

Leading artist paints by letters

West Suffolk artist Lillias August set herself the task of producing a series of still life paintings to raise funds for a leading artists' charity. Arts editor ANDREW CLARKE met her

What started as a simple exercise in self discipline and a means to raise funds for the Artists' General Benevolent Institution has turned into a major series of watercolours which takes the viewer through an A-Z of beautifully realised still life paintings.

As I confessed to West Suffolk artist Lillias August, I do have trouble with still life. I find some very hard to connect with and, at times, they seem to me to be little more than a technical exercise - very similar to the way that musicians practice their scales.

The greatest compliment I can pay Lillias August's work is that these dazzling paintings don't come across as examples of still life at all - but rather they appear to be a detail lifted from a much larger, more atmospheric landscape.

When I make my confession Lillias appears pleased with the analogy because as a landscape painter, her work is all about atmosphere and attention to detail.

Her work as the official artist chronicling the building work on the St Edmundsbury Cathedral tower is well known and provides a starting point into her work. But, the non-commissioned work of Lillias August, her own work, is darker, more detailed and is more atmospheric still.

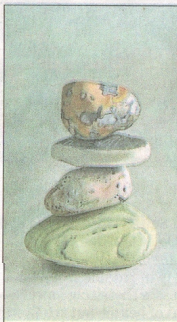
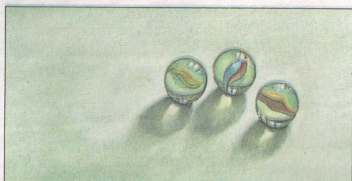
Her landscapes, particularly her urban work, have a strong element of the abstract, preferring to focus in on details and texture rather than being swept up in grand vistas. She says: "I like focusing in on the detail. I love the texture of surfaces. I feel that my pictures are telling a story or are provoking the viewer to think about what has been happening in a scene."

"In this exhibition I have a half dozen of my own landscapes to complement the A-Z. In a scene which I painted in Morocco, there are some hand-prints buried in the paint on the wall. 'How did they come to be there?'"

"Also there is a scene with plaster crumbling off a wall. On part of that wall there is some graffiti. Who wrote it? What does it say? What is their story? Where is this wall? Why has it fallen into disrepair?"

"There are a whole range of intriguing questions which arise out of this simple scene and for me that is part of the joy of painting."

Attention to detail is what brings Lillias's work to life. Although she paints in watercolours, her work is finely detailed and has the feel of pen and ink and pastels. She uses



ALPHABET STREET: Acclaimed West Suffolk artist Lillias August and three of her A-Z of Still Life series: *W* - Wallpaper brush, *M* - Marbles, *P* - Pebbles

PHOTOS: LUCY TAYLOR/ CONTRIBUTED



masking fluid to build up her strong colours and her love of dark backgrounds.

But what marks out her A-Z series is the quirky nature of the compositions. There are pebbles which have been piled up on one another rather than been spread around on the ground, a battered, well-used paint brush and my own personal favourite a key hanging on a nail with a red ribbon tied to it. It is the intriguing nature of the compositions that brings them to life.

"I am the regional representative for the AGBI (Artists' General Benevolent Institution), an organisation that helps artists

should they fall ill or suffer some personal crisis, and I wanted to do something to help raise funds.

"I also saw it as an opportunity to do something different, take a break from my usual landscape work, do something which is a good discipline and then come back refreshed."

"My plan was to do a series of still life paintings which gave ordinary objects a 'new life' where their simplicity is evocative and sometimes symbolic."

"So since July I have been doing two or three small paintings a week using simple objects found around the house. But I became completely caught up in this very quickly and

what started off as a casual fund-raising exercise swiftly became an intimate and absorbing project.

"It was at that stage I had the idea of turning it into an A-Z project which of course meant that I committed myself to 26 paintings."

Still life painting has a rich and honourable history - whatever my own prejudices - dating back to the Greek and Roman civilisations and received a huge shot in the arm during the Renaissance when it was used to lend significance to religious paintings.

"But it was in the 16th and 17th centuries that still life painting came into its own, probably through

the new interest in the natural and scientific world and the introduction of oil paint which lent itself to higher realism.

"It included those magnificent and opulent Dutch 17th century paintings that advertised their owner's wealth and culture through bulging tables of game, huge vases of tulips or collections of scientific objects and books. Often, slipped in amongst all this, there was a symbolic reminder of man's mortality in the form of a skull or a burning candle known as 'vanitas' painting."

"For me the beauty of a still life is that you are making something more than it is," says Lillias. "It is as if it is saying 'I may be an ordinary object in everyday life but if I am painted then you view me in a different way.'"

Many of Lillias's artistic heroes are well known for their still life work. Her favourite Chardin (1699 - 1779) used to favour dark backgrounds, something Lillias tends to use in her own work.

"This is a hard thing to achieve with watercolours, where lighter areas have less paint on them - darker areas therefore have to be painted around lighter areas which can be fiddly and result in uneven backgrounds if the wash isn't put on quickly enough."

"Also if you want to make changes or add detail then you have to work quickly because you only have a short window to do anything because you have to work while the paper is still wet."

All the works in the exhibition have been mounted and framed quite simply to keep costs down, so that the maximum amount of money can go to the artists' charity.

Now, that her 26 painting series is complete Lillias is returning refreshed to her landscapes and will be looking at some modern urban landscapes in and around Bury St Edmunds in preparation for an exhibition next summer. Nothing is decided yet but she says she is toying with the idea of looking at historic Bury from a whole new angle.

"I am not completely sure what I am going to do for that exhibition yet but it will have a different sensibility from the work I did on the cathedral project. Usually my landscapes are done travelling around Britain and the world. It would be nice to do something centred around Bury but I have to figure out exactly what I want to do."

■ Lillias August RI, *A-Z of Still Life*, is at Wildwood Gallery, Churchgate