For most of his digital collages, Joseph Cuiccio begins by randomly improvising photo manipulations in Adobe Photoshop, his tool of choice. Usually, he runs a raw digital photograph through Kai Power Tools’ vortex tiling filter. “I can spend hours and sometimes days experimenting with this filter until I hit on something that really catches my artistic eye,” he explains.

Next, he collects as many as a dozen layers of various random designs from these manipulations and combines them, beginning with a main design that he likes and adding variations to that. “Then I place that variation layer underneath the main top layer. Using a large, soft-edged eraser brush, I erase the top layer, letting areas of the bottom layer show through—in a sense combining the two.”

When he’s satisfied with the result, he merges the two layers to create what then becomes his new main design. “I repeat this process over and over until the final image is saturated with intricate detail and depth to create an overall pleasing composition,” he adds.

Fancy Colors

Not all of Cuiccio’s digital images begin with photography. Fancy Colors, one of his favorites and this issue’s cover image, is entirely computer generated. Rather than running photos through the vortex tiling filter, he began with a few patches of vivid color and put them through the filter instead. “This powerful tool can produce quite extreme and bizarre effects even when used on the simplest of images,” he says.

Using this technique, he created a series of variations, each more complex than the last, and then finally combined them. When the final design emerged, he employed a few favorite tweaking rituals. “The crackle filter has a sort of embossing effect when used at a low setting,” he says. “The mosaic tiles filter has that effect as well. I just like the way they bring out detail in certain situations. To create the swirling effects, I used the twirl brushes in the liquefy filter. After a few final color adjustments—mainly shifting the hue/saturation slider around slightly to find just the right hue and intensity—it was complete. One of my favorite pieces was born.”

Admittedly, Cuiccio’s process often involves trial and error. Sometimes he doesn’t even know when the piece is finished. “Occasionally, I go a bit overboard and have to revert to an earlier, simpler version. But after varying degrees of trial and error, I usually discover an equilibrium that lets me declare, ‘I think it’s done.’ Still, sometimes I must literally force myself to stop or I’ll never quit fiddling with it.”

Artistic chaos

Cuiccio does not have a creative arts background. Rather, he studied liberal arts and education in college, which led to a brief teaching stint, after which he managed a photo studio. Eventually, he began experimenting with Photoshop, which led to his very first piece of digital art, Acid Church (see Figure 1). Taking one of the stock images that comes with Photoshop, he dove head first into the program’s filters and effects, fully experiencing its creative potential. After many hours spent exploring, probing, and transforming, he gave birth to
Acid Church and found himself immersed in a whole new world of artistic expression.

That was 1999 and Photoshop remains the only program he uses. “I’ve dabbled with some others, such as Painter and Bryce,” he admits, “but I’m not skilled in drawing or painting and only use my mouse when I work as opposed to a Wacom tablet.” At heart still a photographer, he finds that Photoshop is such a vast program that it gives him all the variety and control he needs. If he ever finds his work becoming stagnant, he might experiment with other programs. “They could provide interesting new raw materials to experiment with, but Photoshop will always be my be-all, end-all program for producing my work.”

So for now, it’s Photoshop to stay. Cuiccio is too entrenched in his improvised approach—one where the mishaps count just as much as the planned outcomes—to switch now. “Many of my favorite pieces were the results of trial-and-error accidents, so I’m always excited by what future ‘accidents’ are in store for me the next time I open Photoshop. I might experiment with other programs to help me explore new artistic directions but I can’t imagine anything replacing Photoshop as my main program.”

Lysergic Overdrive and izihlangu (see Figures 2 and 3) also demonstrate Cuiccio’s photo manipulating skills. For izihlangu, he took photos of a huge chandelier constructed from five or six Zulu war shields called izihlangu. Again running the photos through the vortex tiling filter, he employed his usual technique of layer merging.

“With this filter, the results are always so different,” he says. “The slightest variance can produce drastic changes. It’s exciting to see all the mutations that can occur.”

Cuiccio finds that the results are often so extreme that the final image rarely resembles the original. “You can see, though, one of the shields pretty much intact just right of the center,” he says. “The rest of the piece is complete artistic chaos, which I love.”

Future creative accidents

Cuiccio’s use of robust color schemes has elicited positive feedback. His current portfolio falls into three categories—abstract, fractals, and photo art—with the latter capturing his attention for now. “These result from photographs that I still heavily manipulate, but more subtly so the original’s underlying content remains, as opposed to the abstracts that are altered so extremely that they no longer resemble the originals at all.”

Readers can contact Gary Singh at gsingh@email.sjsu.edu.