

HONORING THE ARTIST: BRENDA ZLAMANY

Brooklyn resident Brenda Zlamany is the kind of egalitarian artist who's rare these days. Not only is she known for her celebrity portraits, but she also paints "day-to-day people who have meaning in my life."

Ms. Zlamany's art openings are rare as well. "The best exhibit experience I ever had took place in a performance space. Someone played the trumpet, my family flew in from Sicily. The audience was composed of musicians, artists, Williamsburg neighbors. I had people on the subway say to me, 'I don't like art, but I like your art.'"

Relating this anecdote is not the artist's way of expressing her ego. Quite the opposite. It's just that she gets a real pleasure from reaching all kinds of individuals from diverse backgrounds. In fact, Ms. Zlamany notes seriously and sincerely that her UPS guy is her best critic.

Connections are also important, as evidenced by Ms. Zlamany's new series devoted to family and friends. Her family has particularly figured predominantly in her work. "I remember painting my sister nude when she was nine months pregnant," Ms. Zlamany remarks. "At the time it was a little risky to do that. Of course, most people didn't know that my sister had been a stripper."

She continues telling stories about her family's influence. "My uncle was an outsider artist who loved boxing and did paintings of boxers. I also have done a

series about the fights. In a way, boxing is like art: There's one - on - one confrontation which is raw, honest, where you feel identification with the process."

While Ms. Zlamany's family played a positive role in her art, she admits that they sometimes put up obstacles. "I was not encouraged to paint when I was younger. After all, it was a white male profession. I did it on the sneak, although I did take life - drawing sessions in high school and majored in French and print-making at Wesleyan College. After leaving college, Ms. Zlamany tried being a waitress (she was fired after a week), finally finding her niche as an assistant to David Salle.

This was the beginning of a process where other influences played a role in Ms. Zlamany's art besides ones exerted by her family. She attended the New York Academy, becoming interested in the work of Laurie Anderson and Bruce Nauman. Twenty years ago, she moved to her present Williamsburg studio / home, a place that continues to inform her art. "I never thought I'd stay," she says now. "When I first came, it was a place where mothers pushed baby strollers."

Apparently, Ms. Zlamany has learned a lot on her artistic journey. "The medium I work in is almost irrelevant. It's what you have skill in that's important," she says. "When I'm not painting, I knit for my daughter. But when I do paint, I do it as if it's my last one."

-Marion Wolberg Weiss