

# Transforming THE ORDINARY

**JULIE FREEMAN'S** PRIZEWINNING STILL LIFE SHOWCASES HER SIGNATURE ATTENTION TO TEXTURE, COLOR AND DEPTH WHILE MARKING A SHIFT FROM NATURAL REALISM TO NARRATIVE-DRIVEN COMPOSITIONS.

By Ruth Rodgers

**FOR BOTH THE ARTIST** and the juror, Julie Freeman's Award of Excellence painting, *Satsuma & Silk*, is a celebration of texture and color. "My first reaction was simply 'wow,'" says Still Life & Floral Juror Robin Frisella. "This work stood out for its masterful composition and sophisticated use of color. The transparent silk complements the glowing fruit beautifully, creating a visual delight that combines technical excellence with grace."

Freeman hopes viewers are drawn to the same qualities in the work that she finds pleasing—the transparency and lightness of the scarf, the rough textures of the oranges, and the play of light and shadow that provides the sense of depth. "I want viewers to feel like they can touch those textures—to make a connection," the New Zealand-based artist says.

## **BUILDING A STILL LIFE**

Freeman created the prizewinning piece as part of an ongoing series. "Orange is my favorite color and my favorite fruit," she says. "I did some photo shoots using mandarins for workshop material, but those mostly featured the peeled fruit. *Satsuma & Silk* was more complex—and something I created just for myself." The artist notes feeling a deeper affinity

for a piece when she has a personal connection to the featured objects. "The Japanese bowl is my own, and I added my scarf while searching for a contrasting texture," she says. "It turned out to be the perfect counterweight to the textured skin of the fruit and the smooth, hard surface of the bowl."

**"I want to capture the essence the camera can't: the feeling within the details."** —JULIE FREEMAN

After selecting the materials, Freeman composed and refined the composition. "I used a dark backdrop, placed the elements on the kitchen table and then moved them around to catch the light," she says. "I arranged the scarf numerous times to fine-tune the layering and to pick up the reflections on the white tablecloth. I pushed the light a little more on the fruit because they were the focal area. The dark background

was a good contrast and added a bit of mystery, and the shadows on the underlying cloth gave a balanced feel from left to right," she notes.

Once Freeman was satisfied with the arrangement, she photographed it extensively before choosing a single image. "I cropped it slightly differently and adjusted the lighting a bit," she notes. "I always make a black-and-white print at the same size to use for value reference, while I keep the color reference on my Samsung tablet."

The artist says the next steps followed her usual process. "After completing the base drawing in pastel pencil on light gray Pastelmat, using a grid for accuracy, I began by blocking in some of the darker values," she says. She used soft pastels for their vibrance, ease of application and quick coverage, and pencils for mark-making and blending.

Turning the piece upside down, Freeman laid in the dark background using a stick of Terry Ludwig pastel, in eggplant, and blended it well. She rendered the mandarins primarily in soft pastel. To keep the scarf feeling light, she relied on pastel pencils over an olive base. The bowl and white fabric were created using a combination of pastels and pencils.



**Satsuma & Silk**  
(pastel on Pastelmat, 16½x10)



ABOVE **Quiet Emergence**  
(pastel on paper, XXxXX)

BELOW **Orange A Peel**  
(pastel on paper, XXxXX)



## FROM NATURE TO NARRATIVE

Although Freeman has long been known for her realistic depictions of natural ephemera, her focus has recently begun to shift. “The process of setting up a composition is very different from coming across a natural still life in the environment,” she says. “I watched my husband, Michael [michaelfreemanartist.com], work with still life. His pieces always carry a story, which adds an additional level of depth to the work. I decided to challenge myself to come up with an idea, gather the supporting elements, compose and photograph the scene, and then translate it into a painting.”

Most of Freeman’s arrangements are austere, yet powerful. Some practically eschew color altogether for subtle impact, as in *Quiet Emergence* (left), while other pieces like *Battery Eggs* (opposite, top) use bright colors and pun-laden titles to deliver a punch.

In addition to her artist husband, Freeman finds inspiration in the work of other artists. “I have an older artist friend who my mother used to work for, and I still love her work,” she notes. “And thanks to the internet, it’s very easy to see the work of so many fabulous artists. I wasn’t formally trained and didn’t study art history, so most artists I admire are contemporary. I’m inspired by many who love the same style I do, but I also like the work of many realists and impressionists.”

## BEYOND THE PHOTO

The artist’s journey into pastels began unexpectedly. “I discovered pastels when I started working in an art supply store, in 2009,” she explains. “A whole new world opened! I had been working in colored pencil and graphite, so the discovery of pencils that could easily blend and create the realism I was after was a game changer. I love that pastels are easy to pick up whenever I’m in the studio. It’s such an immediate medium.”

Freeman’s goal with pastels is to achieve realism beyond the photograph. “Photographs are flat,” she says, “so my aim is to create something that looks three-dimensional—something that has depth, emotion and presence. I want it to feel alive, not just real. I want the viewer to *feel* something, not just see it. I want to capture the essence the camera can’t: the feeling within the details.”

So how does Freeman communicate the feeling within the details? “Pastel is



ABOVE  
**Battery Eggs**  
(pastel on paper,  
XXxXX)

LEFT  
**Where Silence Rests**  
(pastel on paper,  
XXxXX)



a very tactile medium,” she continues, “so my direct contact with the surface gives my marks an expressive, personal quality. The subtle pressure changes, the act of layering and the direction of my marks all carry emotion. I can choose what to sharpen and soften. My choices of hue, temperature and contrast can communicate more than a photo does.”

She adds, “I’d like to think that I translate and transcend the photo with the choices I make. Viewers can feel when an artist has spent time on a subject and truly understood it. The care shows in every layer.”

**Ruth Rodgers** (ruthrogers.com) paints in oil and pastel and enjoys writing about art and artists from her home in British Columbia, Canada.

See Freeman’s Honorable Mention in the *Landscape & Interior* category (page XX).

**Julie Freeman** (juliefreeman.co.nz), of New Zealand, is an award-winning, self-taught artist. She’s a Master Pastellist with the Pastel Artists of New Zealand and the Pastel Artists of Australia; a Master Circle member with the International Association of Pastel Societies; and a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America. Her work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions.

