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BRENDA ZLAMANY

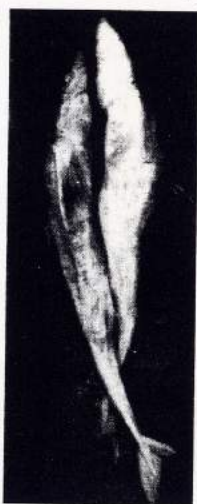
E. M. DONAHUE GALLERY

Brenda Zlamany's works depict the bodies and parts of bodies of slaughtered animals, of human cadavers, and, for the first time, quite living friends. Isolating each represented object in a dark, glassy, anonymous space that, in its reflectiveness suggests a mirror more than a window, her representational technique vaguely recalls that of certain 17th-century Dutch still-life painters who managed to combine austerity with opulence. Her forms emerge not only as delicately yet richly colored, but as highly tactile and quite material. This tactility is particularly effective in a portrait of Bill Arning, entitled *Bill*, 1992, in which the subject's dark hair can only be separated from the background by its texture. Zlamany's tour-de-force, *Dogfish*, 1992, depicts a pair of five-foot-long sharks whose skin—a flickering interplay of evanescent colors emerging from and submerged in a mineral texture—is enough to disclose the work's conflation of the voluptuous and the elegiac. That the arrangement of the two scaly carcasses recalls a human couple's embrace—as well as the female sex—only emphasizes the nature of this piece as a nexus of desire and death.

What gives Zlamany's paintings their meaning is that she uses the images to talk about representation—its half-feared, half-desired stirring of irrational cathexes. Only through the gap between painting

and body—and more complexly, between painting-as-body and body-as-image—does the metaphorical transference that allows us to dwell on these works as images of death, of desire, of intimacy, even of dread, occur. Much current art prefers to forget that without the leap across difference that metaphor affords, the act of exhibiting containers of body fluids, for example, adds little to the so-called discourse on the body: synecdoche has but minor cognitive power. Conversely, we have seen enough artists adopt self-consciously pre-Modernist styles to realize that what is at stake in such mannerisms is often little more than an attempt to erase the discomforts that come with the acknowledgement of the irreversibility of history. Zlamany seems to be coming at the legacy of Modernist self-referentiality by altogether different means—by depicting dead beings in a dead language, frozen images of living selves embalmed in a hardened, frozen style. That these are mere images—highly illusionistic but also erosions of the illusions they create—is in part how they intimate that, to quote Wallace Stevens, "It is an illusion that we were ever alive." There's a nasty edge to this haunted beauty. Instead of flaunting the imagery of decay and putrefaction in the manner of Alexis Rockman, Zlamany shows beauty itself, or its enjoyment, as a kind of decomposition. If she continues to move away from the direct depiction of dead things, her point could become even more subtle, seductive, and cruel.

—Barry Schwabsky



Brenda Zlamany,
DOG FISH #1, 1992, oil
on panel, 63 x 24".