

The Itinerant Portraitist: Brenda Zlamany discusses her Hebrew Home project with Leslie Wayne

[Leslie Wayne](#)

In late November I went with Brenda Zlamany to the Derfner Judaica Museum in the Bronx to see her exhibition 100/100, the latest in her ongoing "Itinerant Portraitist" project in which she travels near and far in order to paint her subjects. In this case, the 100th anniversary of the Hebrew Home for the aged, which houses the Museum, gave rise to the invitation to paint 100 of its residents.



Migdalia Persaud, portrait subject in Brenda Zlamany's series, 100/100, 2017 holding her watercolor. Photo by the artist

Brenda, last year I sat for you in your loft while you painted my portrait for your *366: A Watercolor Portrait A Day* project, which documented the many faces of the art world. There was a sense of ease and comradery to it as we breezily chatted away about this and that, people we knew in common and what was going on in the galleries. This project, however, was distinctly different. Your subjects were extremely elderly and many suffered from dementia and debilitating diseases. It had to be a very taxing experience emotionally. Can you tell

me a little bit about that aspect of it?

The portrait subjects in *100/100* had experienced an unusual degree of loss and their physical condition, as well as their levels of awareness and ability to communicate, was often compromised. Their stories were difficult and sometimes painful to hear. For instance, I painted a Holocaust survivor, who after showing me the number tattooed on her arm, told me about the 27 members of her family who were killed in the camp (including her twin sister) and how she had managed to survive. There was a woman in her 80's whose significantly younger boyfriend had repeatedly beaten her, so severely that she eventually ended up in the hospital before moving to the Home. I painted parents who had just buried a child, and there were countless women who had lost their husbands and were in mourning (although a surprising number found it liberating!). Many of the subjects over 90, and quite a few over 100, had endured great hardships over their long lives, but it was the younger sitters with debilitating conditions that were particularly hard to face because it struck so much closer to home. I felt anxious when painting subjects who were 'post-verbal' (who could not talk) because I did not know what they were experiencing or how they might react. A subject might forget that he or she was being painted and become angry or even hostile. Once I was attacked. But sometimes through the painting I discovered a subject's level of awareness and even made a connection. For instance, I was painting a man with advanced Alzheimer's disease who was wearing an argyle sweater, primarily in shades of grey. When I loaded the brush with blue to paint a thin line that ran through the pattern, his eyes widened with alarm. He searched his sweater for the blue. Upon locating it, he visibly relaxed made eye contact with me and smiled. Trust was established and a new form of communication emerged. That was a small victory.

What an amazing experience. Were there other more positive exchanges?

In most cases, the attention of being painted was more than welcome and the sessions ended with hugs. A blind woman asked me to describe what I saw as each brushstroke of her portrait hit the page. I told her that her hair was styled in small curls and the auburn color looked nice with the red of her sweater, that her nails were done in red too. We had a frank conversation about blindness. It was very moving.

And while sometimes the conversations were joyous, they were always interesting from a historical point of view. Although midway through a particularly fascinating conversation, I might discover that the sitter was

delusional and very little that they said was true!

Oy vey. Let's switch gears here for a minute. Let me ask you about your process.

The watercolor portraits in 'The Itinerant Portraitist' are always painted from direct observation with the subjects positioned very close to me and the sketchbook laying flat. The sitters can observe their image as it emerges on the page and they guide it, both consciously and unconsciously. I begin each painting with a quick pencil sketch to establish a likeness. Once the likeness is established, the subject is encouraged to talk. These conversations inform the portrait. I paint what I hear, as much as what I see. In *100/100*, each painting took around an hour. My goal was to paint 6-8 portraits a day. For various reasons, many of the subjects could not hold the pose so I worked in a state of heightened awareness, often orbiting the subject with my paints in an attempt to catch a glimpse of their face. Because I grew up with the Sicilian tradition of "Malocchio," a tradition where children are discouraged from making eye contact with elderly people for fear of getting bad luck, the project was pretty intense initially. I also needed to make changes in what I chose to paint. For instance, in my watercolor portraits I usually focus on the face and seldom paint furniture. But many of the sitters in *100/100* were confined to wheelchairs, so the wheelchairs became an important element in the painting. I had to learn to navigate breathing tubes, organize layers of chairs and capture silent screams as well.



Olga Prieto sitting for Brenda Zlamany in her series, *100/100*, 2017. Photo: Oona Zlamany

You recently completed a very large portrait commission in oil paint of Yale University's first seven women Ph.D.s. and on the success of that, you've been asked to paint another group portrait for Yale's Davenport

College. Unlike your *Itinerant Portrait* project, in which you are answerable only to yourself, commissioned portraits demand another kind of criteria. Do you find commissions challenging in a good way or demanding in a way that takes you away from other projects that you would rather be doing?

Well actually, in portraiture whether commissioned or not you are never answerable only to yourself. One way or another, there's someone on the other end, usually with a strong opinion, who sees you seeing the subject. And navigating that is exciting!

I take on very few commissions and gravitate toward challenging, high profile projects, where I hope to learn something new. For instance, in my New York Times Magazine commissions, which have included portraits of Jeffrey Dahmer, Slobodan Milosevic and his wife, and Osama Bin Laden (for their September 11, 2005 cover), I got to explore evil. In these projects making a good painting while respecting the victims feelings was an engaging balancing act.

With Yale's First Seven Women Ph.D.s and the new Davenport paintings, I had to come up with new working methods to organize groups of figures in invented, somewhat allegorical situations. These commissions have lead to more complex compositions in my studio practice.

In the end, the technical, as well as emotional discoveries that I make in *The Itinerant Portraitist* project, and in the commissioned portraits, are important for my studio practice because they play a role in my development as an artist.

You and I came to New York at about the same time, in the early 80's. You had interned in Paris with Stanley William Hayter and had just graduated from Wesleyan. You moved down to the city and got right into the thick of it as a master printer, printing editions for Chuck Close and Julian Schnable. At that time you also met Alex Katz and David Hockney. You've stayed close with many of these artists, as part of a family of portrait painters. Do you see yourself as part of a tradition dating back to the Medicis, or do you feel like you are part of a newer conversation about what portraiture means in today's art world?

Both. The role of the painted portrait in society is ever-changing, not only in terms of who is depicted but also in relationship to new mediums. So while I view my portraits as part of a long lineage, dating back at least to the Egyptian Fayum portraits, and I definitely take cues from the 'masters', I see myself as playing a role in a constantly evolving discourse.

When I had my first portrait show in NYC in the early 90's, portraiture was

considered subversive. The white male language, and reinvigorating the medium was the task at hand. At the time there were very few artists who painted portraits – almost no women, so I gravitated toward the earlier generation, painting them as well as posing for them. These early friendships were key in developing my own project.

These days there are as many new voices in portraiture as there are subjects being depicted. And projects like the two Yale's commissions, which help to diversify iconography in institutions, are playing an important social role.

The *Itinerant Portraitist* is also answering a need. In a time of virtual reality and high-speed, mediated experience, the connection between artist and subject created by the act of building an image stroke by stroke is unusual. There is much to be explored in the question of who is portrayed and how. I am interested in the multifaceted nature of portraiture in the digital age.

***Brenda Zlamany: 100/100* remains on view at the Derfner Judaica Museum, 5901 Palisade Avenue, Riverdale, New York through January 7, 2018**



Sylvia Sutton, Zelda Fassler and Shirley Weintraub, portrait subjects in Brenda Zlamany's project, *100/100*, 2017. Photo: Richard Goodbody

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