

The Itinerant Portraitist

By Michael Cesarczyk

“You have a very interesting face,” Brenda Zlamany told me during my visit to her Northside studio. “The way the nose twists, and your eyes especially. May I draw you?”

It was not an unusual request, given Zlamany’s line of work. Since the 1990s, the Brooklyn-based artist has produced a massive catalog of portraiture, dazzling in technique and variety. Last year, she visited 33 sites in Taiwan and made 888 watercolors of its inhabitants, mostly aborigines. Using the camera lucida, an optical tool dating back to the Renaissance, she created what she calls “a two-way exchange between artist and subject.” It’s an intimacy that glows in images ranging from those of cherubic children to a 104-year-old woman.

Zlamany’s face is itself radiant. Curly raven-black hair falls softly over delicate features: a straight nose, a mouth like a quick brushstroke of red and clear brown eyes lush with curiosity and intelligence. Born in Manhattan, Zlamany moved to Connecticut when she was 13, and attended a high school that emphasized the interconnectivity of the arts. Later, she studied at the Yale School of Art, where she also took anthropology classes, igniting an interest in world cultures. In 1981, after additional training in Paris and Rome, she graduated from Wesleyan University with honors. By 1984, she had completed her formal education at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine.

In a clever move, Zlamany sidestepped the usual financial struggles of young artists. Since she had gone to school on a scholarship, she borrowed student loans after graduation, using the money to buy a loft in Hoboken, NJ. She and other artists were bought out by developers not long after. “We were lucky,” Zlamany recalled. “If you were poor, you were on your own.”

Discovering an art studio for sale in the New York Times, she crossed the river and landed in Williamsburg. It was a different neighborhood during the 80s, and Zlamany is not one to sentimentalize. “It really was the Wild West back then, very violent. There was not a single shop. Only got mugged once though. Other than that, it was fun.” Although her lawyer advised against the closing, Zlamany wanted stability, especially at the start of her career. “The art market is feast and famine,” she explained,



standing among life-sized oil paintings in her 2,000 sq ft apartment. “If you own your own studio, you’ll always guarantee that you can work.”

As the work flowed, so did decades of change in her adopted neighborhood. In the beginning, Zlamany had to pay cab fare for the few gallery dealers brave enough to visit her. Even getting home required a few tricks of its own. “You had to get into a cab, pretend you were going uptown and then change your mind and ask for Williamsburg,” Zlamany smiled. “You’d always hear the click when they locked their doors.”

By the 1990s, the first restaurants had begun to crop up, and soon enough there were galleries blocks away from home. Zlamany likewise flourished, receiving commissions from the New York Times Magazine, the World Bank and several other institutions, as well as some of the world’s most prestigious grants. (She completed “888: Portraits in Taiwan” on a Fulbright.) She also made sure not to work in isolation. One of her most treasured paintings is of Enzo, Williamsburg’s UPS man since the 80s. A Sicilian

immigrant who had come to study the baroque trumpet at Julliard, Enzo started working for the company to support his family. Once Zlamany noted his insightful comments on her work whenever he delivered a package, a friendship developed and she eventually painted him. In 1999, she staged a vernissage at Galapagos, and, as Enzo performed before a room of “art-world professionals, musicians, UPS workers, neighborhood factory workers, and family,” she unveiled a full-length portrait of the musician in his brown uniform, holding his horn.

Being rooted in North Brooklyn, however, has not diminished Zlamany’s wanderlust. Having launched a project known as “The Itinerant Portraitist,” (of which “888” is the first chapter) she plans to do more portraits in “places where there is conflict or a need for understanding.” Countries on the itinerary include Cambodia, where she hopes to meet victims of sex trafficking. “Art has the ability to teach, and to create communities,” Zlamany said. “You can have a role in asking relevant questions for our time.” She

also aims to visit disaster sites in the United States, and paint victims as well as landscapes of their homes.

To warm up, Zlamany will be painting watercolor portraits at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, at the second annual Skowhegan PERFORMS. The event takes place Saturday, September 29, 1:30 – 5pm with each painting taking around 10 minutes (first come, first serve). Zlamany hopes her neighbors, both old and new, will visit.

“It’s changed so much; I feel like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz,” laughed Zlamany. “I was stranded in Kansas. Now I’m in Munchkinland!”

For more information about the event, visit <http://www.skowheganart.org/index.php?page=events>.

For more about Zlamany, visit her website at brendazlamany.com.

THIS PAGE:

TOP PHOTO
Brenda Zlamany with Portraits of Tibetans

PAGE OPPOSITE:

TOP PHOTO
Brenda Zlamany with her Dog

BOTTOM PHOTO

L: Recent Works
R: Brenda Zlamany with Enzo

Photos Courtesy of Michael Cesarczyk

