

MARCH 1991

Brenda Zlamany

E.M. DONAHUE GALLERY

JANINE CIRINCIONE

The works in Brenda Zlamany's first one-person show at E.M. Donahue gallery teeter on the edge between abstraction and representation, old master bravura and postmodern theory, between the seductive and the gruesome. In these eleven paintings of dead animals—ducks, blowfish, goats' heads and turtles—floating ambiguously in painterly abstract fields, Zlamany has mastered the art of the oxymoron, celebrating conflict and contradiction.

Zlamany knows how to push paint around, and clearly enjoys the expressive possibilities of the abstract, painterly surface. Yet when, like many artists, she was confronted with the risk of falling into the empty formal gymnastics too often associated with abstract painting, she chose to re-invigorate painterly issues by incorporating confrontational subject matter into the work.

Influenced as she is by the free-wheeling, anything goes spirit of postmodernism, Zlamany has borrowed freely from various art historical styles and strategies, still life in particular. By acknowledging and deconstructing the least heroic of painting genres she negates the importance of traditional representational pictorial values, with its attendant three dimensional space, and embraces instead a decontextualization of images, with purposefully ambiguous figure/ground relationships.

Theory aside, however, there is a religious quality to these works which transcends their down-to-earth subjects. Like the Christian martyrs, her figures are isolated, hanging, nailed—in one large painting two ducks are configured like Christ on the cross. And, these works serve, as icons do, to present images of violence while still keeping the eye and spirit in a state of quiet contemplation. †

