

# Surreal Composites

## Examples, Techniques, and Tips

by  
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# Which Surreal?

“Surreal” covers a large swath of territory. I’ll be talking about images that have a realistic look but content that is clearly not real.



# Topics

Masking

Cloning

Warp & Liquify

Light Aggregation (Lighten Blending Mode)

Creating Shadows

Adding Texture

Creating Electrical Discharge

Creating Disintegration

Actions

Displacement Mapping

Green topics are in this powerpoint presentation.

Blue Topics are handled in example images with text layers.

# Useful Keyboard Shortcuts

Note: These shortcuts are for Mac. For Windows, use Ctrl instead of Cmd.

Cmd-e: Collapse the selected layers

Cmd-i: Invert the selection or currently selected layer

Cmd-j: Create a new layer from the selection or current selected layer

Cmd-t: Bring up Transform tool

Cmd-a: Select All

Cmd-x: Cut

Shift-F5: Bring up the Fill dialog

Cmd-Option-Shift-e: Stamp Visible (create layer equivalent to visible layers)

# Caveats

There is usually more than one way to do things in Photoshop. My way is not necessarily the only or right way.

The directions I'm providing work for CS6. If you are using other versions of Photoshop your mileage may vary.

Surreal compositing can be rewarding but some judges don't relate to it.

# Topic 1: Masking

Sometimes masking is a piece of cake, especially if you shoot images with that in mind. Sometimes it's a real pain.



The masking for this image was very simple. Without moving the camera I shot two pictures: one with my hand in place and one without it. With those images aligned, only the placement of the edges of the mask along the wrist and shadow mattered; the rest of the edges could be anywhere.



These are the two original images and the mask (above) that combined them.



Once combined, the final image required additional changes to color, contrast, and perspective.

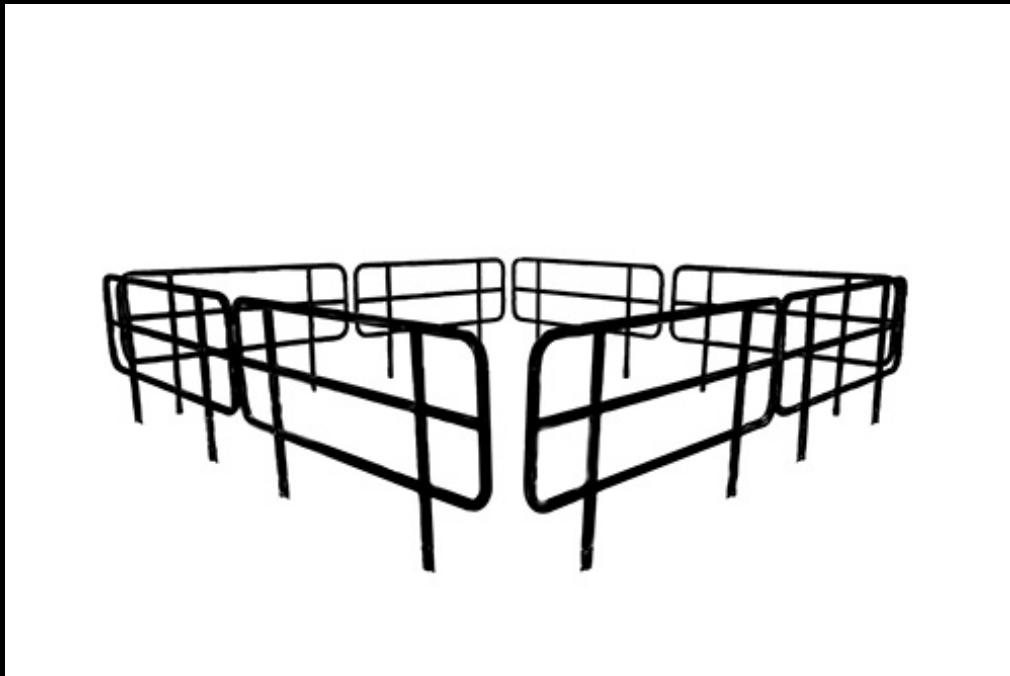
Note: There is a huge amount of creative potential in shooting multiple images without moving the camera but with different content! And it makes the masking easy.





I shoot a lot of locations that a friend dubbed “stage sets”: places that seem interesting but that appear to be waiting for something to happen. Some of my composites start with a stage set and a question: “What would happen here?”

This was in the Swan Island Sewage Pumping Station in Portland (on a club field trip). It looked like there should be a hole there with something emerging, but that required creating a mask of the railing, which was a real pain. The railing is very similar in tone to the rest of the image (at least in parts), so there was no easy way to select it.



I ended by using Polygonal Lasso or freehand brush to make this mask. It doesn't look that complex but even this level of detail takes a lot of time to do if you're doing it all manually.

Once the mask was complete I could put a subject "behind" the railing. My wife very thoughtfully gave me a dog skeleton some time back (they require less time than a real dog) and it seemed like a good fit.



The lighting in the original image looks like it's mostly from a single overhead light, so I shot the skeleton using the room light, holding a piece of paper over the back end to create a shadow. The color of the light didn't matter (you can adjust that in raw processing), and using a dark cloth for the background made selection simple.

The perspective on the skeleton isn't perfect but it's close enough.





The finished image. The shadow on the back of the skeleton isn't in quite the right spot but it's close enough to be visually believable. I only needed the lower part of the mask to drop in the hole (a black layer), the edge of the hole (a modified copy of the back wall), and the skeleton. However, I still needed the upper part of the mask (the back railing) in order to modify the wall but not the railing; that made the railing pop out a bit more.

As usual the final image has additional changes in color, contrast, and perspective.



Ideas for images materialize in different ways. Some ideas reveal themselves as I work on an image, and others occur to me when I'm trying to figure out what to do with a location or subject. A few like this one pop in spontaneously for reasons and from source unknown. I was minding my own business when suddenly– “More Meatballs!”: a meatball-eating orgy of anthropomorphic forks.

This is very similar to the original idea, except that the original had a black background and every tine ended in a mini fork. The mini forks would have doubled the work required so that part got dropped.



The base image is a focus stack, which can be simple to do if you use Photoshop, Zerene, or Helicon to do the grunt work. The rest of the image required another dozen or so pixel layers, with masking for each layer. Each layer individually is simple, but the time required to complete an image tends to scale directly with the number of images being included.





You can simplify the process by shooting each layer with the right background and lighting, so that selecting/masking is easier and the lighting doesn't require tweaking.

If you have to go back and reshoot something you forgot it's a big hit on the time required.



I had a tough time getting the mouths to look right. In the end I scrapped the original color entirely and colorized them using the base color of the forks.

# Topic 2: Cloning

Cloning can salvage otherwise unusable images.





This staircase is in downtown Auckland, NZ. It does a 270 degree turn that I thought was graceful, but isolating the stairs from their context required a lot of work. Content-Aware Fill did not produce useful results so I did a lot of careful cloning.



Post-cloning. The ragged edge on the bottom didn't matter because the next step...



...was to drop in a background that cleaned it up.



As usual the final image involved changes to color and contrast, in addition to expanding the canvas, the sky changes, the moon, and the moon's shadow. But the whole image was possible only by virtue of all the cloning.





This spot, the stairs at Portland's Rocky Butte, cried out for a beckoning figure. The problem was the old pedestal (maybe a drinking fountain?) right where I wanted a semi-transparent figure to be.



Solution: lots of cloning. The lower part was simple, but the upper part meant making a new chunk of wall. That turned out to be sort of fun, a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle with a piece from here and another from there.

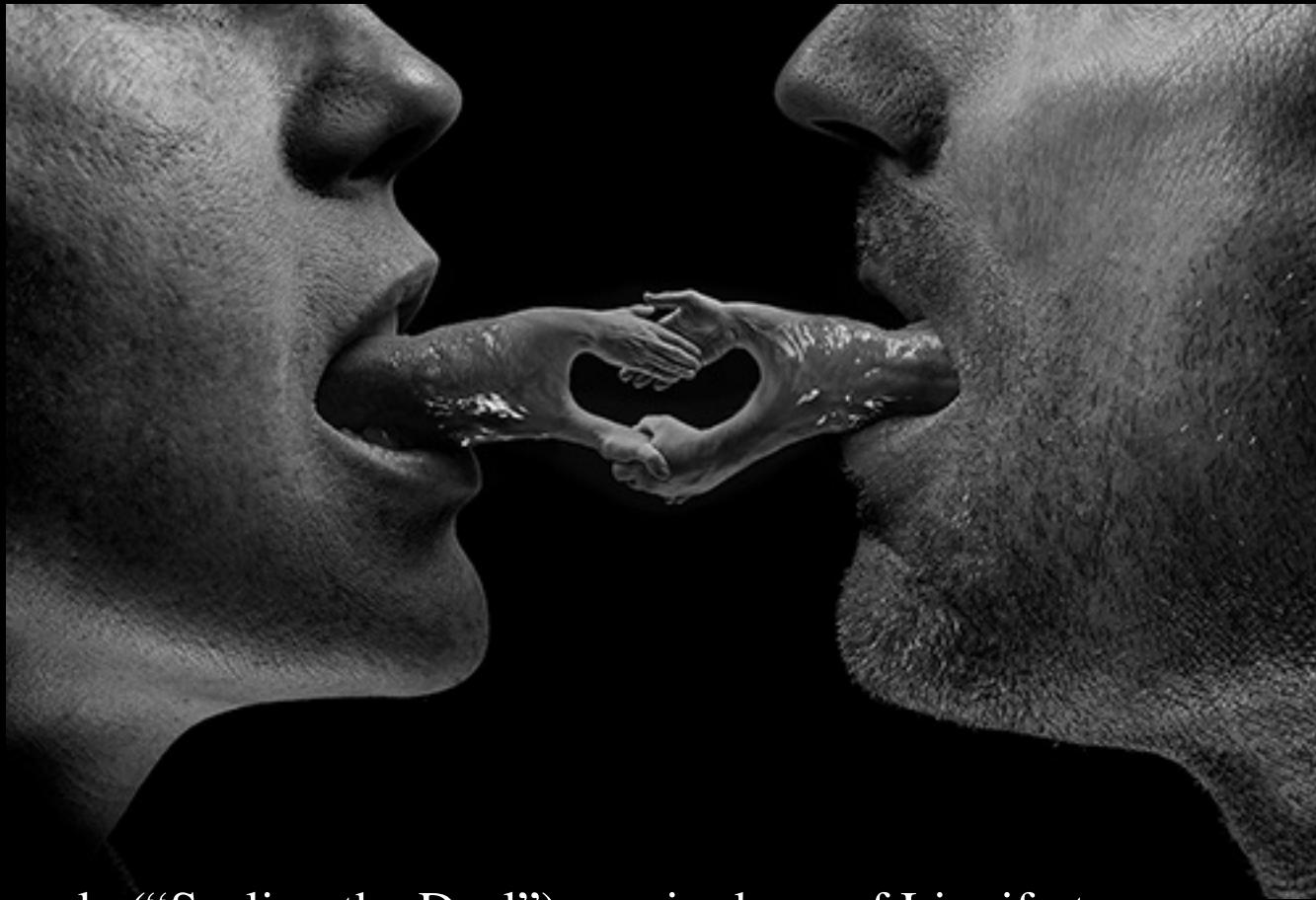


The final image, cloning not apparent.

# Topic 3: Warp and Liquify

Warp and Liquify— especially the latter— are extremely useful for fitting things together.





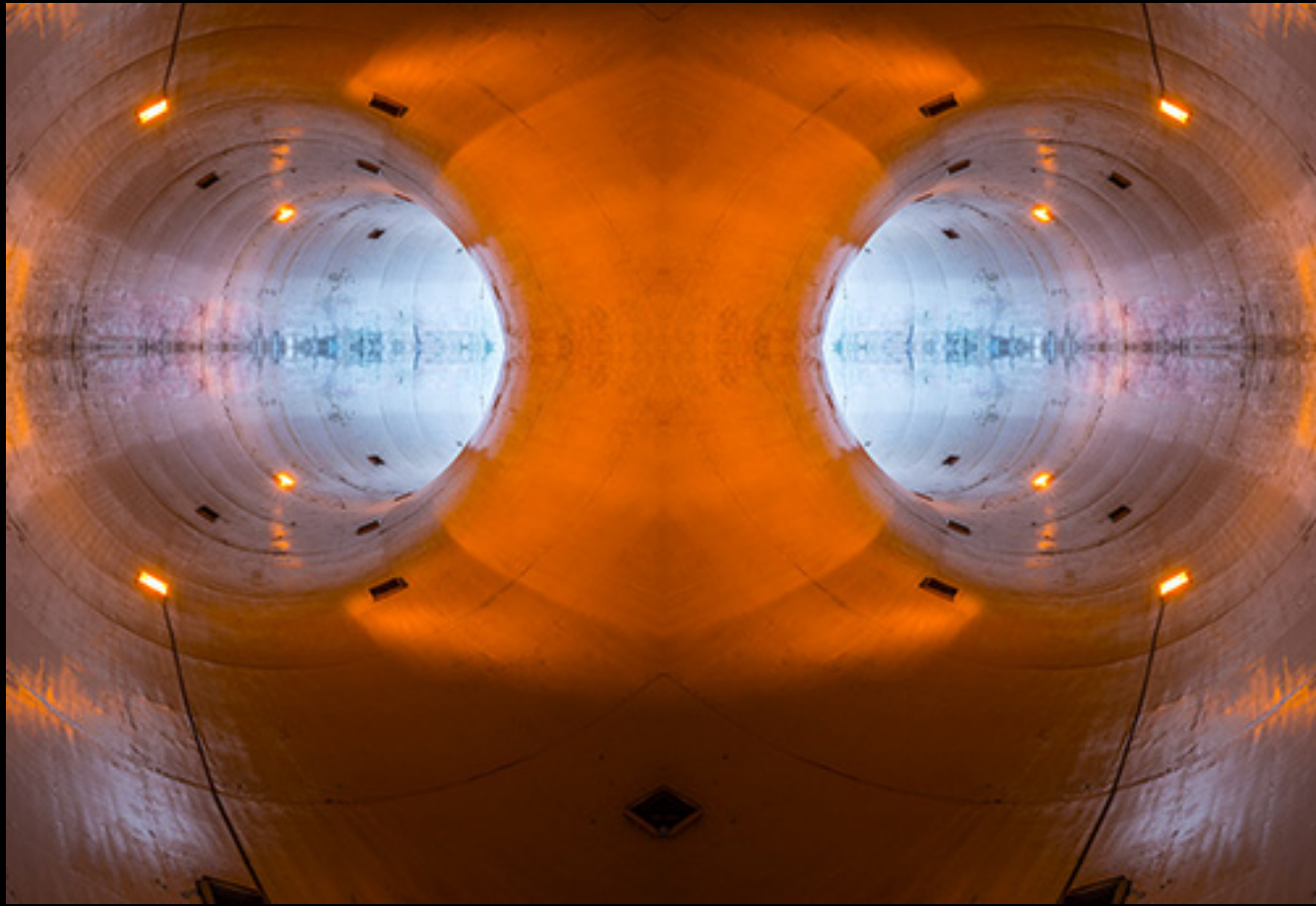
This example (“Sealing the Deal”) required use of Liquify to:

- Expand the tongues
- Modify the wrist/arm shapes so that they could be blended into the tongues
- Change facial structure to improve overall balance

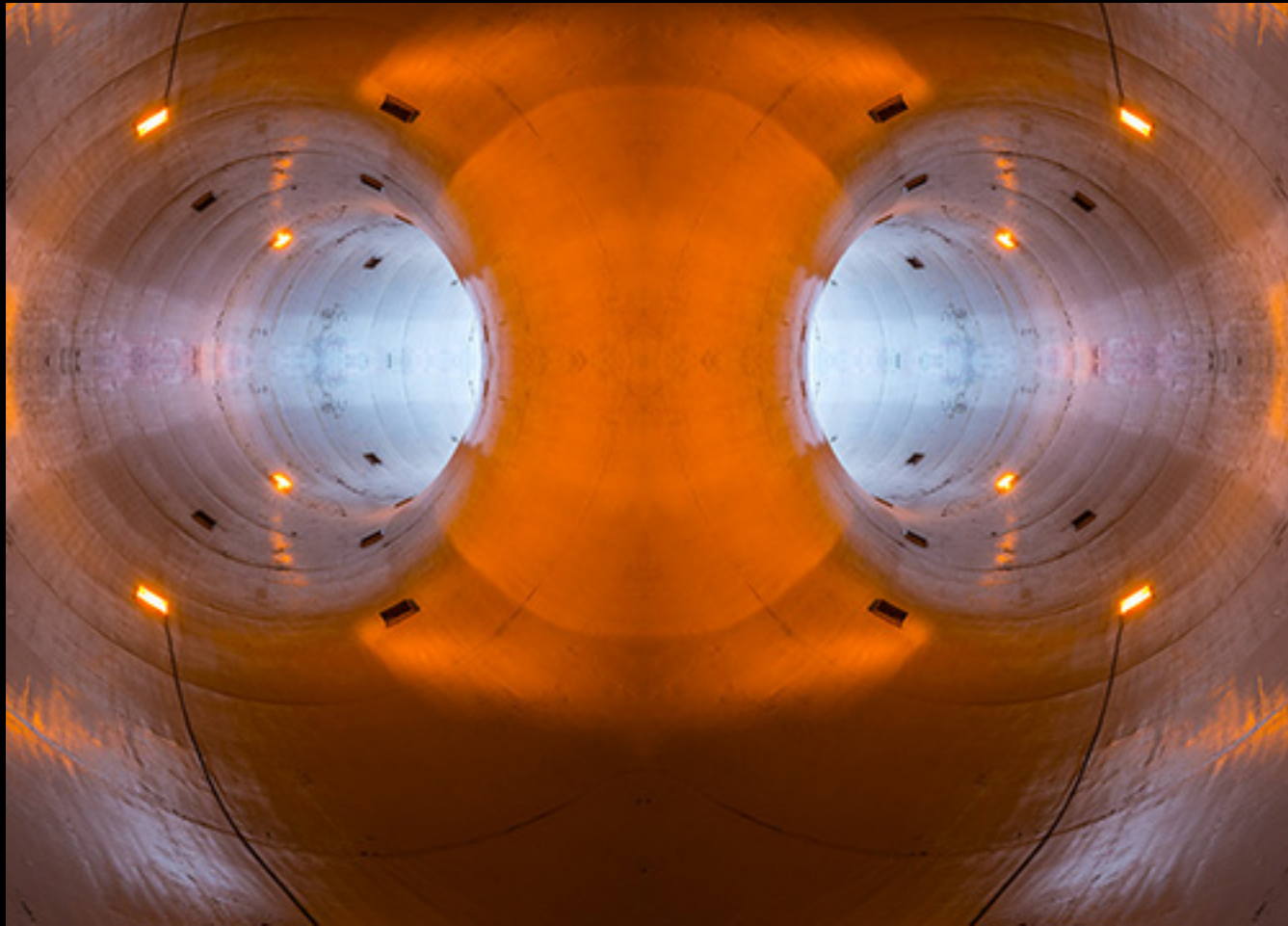
The second point would have been very difficult to work out any other way, but was simple with Liquify.



This tunnel is on the road up the west side of Rocky Butte. The road does a switchback by curving back over itself, requiring an unusual, tightly turning tunnel.

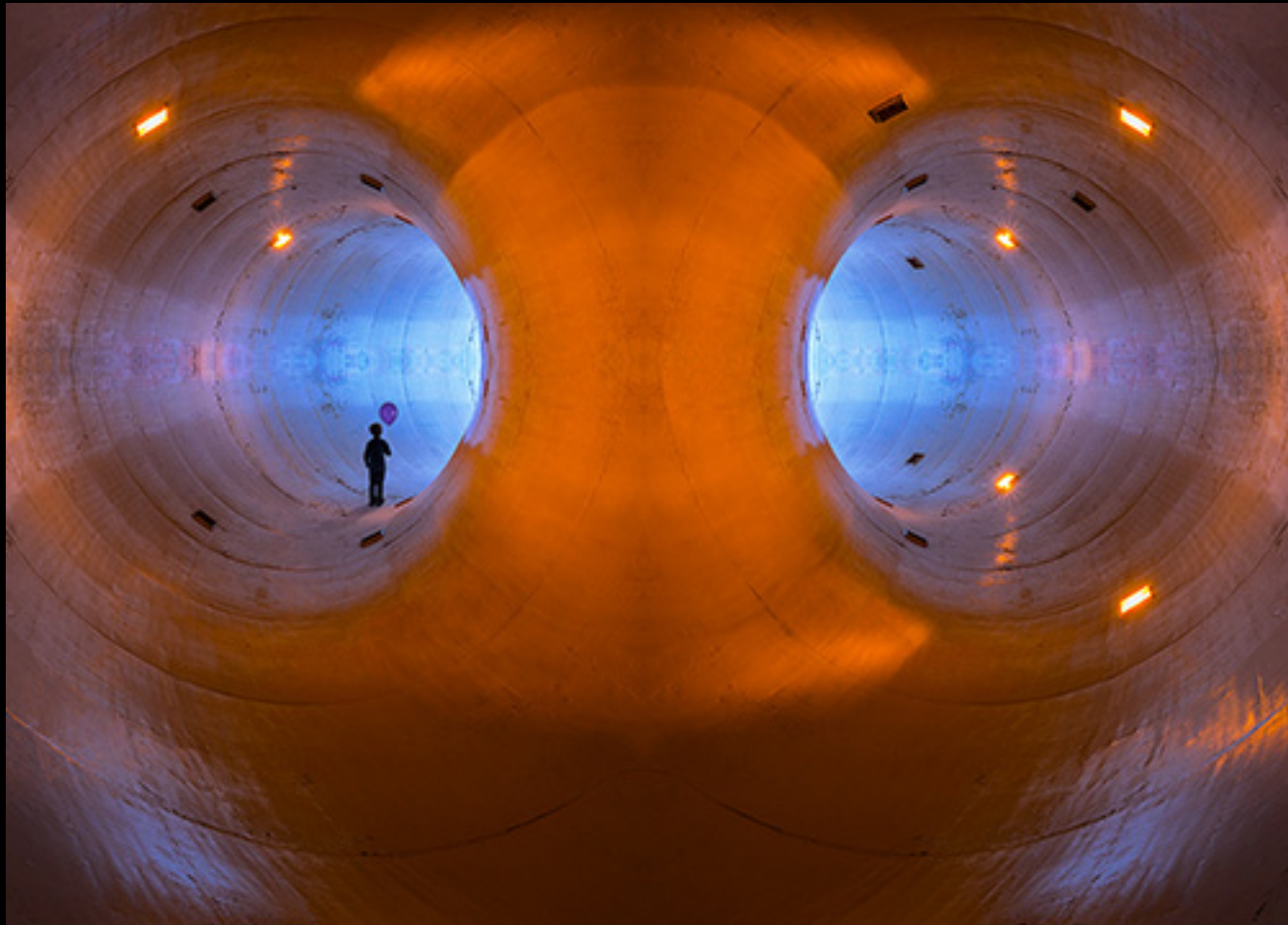


I thought it made interesting material for mirroring: this is a straight double mirror of the image with some cropping. But the tube effect isn't quite right due to the dents and I didn't like the way the shadows and some of the lines meet in a V shape.



Solution: use Liquify on the original image before mirroring to make sure the lines run straight into the mirror lines. That eliminates the V shapes, turning them into U shapes. The Warp tool was handy to pull the dark lines along the bottom of the tube more toward each other, helping to create sort of a doughnut look.





As usual, the final image required changes to color and contrast, in addition to a lot of cloning to eliminate some of the symmetrical elements, plus masking in the figure and shadow.

For the rest of the topics, fire up  
Photoshop and open the example  
images.

Then return to this presentation for a  
few final images.

# Topics & Corresponding Example Files

Light Aggregation – 1\_LightAggregation.tif  
Creating Shadows (1) – 2\_ShadowExample\_1.tif  
Creating Shadows (2) – 3\_ShadowExample\_2.tif  
Adding Texture (1) – 4\_AddingTexture.tif  
Adding Texture (2) – 5\_CompositeWithTexturedFace.tif  
Adding Texture (3) – 6\_TexturePlusSmudge.tif  
Creating Electrical Discharge – 7\_ElectricalDischarge.tif  
Creating Disintegration (1) – 8\_Disintegration.tif  
Creating Disintegration (2) – 9\_ExampleBrush.tif  
Actions – 10\_TwirlAction.tif  
Displacement Mapping – 11\_DisplacementMapping.tif

There is a set of tiff-format files in the same folder as this presentation on the 4Cs website. Each file has multiple layers, including layers with text that explain the technique being illustrated. If there is a “Read me” text layer, make sure that is turned on and follow the directions there.





# Examples from 4Cs

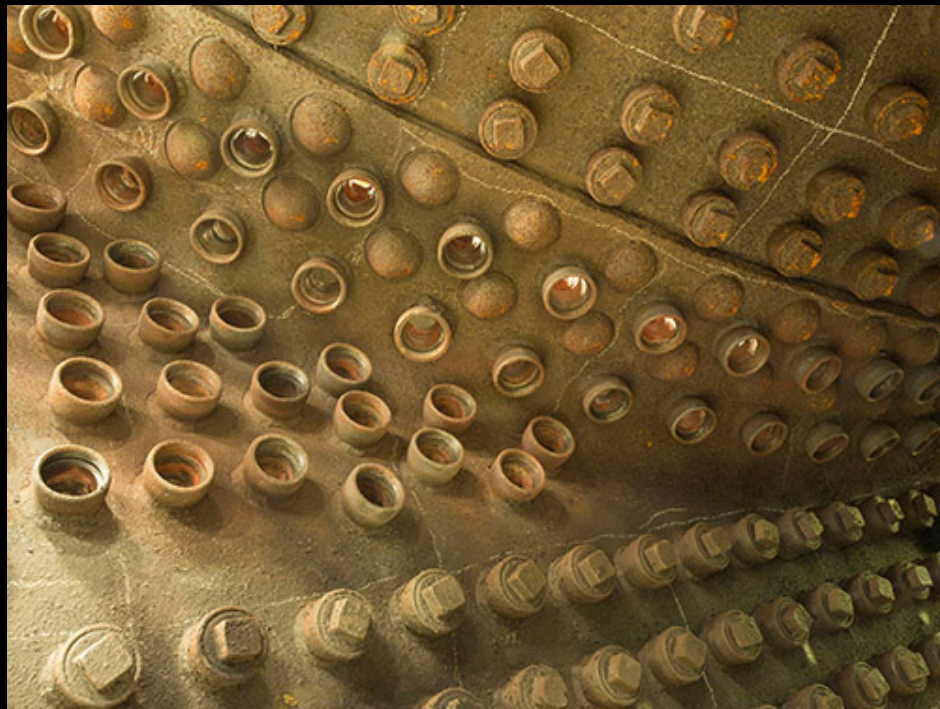
Dan Hottenroth (FGCC) has had several particularly memorable images of this type in the last few years, images that have done well in 4Cs competition. He graciously agreed to let me show his images and the way he built them.



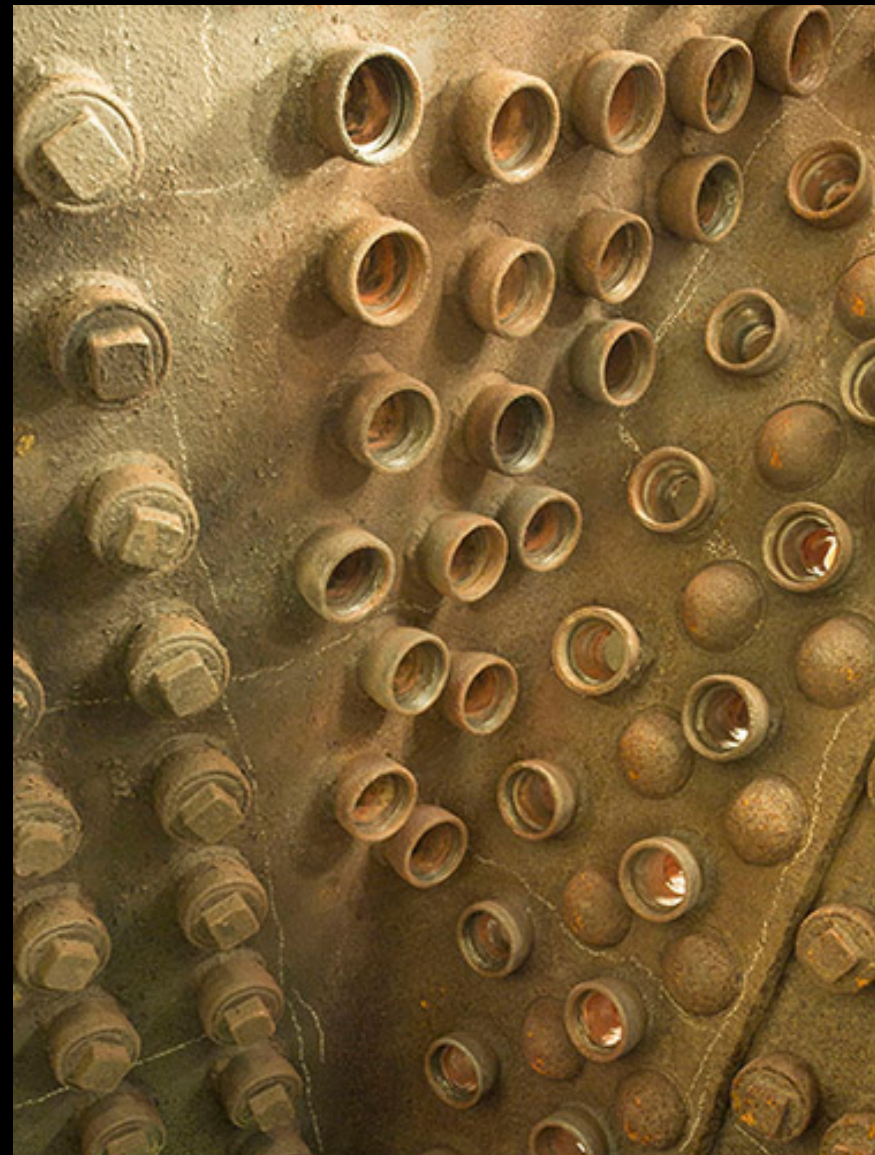
“Looking For Love in All the  
Wrong Places”

2015 Top 80 HM





It started as the image above, the underside of a steam locomotive boiler at the Heritage Rail Center.



Step 1: Rotate to vertical.





Step 2: Add a tentacle, add a hole for the tentacle to come out of, bump up contrast, and eliminate light coming from inside the boiler.

Step 3: Shift the color of the background and part of the tentacle





Step 4: increase contrast and add shadow around the tentacle

Done!

It's a simple composite and I think it is so effective because of four aspects:

- A) The concept: a tentacle exploring an unlikely spot
- B) The mirrored use of circular shapes in the tentacle and background
- C) The color of the background, which has an old-copper, Captain Nemo feel
- D) The color contrast with the tentacle



“Green Man”

2014





Original images





Step 1: Blend the face into the tree image with variable opacity: the eyes are solid but the rest of the face is either fully or partly transparent



Step 2: Change eye color





Step 3: Add contrast.

Done!

I think one important reason this works is that the shape of the trees echoes the shape of a head, making the tree tops read as hair.



Lost in the Bowels of Portland  
2013 QEID Creative 1<sup>st</sup> Place





Original image, from the club field trip to the Swan Island Sewage Pumping Station (thus the title's reference to bowels)



Step 1: Mask in toy car and person





Step 2: Increase contrast





Step 3: Add shadows under car and figure, and down shaft

Done!

If you want to see amazing work on  
the internet...

...search for these three names:

Jerry Uelsmann:

He's been doing surreal composites in the darkroom since the 60's

John Paul Caponigro

Does magic with not much besides water, rocks, and skies

Erik Johanssen

The master of idea-driven, surreal scenarios

# Final Thoughts

There are two types of photography: hunting and farming.  
Hunting is fun and rewarding, but there is a special satisfaction in farming when you make something uniquely your own. I hope you try it!

*finis*