



simply put

No splashy color or elaborate setups for British artist **Lillias August**, who finds the story of everyday objects is best told with simple but powerful statements.

By Ken Gofton

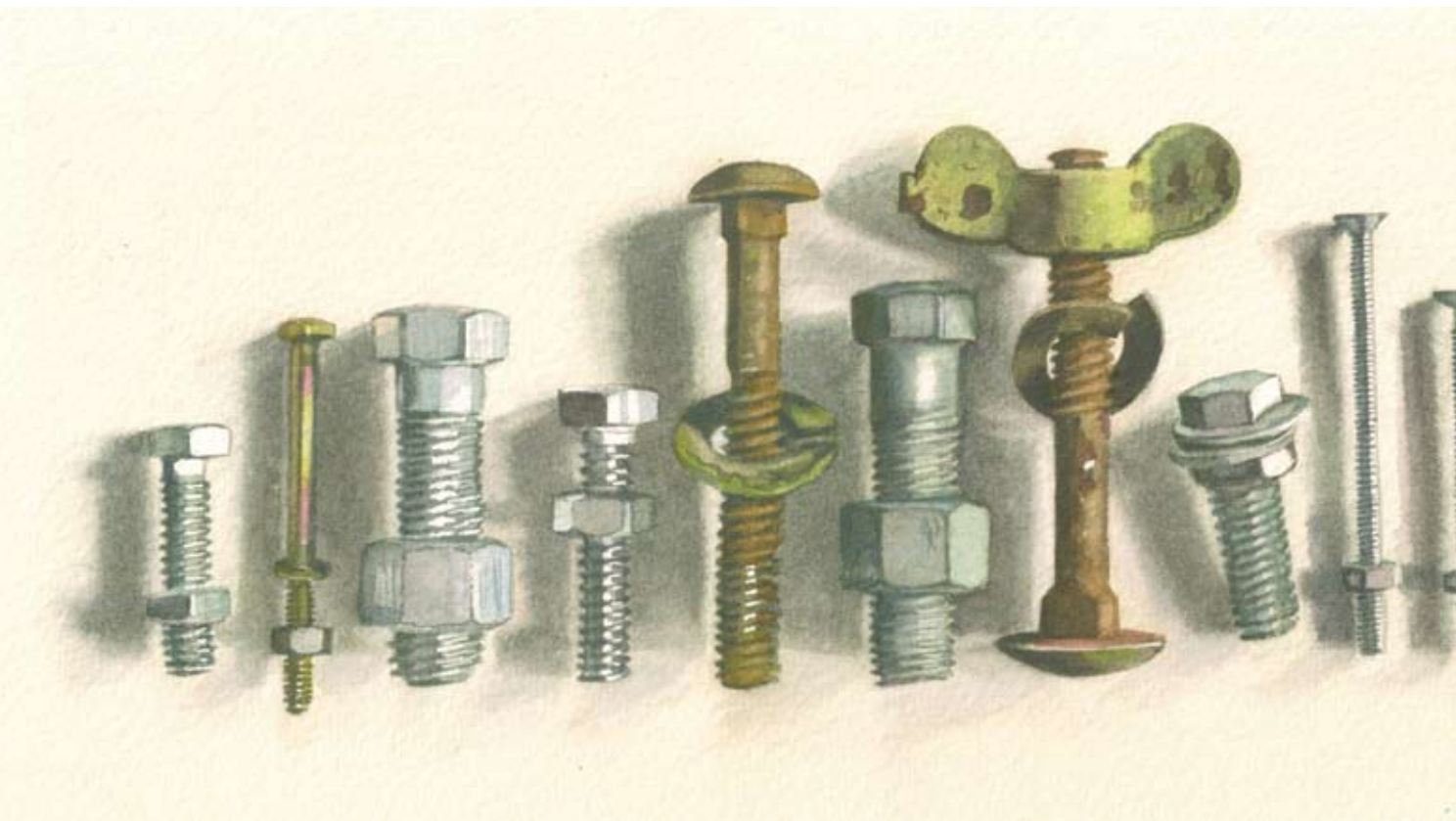
In 2010, watercolorist Lillias August faced a dilemma. While enjoying a lull between two phases of a major project, she was presented with the opportunity to stage a solo exhibition. The problem was that she didn't have enough new work on hand.

"I decided to mount a show devoted entirely to still life paintings," she says. "I love doing still life. It's peaceful, disciplined, intimate, direct and it keeps your eye practiced, in much the same way that life painting classes do.

"For a theme, I decided to produce one painting for each letter of the alphabet. It only sank in later that this meant completing two or three a week in the three months leading up to the exhibition, which proved quite demanding. In passing, I also discovered that there are some letters which readily suggest 10 or more subjects, and others for which it's quite hard to think of a single one!"

As it turned out, the idea of an artistic A to Z worked well. Such a concentrated painting spell, focused entirely on still life, not only provided August with a stimulating challenge, but has influenced her subsequent work. More than that: 22 of the 26 works sold immediately, and the show also led to a couple of commissions. One was created as a present for a

Mixing Neutrals The artist's conviction that wonderful grays and browns can be achieved by mixing a very limited range of colors is well illustrated in *Distemper Brush* (watercolor on paper, 8¹/₂x8¹/₂), a painting from her "A-Z of Still Life" series. Touches of brighter colors hint at the brush's long working life.



controlled release

“Painting in watercolor scares me!” says Lillias August. “You have to do all the planning—the placement of the lights and darks—before you start. And there’s the fear that—after you’ve been working on a painting for perhaps 10 days—it may all go wrong.”

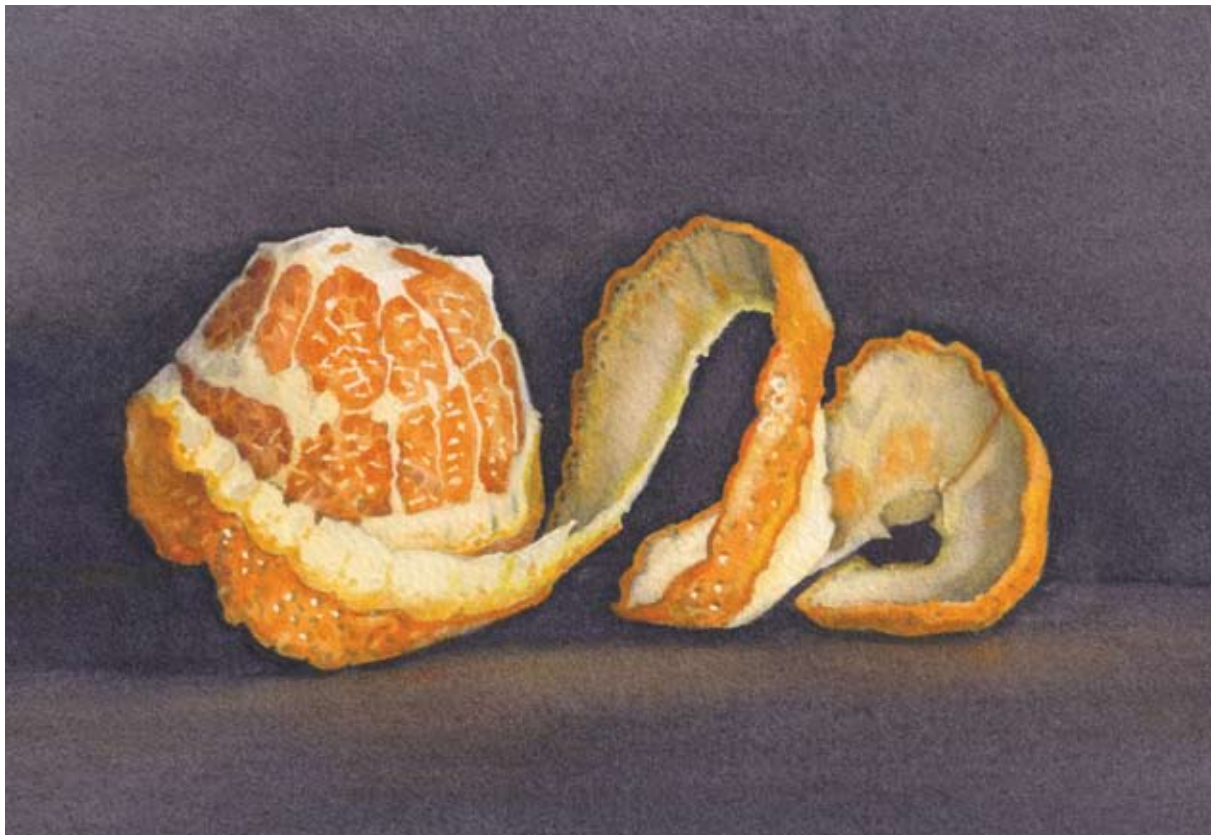
Looking for a way to feel more in control, she prefers to work on Saunders Waterford 200- or 300-lb. Not-pressed [meaning “not hot-pressed”] watercolor paper, stretched in the traditional way by soaking in water. “I can’t work on a hot-pressed surface,” she says, “because the brush slides too easily for me. The texture of a cold-pressed paper, on the other hand, grips the brush sufficiently. I also think the texture helps to give a watercolor painting a shimmering translucence, which I love.”

Similarly, she feels a need to have the whole picture at least vaguely in place before tackling any detail: “If I was working on just a small part in isolation I would feel insecure because the rest wasn’t there!”

Contradicting her stated need for control, however, she says she deliberately chooses a brush one size larger than what she thinks she needs. The larger brushes can be clumsy and therefore she risks making mistakes, she admits, but they prevent fussiness.

Rather than *fear*, perhaps a better term for what she feels is *creative tension*. “I like to be in control in the sense that I know what I want to achieve,” she says. “But I know it won’t turn out exactly that way because watercolor painting is full of happy accidents. Besides, it’s good that the process should show in the final picture.”





local farmer from his partner (see *Long Farm*, opposite, bottom). The other, for an elderly gentleman, was a collection of treasured items from his life, including his wedding ring.

“I don’t normally like doing commissions,” notes the artist, “but personalized still life paintings are attractive to people and are something I wouldn’t mind doing. In fact, I might start a new business in them.”

Up Close and Personal

August’s approach to developing a still life painting is very personal. No elaborate setup of objects, or hours, even days, spent on arrangement for her. Very often, she chooses to portray a single item, as in *Distemper Brush* (on page 54) or *Orange* (above). At most, it will be a small group, as in *Nuts and Bolts* (opposite, top).

And she insists on a very direct view. For the whole of the “A-Z of Still Life” series, this meant setting things up so that she could see them close up, over the top of her easel—something which wasn’t always easy to contrive.

She believes this approach gives a sense of strength or dignity to everyday objects, compelling the viewer to look closely at something he or she might otherwise not notice. At the same time, she finds the simplicity of the resulting images very evocative.

Of course, to fully appreciate the intent of the artist, the work must be considered in the context of her wider output; for although still life is an important part of her oeuvre, she’s also an accomplished landscape and cityscape painter. The factors common across all genres are her acute visual sense, coupled with a love of subtle color.

Beyond Still Life

August lives in rural Suffolk, called “Constable Country” after the landscape artist John Constable (English, 1776-1837). It’s a region also loved by John Sell Cotman (English, 1782-1842), one of August’s favorite watercolor artists.

The countryside is prime agricultural land, noted for the production of wheat, sugar beet

Fine Line In the artist’s “A-Z of Still Life” series, the letter “N” was represented by *Nuts and Bolts* (opposite, top; watercolor on paper, 5x11). The challenges included portraying a range of materials from chrome and brass to rusty steel, but also the highly detailed depiction of screw threads, especially to the right of the picture.

Going Dutch “*Orange* [above; watercolor on paper, 5x7 $\frac{1}{4}$] is one of my favorites, perhaps because it reminds me of those wonderful Dutch still life paintings,” says August. “It wasn’t easy. I used masking fluid to shield the pale areas, including all the skin indentations and highlights on the segments, so I didn’t have to hold back with the washes.”

Having Fun August chose the longest vegetables she could find—a leek, a parsnip and a carrot—as a visual pun for *Long Farm* (opposite, bottom; watercolor on paper, 12x9 $\frac{3}{4}$), a painting commissioned for a local farmer. The splattering of soil increases the realism.



and vegetables. Rows of trees, closely planted as windbreaks, interrupt what would otherwise be a very flat landscape. Elsewhere, there are wetlands with tall, feathered reeds, bordering onto a coastline facing out onto the North Sea. All these scenes feature in her large landscape paintings, such as *Black Earth Poplars* (opposite, top) and *Sand Dune Sky* (opposite, bottom).

Her cityscapes, in contrast, tend to result from holidays in continental Europe, but aren't traditional scenic views. "I'm always trying to get away from what people would call 'beautiful' in a conventional sense," she says. "I've painted a burnt-out car because I want to draw attention to how intriguing the

colors and textures are. I've painted old doors with fading graffiti in a foreign language, hoping it will prompt the viewer to wonder who wrote it and what the message was."

And then there has been her work on a major project of the last few years. Back in the year 2000, the neighboring city of Bury St Edmunds received Millennium Lottery funding to complete an unfinished tower at its cathedral, using traditional materials and building methods. August served as project artist between 2000 and 2005, recording the complete process. Now she's back, painting pictures of the new, highly decorated, wooden vaulted ceiling, having closely followed its construction and installation between 2009 and 2010 (see *Form, Colour, Framework*, above).

New Directions Combining drawing with pale washes, and also full color, *Form, Colour, Framework* (above; triptych, watercolor on paper, total dimensions 21¹/₂x29¹/₂) from her work at Bury St Edmunds' Cathedral is "a bit experimental and new," says August. She plans to take the idea of mixing graphite with watercolor even further in future paintings.

Sharing the Experience "In my landscape paintings there's always something singular to which I want to draw attention," says August. "It's a bit like saying, 'Hey, have you noticed this?'" In *Black Earth Poplars* (opposite, top; watercolor on paper, 18x28), it's the bright, yellow-green line of grass that divides the vertical trees and blue sky from the black soil, almost like an abstract composition.

Lifting Color A very flat county, Suffolk is known for its big skies, which the artist has exploited in *Sand Dune Sky* (opposite, bottom; watercolor on paper, 19x28). Here she portrays the thin cloud and vapor trails by lifting paint from a still-damp deep blue wash.

Artistic Evolution

So how did August reach this point in her career? Interestingly, although she is a fine art graduate from Goldsmiths College, London, watercolors are a more recent interest. While many of her contemporaries were into conceptual art, she spent her student days painting tiny, highly realistic, 4x4-inch oil paintings.

"I taught myself watercolor because I wanted to paint when we took our young





family on holiday,” she says. “Watercolors were convenient for that, especially as I use a very restricted palette. At first I produced mainly pen-and-wash studies, but moved on to do pure watercolors. I began exhibiting, and it took off from there.”

Her preference for a limited palette stems partly from the desire for portability, partly from a liking for classical techniques, and partly from childhood memories. “When I was about 8 years old I was given a box of 20 paints, which I absolutely loved. It was only later that I realized I wasn’t using them all,” she says.

Today she restricts herself to just nine colors—two blues (ultramarine and cerulean), two reds (quinacridone violet and cadmium red light), two yellows (Hansa yellow light and cadmium yellow light), plus viridian green, and burnt and raw sienna. She’s tried various makes, but for their richness and intensity prefers those made by Michael Wilcox, the color blending expert best known for his book *Blue and Yellow Don’t Make Green* (School of Color, 2002) and related titles.

“I’ve read his books, too,” August says. “In the end, though, you just have to get on and do



See more work by Lillias August at
[www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/
lillias-august-watercolor-gallery](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/lillias-august-watercolor-gallery).




it. A lot of my knowledge has come from simply mixing colors. After a while, it becomes second nature. You mix a gray, and it's a little too brown, so you add a little blue. The grays and other neutrals you can create this way are just wonderful. Such interesting colors."

Among other key elements in her technique, she makes good use of masking fluid so that she can apply washes without worrying about tiny shapes that have to be left white. She's fond of lifting off color, noting that the effect varies depending upon whether the paint in question is dry, damp or wet. And she will occasionally splatter paint from a full brush onto her surface—but when she does, she says she often feels guilty because the effect can be slick and contrived-looking.

Above all, it's clear that drawing is central to her work. "Sometimes I have to make quick sketches with lots of written notes in the back of the book," she says. "But what I love much more is being able to sit and draw without a time limit. And I love building up the tones. I don't often use line."

In her current project—portraying the completion of the new vaulted ceiling in the cathedral at Bury St Edmunds—drawing and

painting are coming even closer together. "What's sad about the development is that beautiful, vital pieces of work are hidden from view when everything comes together," she says. "One aspect of my work is to show what's underneath."

"Having done so much still life recently, I now see these architectural details as still life subjects, and approach them as I would a setup in the studio. And I'm trying new things, such as combining pencil drawings with light washes and even starting to use graphite tone in a few places under watercolor. It's an exciting time." 

KEN GOFTON is an artist and contributing writer living in Kent, England.

Bold Design Intriguing, close-up compositions bring paintings such as *Keys* (opposite, top; watercolor on paper, 8x4½) to life.

Second Look "For me, the beauty of painting a still life is that you're making something more than it is," says August. In *Five Autumn Leaves* (above; watercolor on paper, 3½x11½) she invites us to view the subjects in a new and different way.

Simple Statement In *Asparagus Tips* (opposite, bottom; watercolor on paper, 4½x7) both the artist's appreciation for simple subjects and structural details are evident. "Asparagus tips have an architectural quality," she says. "I can imagine a sculptor being equally inspired."