Common Tools and Found Objects for Mixed Media Art

Everyday Objects Perfect for Mixed Media Artists

To take mixed media art to its heights, you have to be a bit of an adventurer — a tinkerer — a risk taker. Rae Missigman is all the above when it comes to her art. But she’s a detective as well. She sleuths out the common tools and everyday objects we walk by every day that are perfect for making art marks.

Rae shares the essential tools she’s discovered for mark-making in her book, *Paint-Play-Explore: Expressive Mark-Making Techniques in Mixed Media*. Discover how you can invent and reinvent endlessly with Rae’s top found objects and common tools shared here.

Upcycled tidbits offer a unique set of relatively common tools for mark making that can yield extraordinary results on the page.

Reusable instruments such as plastic knives, combs, brushes, straws and stirrers can be used to create the simplest of organic marks, such as lines, circles, dots and scratch marks.

Pieces of bubble wrap, cardboard tubing, fruit netting and sponges will each leave an unusual imprint when coupled with the same mediums — smudges, rings, hash marks, peaks and valleys, each mark uniquely different each time they are applied. Cotton swabs, gift cards, droppers and even nail polish all have the ability to create singular marks within a piece of art.

Swipes, stripes, drips and splatters: each upcycled tool creates random yet repetitive marks that cannot be duplicated, only replicated— the beauty of their raw and disposable forms.
Merged with an array of mediums, each of these basic marks will appear differently according to the medium it is paired with when applied to a specific substrate. While paint will leave heavier, toothier marks, inks paired with these tools will leave marks that appear less defined, more abstract and blended.

Nail polish can be applied with precision and form specific marks of color, or its wand can be used to spatter the paint across the page in an uncontrolled swathe. An upcycled toothbrush can be used to apply ink or paint in a pattern specific to its head shape, or it can be used to pull and drop the ink across the surface of your work. A sponge can be used to add simple impressions to a substrate, or it can be paired with a watery ink and used to add a wash of color to the entire surface.

Think of your hands as a built-in brayer, allowing you to move paint and other wet mediums across the surface of your canvas quickly and in large sweeps.
Without the added extension of an outside tool, your fingers and hands allow your marks to be added in both a fluid and defined manner. In creating with these takealong tools, you will find that using your hands and even your lower forearms can add an unexpected and delightful layer to your work.

The results are both surprising and unique: Each artist’s hands leave their own distinct texture behind in their wake. Just as your hands are a brayer, your fingers are your brushes, varying in size and shape and each leaving a detailed and unique mark with each stroke.

Wrap one half of a cardboard tube with elastic bands in assorted sizes. Use two-sided tape to adhere a piece of bubble wrap to the other side of the tube. You may choose to wrap an entire tube in either elastic bands or bubble wrap, resulting in a wider finished application of each type of print.

Add paint to the bubble wrap on your cardboard tube. You can simply brush the paint on for a thinner, more precise impression when rolled, or you can roll the wrapped tube directly into the paint, which will result in a thicker, less defined print. Roll the loaded wrap over paper to make the print. Remove the wrap or let it dry before using again to avoid mixing the colors.
Use a heavily loaded brush to paint all of the elastic bands on the cardboard tube. The cardboard will want to soak up some of the wet paint, so a heavier application will result in a more defined print of the bands when rolled. Keeping the bands near one end of the tube will make it easier to roll once the paint is applied.

Roll the loaded cardboard tube across your substrate in a quick, fluid motion. Repeat the motion until all of the bands have been exhausted of color. Crisscross the marks as you roll to get interesting and painterly lines. The bands will leave a slight ridge along the edges of the color, adding even more dimension to the marks as they dry.

You can cut, fold and reshape cardboard tubes into a huge assortment of mark making shapes; however, the natural circular form makes a great mark for larger projects. You can reuse these as they dry or cut them down and start fresh with a new color. Just dip in paint and press gently but firmly onto your substrate.

Similar to their larger counterparts, drinking straws can be cut and shaped like the cardboard tubes. These are great mark makers and leave a less than perfect imprint when heavily loaded with paint. For larger projects, consider using an elastic band to secure several straws together to create one large multipoint tool.
Heavy-duty plastic cards are a great repurposed tool. Dipped in paint, the edge of the card can be used to make painterly lines. Rocking the card back and forth as you apply the paint to your substrate will create small valleys in the paint that, when dry, result in interesting texture. This same method also works well with texture pastes.

Key cards are easily altered to create an even larger array of marks. Try wrapping the card with elastic bands in varying sizes. Dip the banded card into paint and pull it across your substrate, rocking the card away from you as you pull. You can also snip small pieces off of the card’s edge using heavy-duty scissors, to create interesting and decorative scrapers.
Makeup wands are a great tool for creating lots of small line marks quickly. They are designed to be heavily loaded with mascara and work wonderfully with paint and ink. Dip the wand in acrylic ink and brush along your substrate. The first stroke line will be much heavier followed by thinner, more defined lines. Paint will give an even heavier, less defined impression.

Easy to find and budget friendly, cotton swabs make great mark makers and are handy in a pinch as a detail brush. The absorbent quality of these tools make them great for ink and paint, allowing a longer open time with the medium as you work. Many of these tools are double ended, giving you the added bonus of working with two colors at once.
Dense sponges are perfect for making lots of interesting marks in your artwork. All-natural sponges will have a rougher, more irregular surface texture while the manufactured versions will have a smoother, more consistent exterior. Both are easily cut into smaller shapes. Use dry with paint or ink for defined prints or dampen before adding medium for more fluid marks.

Use a recycled clothespin to create a series of nearly identical marks. Dip either of the two wooden ends into paint or ink, and press firmly onto your substrate. You will be able to make a large number of marks quickly given that every imprint will form two marks.
Organic tools such as leaves, twigs, fruits and vegetables are interesting choices for mark-making tools in that they are truly unique by their very nature. No two leaves, twigs, fruits or vegetables will ever be alike, thus their marks will be one of a kind. These tools can be used in a variety of ways, each offering an uncommon and distinct mark.

Leaves, flowers and vegetables all leave wonderful impressions. Adding paint and ink to these organic implements and using them as stamps is a delicate but rewarding process, leaving intricate and detailed impressions. Sticks and twigs make equally handy mark-making tools.

When dipped into wet mediums they can be used to draw or sketch simple, rudimentary marks and add delicate loose details across a foundation. A popular and gratifying technique that is easily coupled with these simple organic tools is monoprinting. You can create one-of-a-kind layered prints using these living elements as simple masks on a printing plate.

A word of caution: not all living elements make good tools. Always do your homework and stay away from all varieties of plants and flowers that are naturally poisonous or may cause allergic reactions. Consider gathering your organic implements from within the safety of your own garden or yard, or consult a botanical guide before collecting your living tools.
Having a wide variety of paintbrushes with assorted head shapes and sizes will ensure you have just the right tool to create specific marks as you work.

Palette knives bring dimension to the table and are indispensable when it comes to building texture and adding a unique sense of flavor to a piece of art. Choosing the right knife is requisite to adding a specific finish to a piece. Small, rounded blades are perfect for adding paint to small areas while wide, flat tips are best for spreading smooth, even texture to a large surface.

When searching for a true workhorse of a tool, you will need to look no further than your brayer. It has the power to spin a full and impactful background on a large work in a short amount of time as well as roll the final touches across your piece, suddenly and fully bringing it to life.

Each of the most basic mark-making tools—pens, pencils, crayons, markers and ink-filled brushes—offer their own unique fingerprint when it comes to forming fundamental marks.

These simple writing elements are easy to gather and provide you, the artist, with limitless opportunities for forming and shaping marks on a variety of substrates. As you experiment with these uncomplicated tools, you will discover their individual natures: some are flexible and yielding, allowing you to create outside the bounds of their intended use; others are unbending and less manipulative in what they will allow you to render.

Practice and play with each implement, stretching the limits of its intended use. Dedicate a journal to making notes on all your mark-making tools. Observe how your writing implements respond to water, paint and other mediums. Test them on all varieties of substrates and make notes so you can track what each tool does and how it reacts when paired with other elements. These rudimentary tools are the ones you will most often reach for when making your mark.
Mixed media artist Rae Missigman wears the proud badge of mark-making adventurer. In her book, *Paint-Play-Explore: Expressive Mark-Making Techniques in Mixed Media*, she brings you more than 60 mark-making tools and mediums and two dozen demos on collage, monoprinting and more. Plus ways to turn your marks into inventive art. *Your copy* is waiting for you!