain at least some semblance of reality and line-of-sight perspective, even if this is only alluded to with a simple horizontal line. We all rely on small visual clues on a day-to-day basis and our memory automatically fills the gaps. This allows for some creative interpretations of reality, but we're not creating fine art – illustration in this context is all about communication.



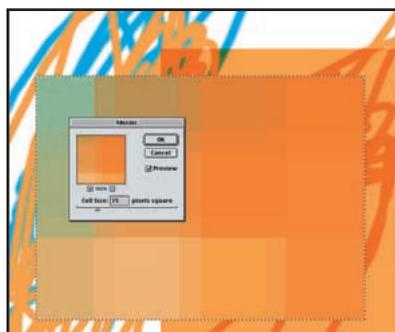
1 The idea was to at least create the atmosphere or feel of a darkroom, so deep red and shadowed texture was the order of the day. The red is simply a colour fill set to Multiply (see step 3).



2 The background texture was basically a plastic bag that Richard May used as a base for spraying window latch bolts for decorating his studio. This left a lovely, random stencil pattern, and that combined with the folds of the plastic made for good texture when scanned. "Play around with multiple layers with different effects, and also with the contrast and levels to achieve the level of detail that suits you."



3 A new layer was created – a block red colour which was then multiplied several times with different layer effects, such as Hard and Soft light, Multiply and so on. It never hurts to introduce more textures to the mix – just experiment.



4 This is where the 'digital' aspect of the background is introduced, and that's simply a case of using the faithful Mosaic filter from the Filters menu – nothing complicated here. Work on a separate canvas, then just cut and paste onto your main canvas as you see fit. Simply draw a few colours with a thin paintbrush (keeping in mind your colour scheme) and hit Apply.



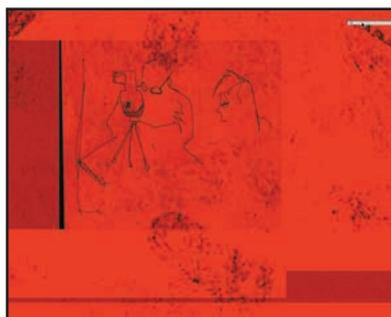
5 Chop into the main artwork with the Polygonal lasso tool and create shapes and pseudo-shadows, lines and form. Flatten layers if you like – you can always do them again. Try to use layers only for the main elements of the illustration, and don't allow your file to get too big; speed is of the essence. Work quickly and be confident. Carelessness is fine, at least for now.



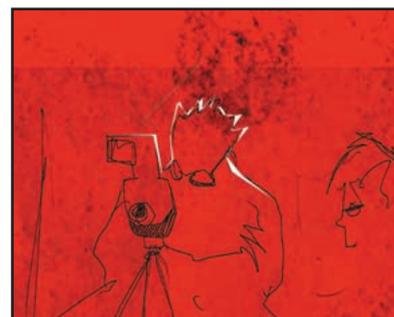
6 If you were successful with your research, or hit jackpot at Google, you have a suitably lo-fi shot of a paparazzi or amateur photographer. Chances are it's only 72dpi, but once again, you're not going for perfection. Re-size to 300dpi (which is obviously what you should be working at for print) and ignore or even appreciate the image dithering.



7 Time to go back to the sketchpad. Print out a high-contrast, black and white version of the photo and roughly trace around the figures on the other side of the paper (hold it up to your monitor, or a window). Be creative as you go along to fill the gaps – you don't want a perfect trace, just a rough approximation to overlay. Next, scan it back in.



8 Drag your drawing layer onto your main canvas and roughly re-size it to fit, although this is one element of the image that you should ensure retains its quality – not everything should be pixelated. If in doubt, scan at a higher resolution than needed and size down. You may wish to draw your figures in *Illustrator*, or with the Brush tool in *Photoshop*. It's not important – as long as you have some kind of outline, you're sticking to your plans!



9 Create a new layer and zoom in on the figures. Next, use the Polygonal lasso tool to roughly draw an outline around the drawing, then add to this by using the Pen tool to create a white outline. Be abstract and messy, but never lose sight of the fact that your figures should be figures, not blobs. Ideally, you're aiming (unless you're an airbrush fetishist – and that's not healthy) for a tactile, hand-drawn quality, even when using the *Photoshop* tools.

Part 3: The clock is ticking

You've got the main background, the digital doorway, plus your figures on the artwork. Now we'll tie these elements together...

Getting distracted

Aside from various stylistic elements, hopefully nothing is misleading the viewer. Anything that could distract from the point of the image must go. Scratch away, but don't start cluttering your image with superfluous details for the sake of realism or perspective.

FTP software

If you're lucky enough to have a broadband connection, you'll do well to bag yourself an FTP application such as *Fetch* or *Transmit*. Both are available as free trial versions from their respective sites. This is a great way (providing your client is technically-savvy – you'd be surprised) to avoid using snail mail to deliver your work, allowing you an extra few hours to make those important last-minute changes.

Clock watching

As silly as this may sound, it may even be a good idea to time yourself when working. Although in an ideal world art and design shouldn't be rushed, we all know that a deadline is a deadline; and hey, if you can make more money by working faster, that's a good thing, right?



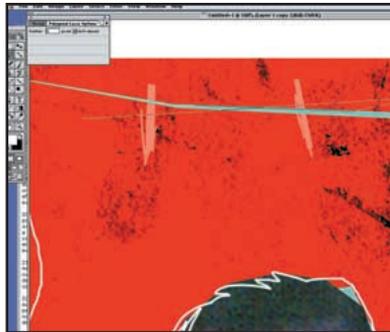
1 Leave the components we've created as they are for now, and think about how your illustration as a whole could be more reminiscent of a darkroom – back to those Zips on the drying line. This third element is effectively the transition piece, metaphorically linking everything together.



4 Duplicate the Zip disk layer several times, adjusting the size of the individual layers to give some illusion of perspective. Richard May: "The trick is, at least as far as I'm concerned, to not veer too close to realism; but you do need some illusion of depth."



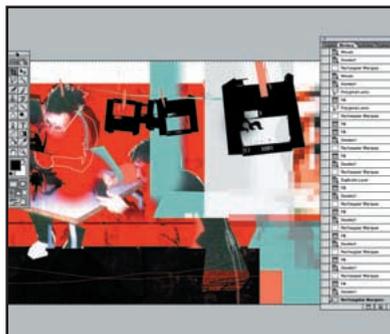
7 The basic illo is now almost finished. The point is illustrated in an adequately subtle way, yet there's no doubt in the reader's mind that this image is there to illustrate a photography-related article. Finally, add a horizon line (of sorts) to the image to enhance depth – that should be all the extra detail you need.



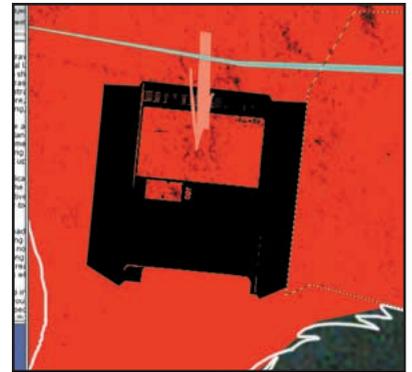
2 To draw the line, simply create a new layer and use the Polygonal lasso tool again, overlapping on itself to create a sharp, angular line. You may want to draw this with a contrasting colour using the Pen tool – whatever works for your illustration. If you have too many scratchy marks elsewhere, stick with the lasso. Contrast and balance is everything, and too much of one technique is bad news.



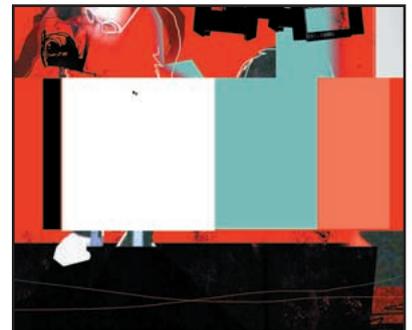
5 Go back to your figures and start working away at the underlying original photograph with the Eraser tool – if this photo is not your own (again, see step 6 in part 1) you need to be eliminating much of the original image as possible, for obvious legal reasons. Consider it as a guide with useful aesthetic qualities where needed, and use your judgement.



8 "I've deliberately avoided detailing the individual key-presses and tools used in this tutorial. The main techniques used are layer effects and Lasso and Pen tools. It goes without saying, but unless they have a purpose, avoid filters like the plague. Remember to keep cropping to reduce file size. This is the time to think more about general composition and colour – if it distracts, bin it now."



3 Draw a few pegs where you see fit, keeping in mind balance and composition, then grab a Zip disc and drag it over. Remember, you're doing the right thing if you're destroying image information (losing pixels), so push that contrast up some more with your disk layers.



6 Keep in mind that to work as an attention-grabbing colour, your illustration should not be running all over the colour spectrum. Try and stick within a particular colour range for each illustration element, plus contrasting blacks and whites for 'drawing.' By all means use bright green, but not for the sake of it. Red was chosen for obvious reasons, and the blue worked as a contrasting colour.



9 Bob's your uncle – one finished illustration. Final tip: "Sign it off with a cheeky signature or logo if you can squeeze one in – try and incorporate this into the overall design. Don't just slap a scrawl on there – see where it'll fit. A little Pixelsurgeon.com flame on a disc label is the perfect place for self-promotion. If it doesn't work though, don't do it." **ca**