

Image Transfers With Acrylic Gel Medium

By [djeucalyptus](#) in [DesignArt](#)



Introduction: Image Transfers With Acrylic Gel Medium



This ridiculously simple technique for transferring images into a plastic yields a wide variety of possible uses.

The thin nature and flexibility of the gel makes it well-suited for incorporating into artworks. Its transparency gives some interesting possibilities... think light boxes or night lights (I did a multi-piece light installation with gel medium transfers as part of BFA work). The malleability makes it well suited for jewelry and other small craft projects.

This tutorial shows the basics - more the process than a final product - your imagination can take it from something simple into something amazing. There's almost an infinite number of applications across the arts and crafts spectrum.

And I realize the image of the BMW isn't the most artistically dynamic, but it works pretty well to show the process.

Step 1: Materials



The **basic materials** list is pleasantly short. What you'll need:

- acrylic gel medium
- brush
- dish or tray
- water
- scissors (in case trimming is necessary)
- an image to transfer

notes on the gel:

the beauty of this technique lies in the nature of the acrylic - you can adjust and modify the gel to suit your needs... whether using retarder to increase smoothness, mixing in acrylic pigment, or even mixing in other materials (i've seen everything from gold flake to sand mixed into the acrylic gel). I use Liquitex's Gloss Heavy Gel Medium, but any clear acrylic medium works.

notes on the image:

Any image can be used for transferring, although some work significantly better than others. Uncoated magazines/newspapers work beautifully, but more coated photos/postcards/etc. may or may not transfer well - a color photo copy would be recommended to increase the probability of a successful transfer. Laser printed images work, but ink-jet prints generally don't work as well.

notes on the brush:

you can use any brush you'd line, whether bristle or foam. The different textures of the brushes will lay the gel medium down differently and will yield varied final products.

Step 2: Apply First Coat of Gel Medium

Place the image on a work surface (dried acrylic gel can be difficult to remove from unwanted areas).

Apply a thin coat of the acrylic gel medium with the brush, being careful to keep brush strokes smooth and even (unless you really want to build up the brush strokes and have them come through in the final product).

- Optional: If you wanted to add other acrylic media like pigments, or even other materials, it can be integrated in this step. In my example, I just stuck with pure gel for this go 'round.

Allow the first coat to dry (usually takes between 20 minutes to an hour, depending on thickness and air conditions). When dry, the milky acrylic gel will turn completely clear (see the photo!).

Some people prefer to tape down their images (I've even heard of setting it in a glass pane with spray adhesive to ensure it remains flat) but I've personally never found the buckling of the paper with the moisture from the gel to be a significant problem.

Step 3: Wash Your Brush!

There's little worse than a brush that has dried acrylic medium gummed up in it!

Wash the brush in warm running water after each application. Enough time for the coat to dry is enough for the brush to dry out as well. Not rinsing your brush will pretty much render the brush useless.

And just to be safe, I'd rinse it in a non-food prep sink, just to be safe. Acrylic isn't the healthiest stuff in the world (this would be a good point to mention it's not advisable to consume the gel medium either, even if it looks like sour cream).

Step 4: Continue Applying Coats of Gel

Apply the second coat of gel medium, alternating the brush direction to ensure an even application. Each alternating layer should be brushed in a perpendicular direction to the previous coat.

Allow the second coat to fully dry again, turning clear, before applying the next coat.

Continue applying thin coats (and allowing for drying) until you have a fairly substantial layer of gel medium. Usually somewhere between 4 and 10 coats is ideal, depending on thickness of each application and desired final thickness.

Step 5: Allow the Image to Fully Dry

It's critical that the image coated with the gel be allowed to fully dry, which usually takes around 48 hours. If you can wait longer, up to 72 hrs, it will be to your advantage as it will be better set for the next step.

Step 6: Soak the Image

After the image has fully dried, it's time to soak it in water (as contradictory as that may seem) to dissolve the paper. If the gel hasn't fully set, the acrylic will begin to dissolve as well.

Trim the paper down to the gelled area, if necessary.

Fill a tray/dish/bucket with lukewarm water. too hot, and the acrylic is in danger of softening too much, too cold and dissolving the paper will be more difficult.

Soak for roughly 10 to 15 minutes, but not much longer or else the acrylic may over-soften.

- a note on trays: I'm using a small photo darkroom tray. I highly recommend picking up some darkroom trays for craft use, even if they'll never see a photo. They're made of a tough plastic (or sometimes metal) and hold up to tons of use. For this one, however, you could use pretty much anything... tupperware, a baking dish, even a stopped sink. Just keep food dishes separate from this project as acrylic medium isn't food-safe.

Step 7: Gently Remove the Softened Paper From the Gel

A relatively straight-forward step:

Gently rub the paper side to break up and dissolve the paper from the gel medium.

Be sure to keep working at the gel, getting all of the small paper fiber off of the back. There is usually a small layer left after scrubbing the initial layer off. If you take the time to remove every bit of fiber, the image will look noticeably cleaner/clearer. (see the close-up photo showing the difference).

You may need to empty the water if it gets too saturated with paper pulp.

Step 8: Dry the Gel Image

After carefully scrubbing all of the paper fibers off of the gel, give it one final rinse in fresh water to remove all paper residue and allow to dry.

I usually place the gel images on either glass or plastic. Paper fibers have a tendency to stick. And as long as the gel hasn't dissolved/melted, there shouldn't be any issues with the gel sticking to glass or plastic.

Note that it's normal for the gel to still appear milky, and won't completely clear until dry.

Step 9: The Final Product, Ready for Use

After drying, you're left with the transferred image in the gel. It's ready to use however you chose... incorporate into art projects, paintings, etc., treat it as an object in jewelery or other craft projects, or just use it as a simple window cling: the possibilities are practically endless!