

# How to Use Paint in Water Technique for Cool Liquid Photography

Is that a [3D model](#)? Is that a combination of two completely different images? These are the comments I got after I posted my shots from my Desintegrated series, where a tomato, chilli pepper, and broccoli seem to vaporize into a colorful cloud.

No, it's not 3D or any elaborate post-processing. This effect was made in-camera. Welcome to the colorful world of paint in water photography!

Let's see how you can create amazing paint shapes underwater and step up your [creative still life photography](#).



Disintegrated Tomato. My first experiment with paint in water photography

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## How to Pick a Hero Object

First of all, imagine a picture you want to get and pick an object that will be a hero of your shot.

You can shoot only abstract clouds of paint, that's cool too. Especially if you combine two or three [colors](#) in one cloud.

But, with a specific recognizable object, you can [tell a story with your photo](#). Your shot becomes not only a cool wallpaper but a [work of art](#).



Abstract clouds are fine...

You can put an amazing cloud of paint behind a perfume bottle. Or pour some paint inside a [martini glass](#) and make a 'cloud cocktail'.



But clouds with a story are even better!

You can pick some [fruits or vegetables](#) and make them dissolve in colorful clouds. Or maybe even photograph several objects at the same time and make a fast-dissolving salad.

[Flowers](#) are also a great choice for this trick. For example, here I picked a tiny Like icon made out of thick [paper](#).

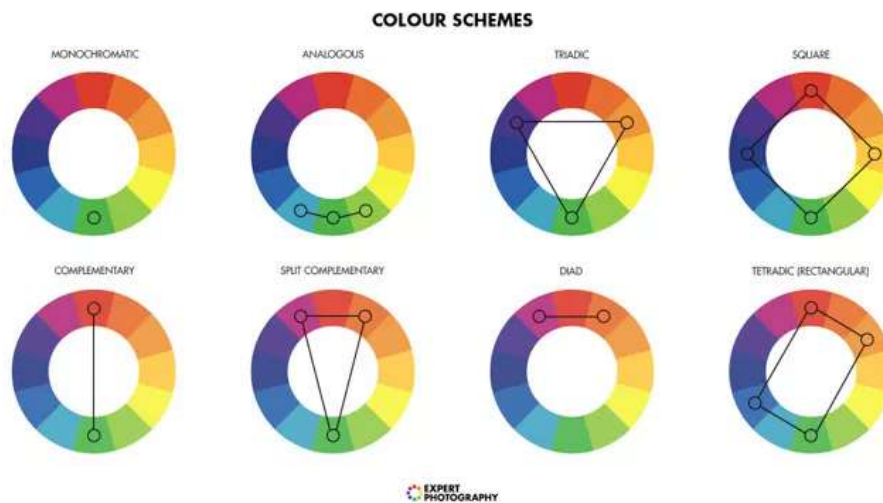


Try using different fruits and vegetables

# Check the Color Wheel Before Mixing Colors

It's very tempting to use complementary colors in abstract liquid photography. Getting an image with a high color contrast is a good idea, right?

Well, not when you're dealing with real paint. Mix red with green in a fish tank and you'll get an unpleasant brown-ish mess. The same goes for purple and yellow or a popular combination of orange and blue.



Pick colors that stay on the same quarter (or at least half) of the wheel, and not directly oppose each other.

Instead, use colors that are a bit closer to each other, but still have some color contrast. Say, blue and hot pink would produce a fantastic shade of lilac.

Warm yellow and colder shades of green can look very fresh. And orange with red can be a fiery combination!

I recommend thinking about a rainbow. If you can imagine your color combination creating a nice gradient inside a rainbow, you're on the right path!



# What Props Do You Need?

## Fish Tank

The first thing we need is a small [fish tank](#). I can't stress enough that the fish tank should be really SMALL! Four litres would be enough.

It's important because after every iteration we need to clean and refill the fish tank. And start again.

It's much easier if you can lift it and carry it to the bath or sink without the risk of dropping it or exhausting yourself.





My first fish tank was too big

I made my first experiments in 15-liters fish tank. I consider myself to be a rather sporty person. But carrying around 15 litres of water in a slippery glass box was hard.

After that, I bought the smallest fish tank I could find, and it works like a dream!



So I switched to this one

## Acrylic Paint Mixture

Another important thing is the paint. Keep in mind, that different types of dyes behave differently in water.

[Acrylic paint](#) is much denser than water. It holds together as it drifts through the tank and forms pleasing opaque clouds.

Ink (spirit-based) is light, transparent and a bit hard to control. It has a tendency to escape from the syringe before you start to push it.

Food dye is transparent, not as bright as ink and has the same density as water.



Acrylic paint, ink and a food dye in water.

I favour acrylic paint both for its fantastic look and the natural way it interacts with solid objects.

When I was shooting dissolving tomato or chilli pepper, I assumed that if they dissolve in water, they would produce a dense transparent [smoke](#), as acrylic paint does.



Mixing paint to match the color tone of my object

Before we are ready to form a cloud, we need to have some modifications. First of all, use some water to make acrylic paint a bit less dense. So you can pour it easier.

Don't add too much water! A too watery solution won't produce [sculpture](#)-like shapes we want to see. Also, mix the color to match the tone of your object.

It doesn't have to be 100% correct, but should be close enough.

I like using [syringes](#) without needles for pouring paint. It gives me more control. If you like using something else (even a teacup), that's okay too.



Here I made a mistake and you can see that the red paint is obviously too thick

## Supports for the Main Object

If you're not shooting only abstract clouds of paint, but have an object to play the leading role, you'll need something to fix the object on its place.

The entire construction should be steady and motionless. So the only thing that's moving will be painted.

There can be several solutions to this problem.

- First, use special clamps, if you have them.
- Second, a [sheet of glass](#). For my shot of the chilli pepper, I glued a fork to an additional sheet of glass. If the glass is clean and unscratched, it would be invisible inside the water.
- Third, a combination of a stick, a [glue gun](#), and a [stationary clamp](#). I did that for the shot with Like icon, as you can see.





I didn't have proper clamps and just glued everything to a sheet of glass

Whatever you do, don't use threads and strings. Unless you can attach them at the bottom of the fish tank as well, and thus make the construction steady.

They tend to react on every motion in a body of water, making the object unstable and draining all the fun from the process. Keep everything in its place and enjoy.



I glued this paper icon to a knitting needle and fixed it with a clamp in a position I wanted

# What Photography Gear Do You Need?

The gear we will need is rather simple too: a [camera](#), a [tripod](#) and any light source suitable for [shooting splashes](#). In my case, it's two [speedlights SB-910](#).

On low power, they have a flash duration short enough to freeze the liquid in motion.

You can use almost any lenses you want, but the [macro](#) would be the best choice. The remote release would be helpful too (but it is only a device for convenience, but not the requirement).

Using a tripod is extremely important. It keeps your camera still and secure for sharper shots.

And it means you can focus manually, arrange your composition and just leave your camera in place, watching the beauty of mixing colors. Your camera is ready for a perfect composition with each shot.

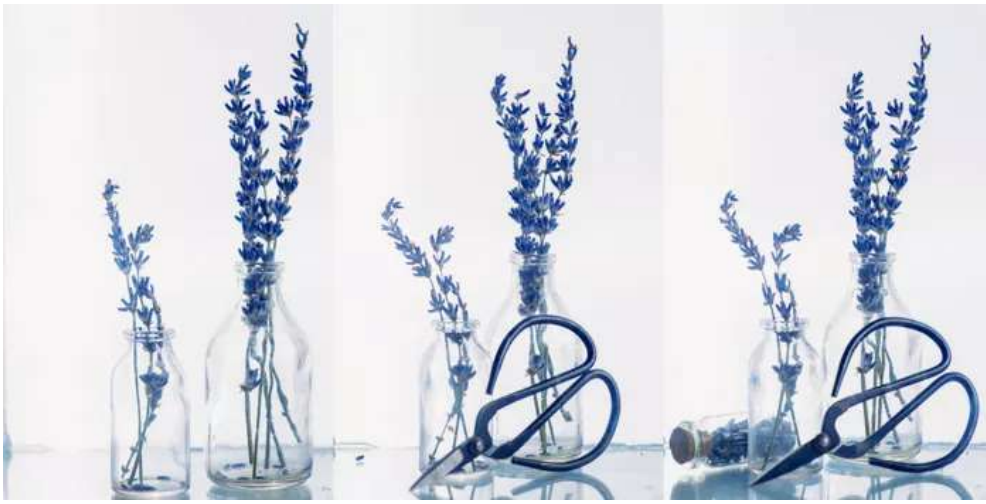


## Setting up the Shot

### Fill the Tank

Fix everything in place. I glued my 'Like' icon to a knitting needle, put it in the tank and fixed with a special clamp. In the case of lavender, I glued everything to the bottom of the tank.

Make sure your objects are steady. Fill the fish tank with water.



Beware the [bubbles](#)! They tend to emerge not only on your objects but on the walls of the fish tank.

To remove them use a [squeegee](#), a wooden spoon or even a simple brush.



Remove bubbles from your objects

## Mind the Orientation for More Exciting Results

You may want to turn your final shots upside down. Sometimes final shot looks more interesting if a cloud of color is going from left to right or from bottom to the top.

You may want to take a vertical photo, rotated later on 90 degrees counterclockwise. In that case, keep in mind that paint will be poured from the top to the bottom.

Set your camera on a tripod taking into account the further rotation.



On the final shot, paint goes from left to right

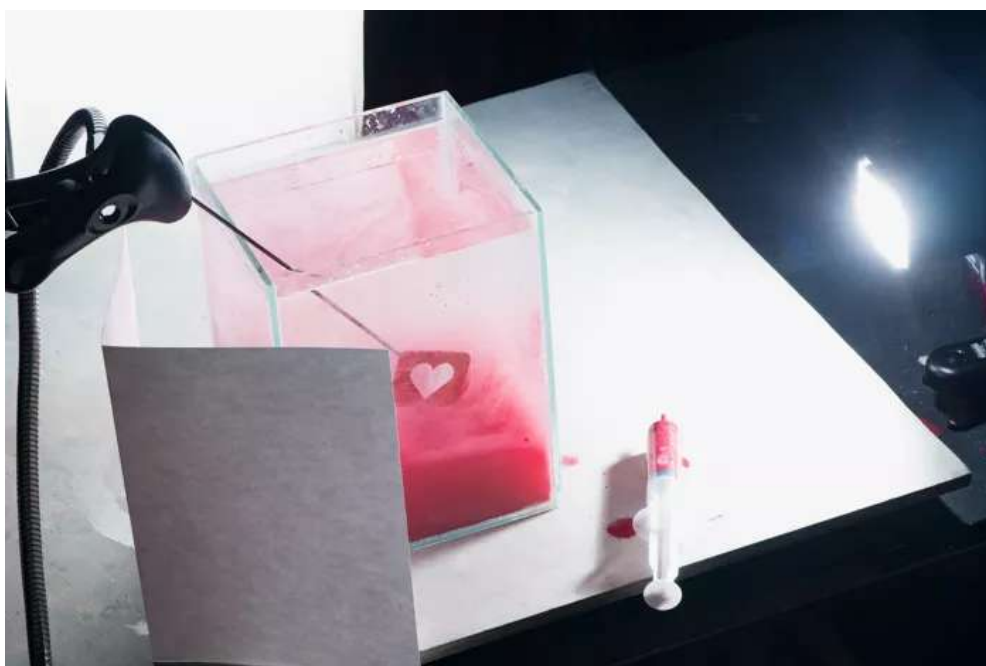
## Set the Lights

The scene is lit by two [speedlights](#) set on the low power. The power from 1/8 down to 1/128 provides a very short pulse that will freeze the motion of the liquid.

One speedlight is inside a small strip-box right behind a fish tank. It works both as a [key light](#) and as a background. Another is on the right side of a fish tank.

Also, there is a sheet of white paper on the left front side working as a [reflector](#) to soften shadows.

I use wireless triggers on each speedlight and a transmitter on the [hot-shoe](#) of my camera. One of my transmitters works as a remote release, which is pretty convenient.



Two lights and a sheet of paper working as a reflector

# Pre-Focus Before Shooting

Sometimes autofocus doesn't work well. Especially in continuous mode. It slows things down and tends to make mistakes. Switch your focus into [manual mode](#) and put the camera on the [tripod](#) to get a nice and sharp image.

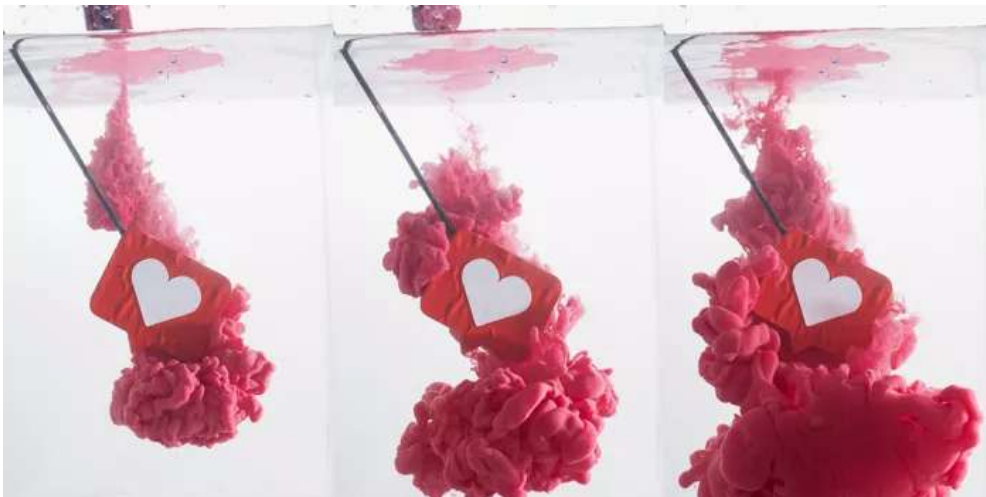
Focus on your main object. Or if you're shooting abstract shapes of paint, take any random item and hold it in the middle of the tank. Then pre-focus on it and switch to [manual focus](#) to lock off the focus point.

## Take the Shot!

Set your camera on a continuous mode to make several shots in a row.

If you're working with [speedlights](#) your shutter speed would depend only on their flash duration. So set the synchronization shutter speed and adjust the [aperture](#) to get a well-exposed image.

If you're using [natural light](#), set the fastest shutter speed possible to freeze the motion of the liquid.



Pour and shoot!

Check if everything is fixed and pour some paint a bit behind your object. Try to make the paint touch the object, but not get in front of it.

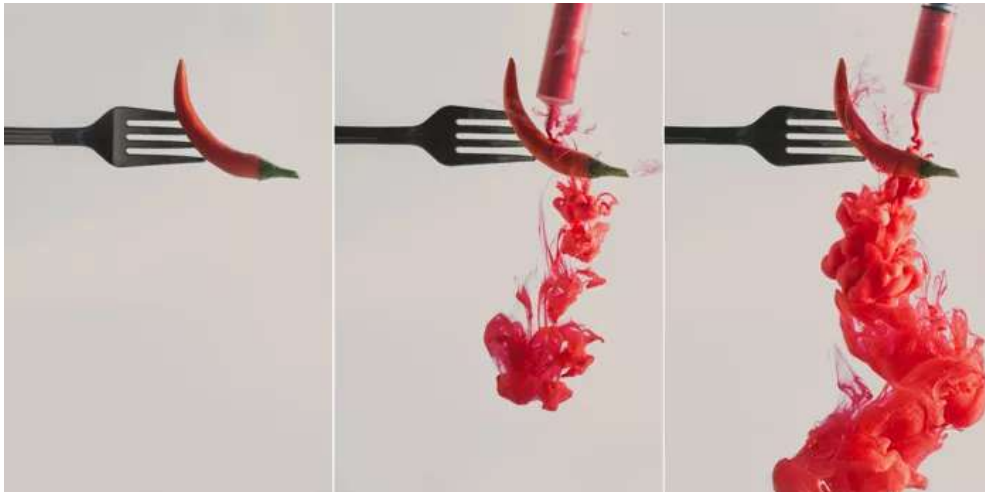
Don't let the paint hide the main object, it will only create a mess. Pour it from behind or from the side and be careful with pressure force.





What happens if you are not careful with paint

Also, pour very close to the surface. If you drop paint from height, you will make it move faster, and it may impact the water harder, making the process more difficult.



After each iteration we need to clean and refill the tank, so be careful where you point the flow of paint

Take a sequence of shots while the paint is making beautiful [clouds](#).



Try using two colors, it makes final images even more interesting

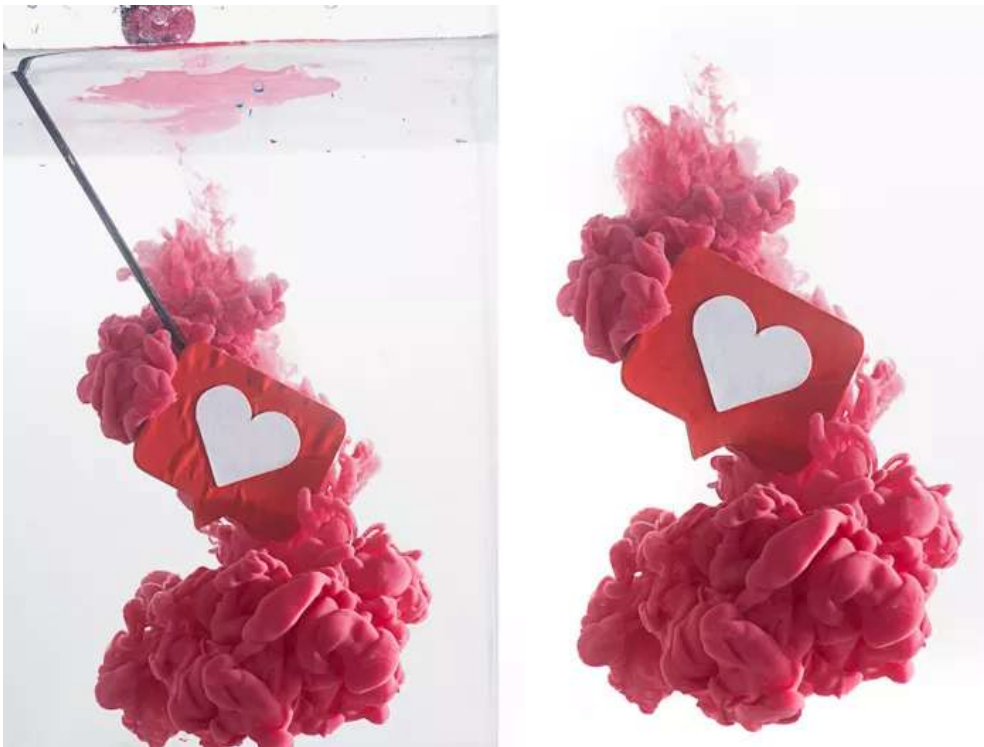
# How to Post-Process Your Photographs

Choose the best shot and give it a little polish. In my case, I needed to remove bubbles on my Like icon, because it was damaged by water.

That's not a big deal, a couple of minutes of working with [Clone Stamp](#) fixed that.



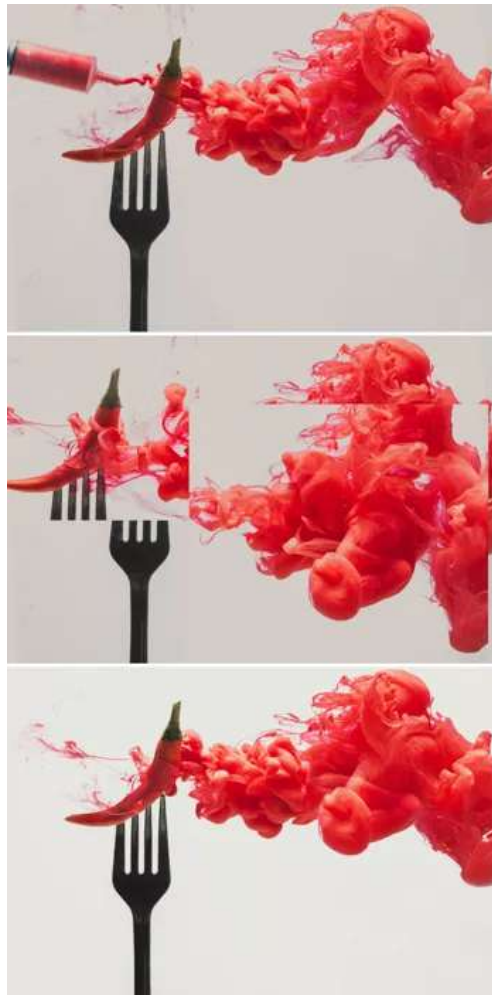
Best shot from the series



I deleted the supports and a water reflection above

Also, you can add some details from other iterations. For example, replacing the syringe on the left side of my chilli pepper with some swirls of paint.

Adjust [colors](#) and [contrast](#) and delete all random dust particles and scratches.



Here I combined two pictures together  
to mask the syringe

Voila! You got a colorful shot with clouds of paint! Now, try it with different objects or attempt to  
arrange a more complicated scene.

Here are some more examples of what you can do.



One more example of simple post-processing



Fruits look great with this trick!





Don't be afraid to experiment with colors

## Conclusion

Hope you can use this tutorial as a starting point on your way to fantastic and colorful photos.

Your turn now! Feel free to show us your photos in the comments.

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