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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: Disposing of Acrylic Paint Waste



An acrylic painting station with multi-stage rinsing containers

**Ask the Experts:** “When I wash my acrylic brushes, it seems like a lot of paint goes down the drain, and I’m concerned for how that could impact the environment. Is there a way to get my brushes clean without the waste water going down the pipes?”

**A:** Many artists have become more concerned about how studio cleanup and disposal activities can impact pollution in waterways. Latex paints used on houses and other buildings have been identified as a source of what is called “microplastics pollution”, and artists’ acrylics are based on related synthetic materials.

Microplastics are tiny particles of man-made polymer. Sometimes these occur when consumer plastic items like grocery bags break down; some come from paint washing away from exterior surfaces, and some come from pouring paint down the drain.

The water used for rinsing brushes while painting and priming contains diluted acrylic polymer and pigment, and so does the water used for washing brushes at the sink. When this waste goes down the drain, it travels to wastewater treatment facilities and into waterways. Artists can adopt some simple, modified techniques to better manage this waste while keeping brushes in great condition.



Watercolor paper toned with acrylic paint sludge

### Re-purposing

Before discarding acrylic waste water, consider whether it can be used for tinting paint or gesso, or for staining paper. Sometimes the random hues that occur in the rinse jar make attractive neutrals for toning papers or canvases.



Jar of waste water with three rinse jars and a holding bucket

### Multi-stage rinsing

The easiest way to remove acrylic paint residue from brushes is also a great way to keep brushes clean at the painting station, and to keep color mixtures pure and vibrant. Start by wiping brushes with a damp rag to remove the bulk of residue; the rag should be damp to retard paint drying in the brush. Next, instead of using just one water container for rinsing, use several: one for loosening up paint, a second to remove most of the residue, and a third for the final rinse. After painting, use the same three containers, then follow up with soap and water for a final wash. Use a special brush soap to

condition filaments and remove all residue. Rinse the brush in clean water and dry as normal.

### Holding waste water

The water used for rinsing brushes still contains paint residue, but since the objective is to avoid pouring it down the drain, it's necessary to use a different method for collecting the waste in a disposable form. The contents of the waste jars can be poured into a holding container, like a plastic pail.



Acrylic paint brushes immersed in soapy water

### Soaping up brushes

Brushes can receive a thorough preliminary washing with soap in a container, followed by rinsing in clean water. Once most residue is out of the brush, it can get a final wash in a wide container like a bucket or dish tub, or if the brush is almost free of paint residue, it can be washed at the sink.

### Evaporation

Depending on the amount of rinse water the studio generates, the waste bucket might be the final stage. If the volume of liquid is small, the bucket can be covered with a screen, tied down securely, and the water can be



Small plastic bucket covered with screen, used for evaporating paint waste water

left to evaporate, leaving dry material at the bottom for later collection. Dry acrylic paint usually releases easily from most plastic buckets, so collection is usually as simple as peeling off the skin. Use a piece of window screen material to cover the bucket to avoid collecting insects with the paint.



Cat litter placed in the collection bucket to displace and absorb standing liquid

### Solidification

Paint waste can be quickly turned into a disposable solid by pouring it into an absorbent medium. Inexpensive clay cat litter is an especially effective medium because it absorbs so much water and lasts a long time, but sawdust and shredded paper can also be used. If this is your preferred collection method, cat litter can be placed in the holding bucket for everyday use to avoid having an open container of standing liquid in the studio.

For larger volumes of acrylic paint waste, consider using products sold at home improvement stores for solidifying latex paints. These are made for disposing of leftover house paint, but they generally work just as well for artists' acrylics. Some of these additives work by flocculating (clumping) acrylic polymers, separating them from liquid; other products turn the entire quantity of paint into a solid mass.

### Disposal

The techniques presented here are common-sense measures for collecting paint waste rather than pouring it down the drain. While these methods can reduce the amount of acrylic paint waste that goes directly into waste water management systems and waterways, this still results in some solid waste, whether in the form of dry paint sludge or paint-saturated collection medium. Dry acrylic paint waste is normally considered disposable as household trash, but check with your local waste management authority and municipality to make sure you are compliant with all applicable laws, and to find out the time and location of collection events in your area.

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