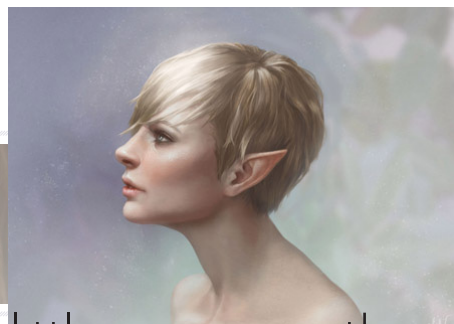# Step by Step OF A
REALISTIC
PORTRAIT

Make painting a photo-realistic portrait a little easier with these tips and tricks by professional artist **Ashley Walters**

1 GET REFERENCE

The first step to creating a highly realistic portrait is compiling detailed realistic reference. While you could scour the web looking for a photo, instead try creating your OWN reference. Then you'll have a one of a kind portrait and you'll have no problems with copyright.

The simplest way to get reference is to take a photograph of yourself or a friend. Taking a photo is a good idea for things like props, fabric, and hair if you are still a novice at painting.

TIP: When taking your own photo, be sure you capture a clear directional lightsource to create depth in your final image.

If you're tired of drawing yourself over and over again (like me), try creating a simple set up in a free 3D program like DAZ studio. I don't usually bother with things like using it for clothing and props, but it's a great way to set up lighting and establish perspective. Once you've got the hang of it you may find it to be an invaluable resource.
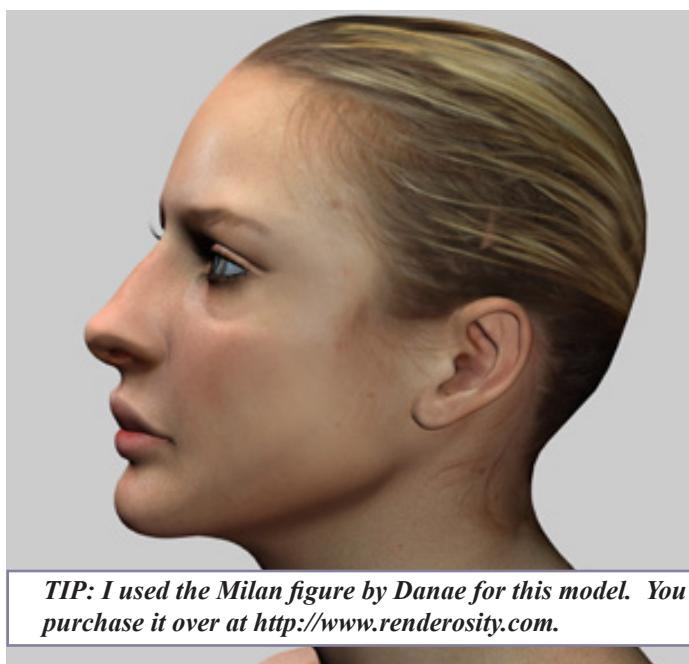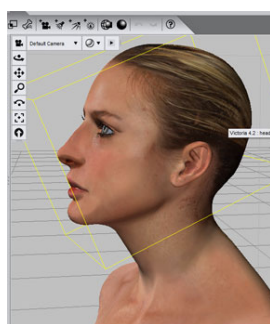
TIP: I used the Milan figure by Danae for this model. You can purchase it over at http://www.renderosity.com.

2 SKETCH

Start a new document with 3000px by 2200px at 300 ppi in photoshop.

For the background I used a photograph I had taken a while back and used the gaussian blur filter to create an out of focus look. Create a new layer for your sketch. Use your reference as a guide as you sketch in a dark burgundy color with a dry brush. Eyeball back & forth as you freehand your sketch.
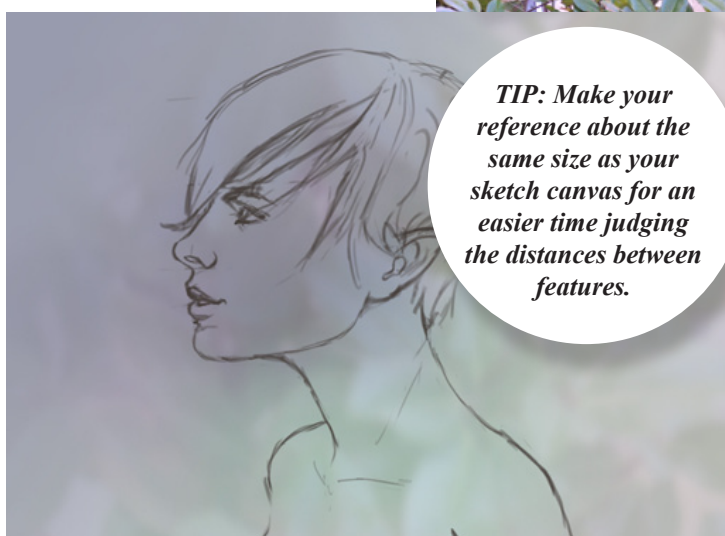
TIP: Make your reference about the same size as your sketch canvas for an easier time judging the distances between features.

TIP: Don't be afraid of deviating from your reference. In this case I drew a more delicate nose and invented a hair style after looking a pixie cuts online for inspiration.

3 CREATE A PALETTE & BlOCK IN

The next step is to pick a skin tone. Select a basic flesh color with the eyedropper tool (press i for the quick key), make a scribble with a hard round brush (press b). With each scribble increase the saturation as you go darker to build up a palette. Add some cooler and warmer hues for variation.
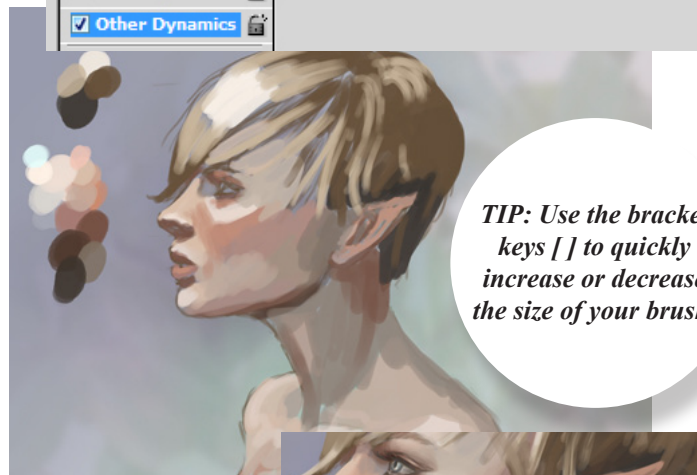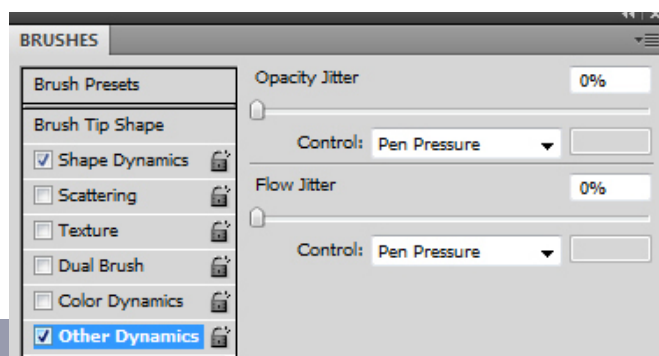
TIP: Use the bracket keys [ ] to quickly increase or decrease the size of your brush.

Next, block in color directly on your sketch using a hard round brush. Paint with a clear delineation between light and shadow as you build up the color. Keep your opacity and flow at 100% and rely on the sensitivity of your tablet to blend the colors. Change the size of your brush as you go. Go smaller for detailed areas and larger for big areas. If you need help figuring out what color to place where, use the eyedropper tool on your reference to see about how dark that section should be and pick a color close in value from your palette.
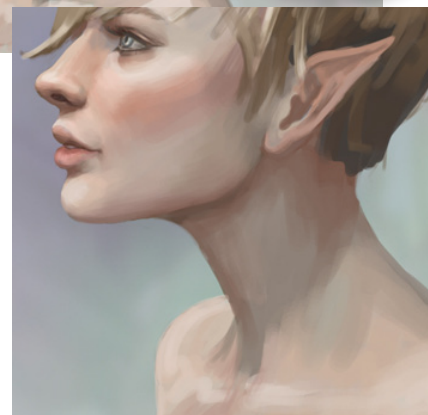
4 ADD TEXTURE & REFINE

Adding texture will have the highest impact on making your work look real. For the next step you will need to install some skin pore brushes like Nathie's found at Deviantart: http://fav.me/d3eqrjf

Once you have the brushes installed, create a new layer and carefully paint over your image with the skin pore brush being sure to match the colors and shading of your painting underneath. Don't go too large. Remember, you want the texture to resemble tiny pores.
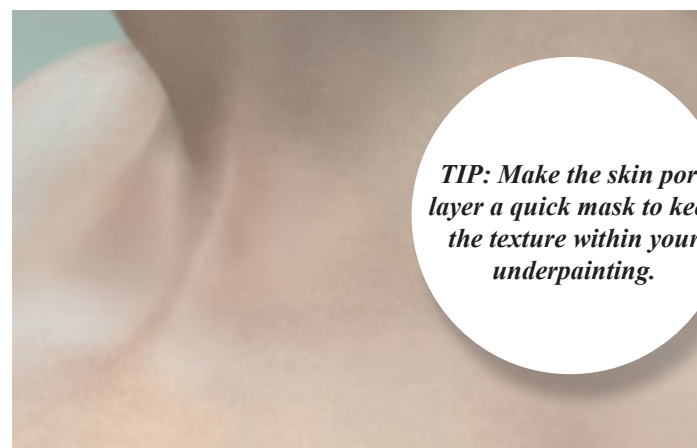
TIP: Make the skin pore layer a quick mask to keep the texture within your underpainting.

To add more depth along the edges of the figure, pick a darker color, create a new layer, and with a soft round brush set to 400px wide paint along the edge of the back and neck and under the chin. Set the layer mode to multiply and reduce the opacity of the layer to 20%. Erase any areas that look funny and make the layer a quick mask over the under-painting.

TIP: Flip your image horizontally every now and then to check your proportions. It forces you to view your image from a different perspective and allows you catch mistakes.

While you continue to refine, don't be afraid to use the liquify tool to correct mistakes. Once you are happy with everything, merge the layers together. Save the document frequently.

5 PAINTING HAIR

To refine the hair, create chunks for a more natural look. Notice too that even light blond hair is *darker* than the skin when thrown in shadow (the only exception to this is white blond or white hair on tan or dark skin). Put the highlight on the hair based on what has been established as the light source in the rest of the painting.

In this case, the light is coming from the top left. Push the area of light by using lighter colors in that general area and having the rest of the hair in shadow.

TIP: Drawing lighter strands of hair against darker areas of value creates depth and helps the strands stand out better.

While drawing hair, gradually decrease the size of the round brush as you refine until the brush is the size of a single strand. Vary your strokes. Once you are happy with things, add fly away strands here and there for the final touch of realism.

Blur some areas in shadow to help create a focal point over the highlight area. In general, areas are most detailed in the greatest area of light.

6 FINAL TOUCHES

Skin has luminescence which is created by the oils of the skin catching light. The key to creating this effect is painting jagged, sporadic, pore-like specular highlights. Use a spackle brush like a stamp, or select a sharp dry brush and reduce the size. Draw in tiny areas of the lightest color from your palette on the nose, just beneath the inside corner of the eye, the cheekbone area, on the top of the lower lip, and just above the lip. If things are looking too sharp, blur the edges slightly and erase some of the edges with a soft brush on low opacity and flow.

TIP: Use sharper brushes for smaller details.

On a new layer, draw in some dark purple veins around the eye and nose area by selecting a tiny hard round brush and scribbling. Use the blur tool to soften edges, set the layer to overlay, and reduce the opactiy until it looks right.

Draw cracks in the lips and details around the eye with a small hard round brush. Draw in some eye lashes and eyebrows with a gentle hand and a tiny brush. Add skin imperfections here and there for a more natural look.

The final step is to mimic the atmospheric effects of light. First, create a new layer and with a large soft round brush in the lightest highlight color paint in an area just over the light area of the hair.

Create a new quick mask layer just above the portrait. Select some of the background color and with a large soft round brush paint around the edges of the figure like the far shoulder. Reduce the opacity of the layer until the effect is subtle. This pushes the outer edges of her figure into the background.

On a new layer create particles catching the light by using a small spackle brush and adding flying dust.

FINAL TIP: On a new top layer, select a neutral middle gray. Use the noise filter and blur the results. Set the layer to overlay and reduce the opacity to get a subtle grainy texture which mimics photographs.

To truly achieve a realism, there is no substitute for skill in drawing accurately. If you find yourself too far from painting at this level, practice drawing people from life.

Happy Painting!