Oil and Water Abstract Photography

The bubbles and swirls of oil in water make beautiful abstracts.

Tools

- Glass dish – Something like a pie plate or glass storage container works well. The side should be deep enough to avoid spilling (1-2" is fine).
- Supports for the dish – The dish can be propped on two stacks of books of the same height, or on cans, or whatever is handy.
- Photo subject and light source – There are a couple ways to do this:
    - Use colorful cloth, wrapping paper, construction paper, etc. as the object. This option will require a light to illuminate the subject.
    - Use a colorful image on a laptop or iPad, or place colorful thin tissue paper, cellophane, etc. on a light pad so that the subject is the illumination. I've found this to be the easiest.
- Water and oil – Vegetable oil, olive oil, or even Karo syrup will work.
- Camera – A macro lens is preferred.
- Tripod – This can be done without a tripod, but the focusing will be more difficult.

Preparation

- Clean the dish and make sure there is no lint left on it.
- Put a shallow amount of water in the dish (half inch or so).
- Place the dish on the books or cans (or whatever props you are using). Make sure it is level.
- Add drops of the oil with a spoon, eye dropper, or just a steady hand from the bottle.
- Place the subject 2-10 inches below the dish. If the object is self-lit (e.g., laptop) and the image is already abstract, the object can be closer (i.e., more like 2-3"). If not, it typically works better if the object is further away (i.e., 8-10"). Experiment to see what works best.
- If additional light is needed, place the light source between the dish and the subject, aimed at the subject (without lighting the dish itself).

Photography

Focus your camera on the circles and swirls created by the oil (not the actual subject). Start at f8 and vary as needed. Look for pleasing combinations of colors and bubbles.

You can stir the oil to make smaller bubbles or nudge them to move them around. You can also use a straw to gently blow them into different configurations. Dish detergent can be added to add another dimension (but don't stir too vigorously or you will end up with foam that blocks the light).

Also try adding different food coloring to the water and oil for an additional dimension (that might not need even need a separate subject). Have fun!