



Lillias August

Facing reality

MORE A PAINTER OF THE BANAL THAN THE PICTURESQUE, BRITISH ARTIST LILLIAS AUGUST'S STRENGTH LIES IN HER CHOICE OF ORDINARY SUBJECTS. SHE LIVES CLOSETED AWAY IN HER STUDIO IN LAWSHALL, A SMALL VILLAGE IN THE COUNTY OF SUFFOLK. SHE TOOK TIME OUT FROM PAINTING TO SPEND A FEW HOURS WITH US AND TALK IN DETAIL ABOUT HER WORK AND INSPIRATION.



Lillias, we already know your beautiful series of paintings of walls, today you are absorbed in painting small and intimate still lifes. Why this change of direction?

I began this series because I needed a rest. I almost went mad producing my walls and pushing texture to the limits. I felt the need for a more tranquil and more introspective theme. The idea of painting everyday objects was a way of concentrating on one subject and focusing on it intensely: form, colour, texture etc. A return to academic methods as it were.

You have chosen to show close-ups of everyday objects in small format paintings. Why?

All of these objects come either from my house or my studio. I don't choose them because they are pretty or because they have some sort of deep meaning for me, but simply because, to my mind, there is something interesting about them. Most of them are simple and humble objects, often forgotten or neglected like these hideous quinces, a brush left behind at the roadside or a heron's skull that I once picked up on the



Arches, Lisloughtin. 36 x 50 cm.

"Éire is still relatively untouched and incredibly authentic because of being protected. I wanted to bring out the powerful structure of this ruined church, which has become an abandoned cemetery, so that it dominated the picture. The three dark zones (background, foreground and shadows) push it forward."



beach. In close-up, these abandoned objects impose their presence on the spectator.

These objects seem to take on an intimate nature. Do they have a symbolic meaning for you?

Every object is full of symbolism for a painter. Just take a look at Dutch still lifes and their rich iconography. Each object is relevant to me in a different way and it's true they are all somehow connected to my life. The quinces remind me of my husband who makes jam, the keys belonged to my parents who are deceased, the buttons and reels of thread were my mother's and the marbles are a reminder of my childhood. But after all, isn't that the purpose of art: to bring meaning above and beyond its pictorial and decorative function.

Is your walls' series just as loaded with symbolism?

I am fond of decrepit walls: they have a rich past and many a story to tell. They are also one of those subjects that seem so insignificant and yet that I can't help but find attractive! Sometimes a motif will call out to me just because I feel I am the only person who finds it interesting. If it seems almost to jump out at me, then I know it's a good subject to paint.

Where did the idea for this series come from?

When I used to paint landscapes, I was often drawn to those

details that are never usually shown, such as scrub and weeds. That's what I felt I was also seeing in these walls, in the graffiti and fragments of abandoned objects. Some of the inscriptions, political slogans or insults are barely readable. I like the symbolism that is associated with them: Why here? Who wrote them? When and to what purpose? Foreign characters increase the feeling of mystery. From an artistic point of view, this type of subject allows a lot of freedom because I can modify reality and choose to highlight one particular feature. It is the same in a landscape: the sky is treated differently depending on what atmosphere you want to create. Here the idea was to show a wall from face on and in the most natural and direct way possible.

We can in fact see the same frontality in your landscapes.

Frontal, straight, immediate: there is nowhere else to look. You can get the same effect with a flat, dull landscape. The ground and the sky, nothing else... in short, reality. The eye is trapped. It's the same in my still lifes, you have to look at them face on. That is why my compositions are deliberately simple and include no other objects other than the one(s) I have decided to portray. If there are several objects, then they are placed in a line and not arranged in a pretty layout. I want them to be blatantly obvious. The frontality of the subject is something very important to me.



Dirty Carrots. Watercolour, 21 x 28 cm.
“A simple and rather comical subject where order and disorder go together perfectly!”



Old Brush. Watercolour, 22 x 22 cm.
“I found this brush on the roadside. I just love its worn fibres and its rounded, paint-stained handle. I used masking fluid to stop out the bristles because I wanted a very regular wash for the background. Then I painted them one by one.”

How do you work when painting your walls and landscapes?

I do several sketches on location and take a multitude of notes. My memories are important to me and it is through my copious notes that I can recreate them and be faithful to my subject: the notes evoke an atmosphere, colours... In fact, I think words can be more evocative than a drawing or a photo. If possible, while I am working on a painting, I like to return to the location. But I also like to use my imagination whilst making sure I remain coherent, both with myself and to the subject. If I sometimes exaggerate small details (a number written in chalk, a puddle), it's simply a way of making my message more pertinent.

You pay a lot of attention to composing the frame of your subjects: is it a key element of your composition?

It is most important indeed. In fact, I spend a lot of time deciding what parts of my subject to show and where to crop. I use a white frame that I move round until I am satisfied with what I see. The way I choose to compose the frame is a means of giving more impact to my painting without making it seem forced. For example, I delight in cropping a window. The rule of thirds however seems to be quite inescapable and, try as I might to rebel against this sacrosanct rule, I have to admit that when you do not apply it, compositions often seem



lopsided. This is especially true for still lifes that always have empty areas. I calculate precisely the space needed for shadows, and how much room to leave around an object. A lot of thought goes into this, but I always leave some extra space just in case so that I can recompose the frame if necessary...

What is the role of light in your work?

Light has the power to evoke. Moreover, the motif's tones and values, the general atmosphere and the way forms are represented are all dependent on light. It is more direct in a drawing and softer in watercolour. But even in my wall series, where the effect of light is barely noticeable, I make especially sure not to neglect shadow and thus avoid any prettiness. You should also be careful if the light is too strong because it will bleach the colours from your subject. I always try to use subtle lighting effects so that light does not overwhelm the rest of your theme. That explains why I have a soft spot for twilight which softens colours making them so rich and deep.

Do you work differently in your studio?

My table is near the window, that's why the objects in my still lifes are always lit from the right! I do not like the harsh nature of artificial lighting and even so-called daylight bulbs still don't seem right. I think they have a very bad effect on the colours of a watercolour. What really bothers me is the way in which this lighting only illuminates the surface of the objects to the detriment of the surface of your sheet of paper. The paper's whiteness becomes sad and opaque and yet the essence of watercolour is to give the impression that the light comes from the paper.

How is watercolour adapted to your artistic approach?

I started out working in oil, but watercolour turned out to be

more practical to carry around and less messy, especially when you have young children who like dipping their fingers into the wet paint! I gradually began to love this medium, mainly because you can really enter into a watercolour, contrary to paintings in thick or opaque medium, which acts as a barrier to the eye. Now, I particularly appreciate watercolour's transparency and bright colours.

The technique you use, laying down layer after layer of paint to build the subject, seems in fact quite close to oil painting...

A lot of people do say that my watercolours look like oil paintings. The process of building up the subject layer by layer is not something you can do instinctively. It is a slow and difficult technique, but that has the advantage of allowing you to play with contrast and chiaroscuro effects. I often use dark backgrounds 'à la Chardin': they make the motif stand out and bring solidity to forms. I have always liked the play of light and contrast in values, which explains my passion for drawing. Although I admire artists who work wet in wet, my watercolour technique is more disciplined, prudent and more controlled. Having said that, there are always areas in my paintings where I paint more freely and loosely, but they are not immediately apparent at first glance because of the overall organisation and balance in my works.

What do your paintings say about you?

My subjects are simple and clear. They look the spectator straight in the eye and don't present an idealised or reworked version of reality. I can identify with this way of saying things, of being frank and not beating about the bush. I think I am sensitive and have empathy, but my priority is to solve a problem as soon as it appears. I know what is real and face up without reserve to life's difficulties and challenges. At my



KEY DATES

1955 Born in Gloucestershire.

1973-1977 Studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London.

1978 Postgraduate course in The History of Art and Design.

1980-1983 Gave up oil painting and devoted herself to watercolour.

2000 First exhibition at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours (R.I.).

2002 Prizewinner at the R.I. (then again in 2005, 2006 and 2010).

2006 Elected a member of the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours.



Yellow Door, Wroclaw, Poland. 30 x 47 cm.

"I love these abandoned places where, through small details, a past activity is discernible and yet there are questions which remain unanswered. Here I was attracted to the contrast between these yellow doors and their grey and dull surroundings."



Asparagus Tips. 11 x 18 cm.

"The tips of these asparagus have an almost architectural feel about them. I can easily imagine them inspiring a sculptor!"



Fallen Feathers. Watercolour, 20 x 16 cm.

"These are quite simply ordinary pigeon feathers. The challenge was in my monochrome palette: I used 6-8 colours and made my darks with complementary colours. It was difficult to preserve the delicate nature of the feathers when working in dark and dull tones."



Net Curtain, Venice. 34 x 49 cm.

"Another abandoned place. One of those places in Venice which are off the beaten track and where signs of humidity and deterioration tell an entirely different story."

easel, I try to tackle my subject, to draw out the essential and to condense the essence of what makes a wall a wall or an inkpot what it is. I stare straight at my subject as intently as possible, just like when you observe the unchanging and unshakeable line of the horizon. My aim is to get to the bottom of things and to invite the spectator to see reality as it is without looking away.

All your watercolours, landscapes, walls and still lifes, have the same feeling of peacefulness and tranquillity about them. Is facing up to problems the way you find a certain serenity in your life?

Certainly. This impression of serenity comes from the lack of complexity in my subjects: they are direct, clear and stable. I don't like confusion. Some people actually find my work disturbing, which is interesting. If you are pessimistic in nature, you can indeed focalise on things like the cracks in the walls, the obsolete character of some of the objects. . . But all in all, the horizon line, the balanced tones, the straight compositional framing and gentle light strive to convey an impression of silence and bliss.

Some people see your works in a different light though. I trust the spectator's eye. A painter can't tell spectators what

to think or feel: these things are the consequence and an integral part of their lives and past experiences. Painting is somehow like giving birth: you cannot make your progeny conform to the mould you choose. That's why I am neither disappointed nor annoyed if others do not like my work or if it makes them think of something else entirely. I'd even say that I think it's exciting. Sometimes, you do not even know yourself what you are painting and it is these comments from others that help you to realise what you really meant.

How do you see your work evolving and the road still to travel?

I have learnt how to use and abuse watercolour: how to break the rules (which you can't do unless you have already applied and mastered them). When you work on a series for example, you have to dig deep down into the heart of a subject. Somehow it's like crossing over into another dimension. I can therefore only think in terms of one series at a time, not thinking any further ahead than my next exhibition. It is the only way I can focus my mind.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: STÉPHANIE PORTAL.
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Blue Door, Marrakech. (Detail). 32 x 49 cm.

"Several elements drew my attention to this subject: the bright blue which is a colour I am not used to, the strong contrast between shadow and light and finally the story told by the various marks and scratches. Use of masking fluid was indispensable for this one!"



Wastell Wall. 32 x 24 cm.

"I know the walls of Bury St Edmunds' Cathedral well as I live nearby. This old wall, dating back to the 16th century, belongs to the oldest part of the church. My gaze was drawn to the motifs that erosion had drawn on the dressed stones."

"Building up the subject layer by layer allows you to play with contrast and chiaroscuro effects."



EVER FAITHFUL TO MY COLOURS

I am a real dinosaur where colours are concerned. My palette is made up of around ten colours: two blues (Ultramarine and Cerulean), two reds (Cadmium and Quinacridone), two yellows (Cadmium and Hansa) to which I add Viridian, Raw and Burnt Sienna and possibly Ochre. Always the same colours... and I don't even feel the need to change! I prefer Michael Wilcox Watercolours for their transparency and staining power. You can really see the difference with cheap paints, especially for such colours as Viridian or Alizarin that can be really chalky and simply atrocious. My only conceit is gum arabic that I use to prolong my colours' humidity and make them easier to lift off.

DRAWING

I am an academic draughtsman in that I am not a fan of dashing off quick sketches: my drawings are worked on in detail and could easily become black and white studies as polished as a watercolour. It all comes down to the process. I also sometimes combine pencil and watercolour which gives interesting results not unlike old 19th century photos.