



Brenda Zlamany: *Iguana #3*, 1991-92, oil on panel, 14 by 60 inches; at E.M. Donahue.

was executed in white plaster-soaked gauze over an armature, and was modeled with the sensuality of clay. This emphasis on touch gave no hint of the impersonal surfaces for which Smith was to become so well known. This exhibition provided a welcome reminder that Smith did not develop in a linear manner, but, in his early phases, oscillated between stylistic modes. (According to the painter Doug Ohlson, who as a young artist worked as Smith's assistant, Smith had hoped to have these works cast in bronze, but felt that the plasters could also have the timeless quality he was striving for.)

While Smith's work with plaster was brief, the forms involved were central to his artistic endeavor. *Tetrahedron* was among his earliest independent sculptural explorations of the four-sided element that became his primary compositional module. Smith clearly saw the vulture's wing as a prototype in nature of the space frame, an idea which would later inspire works such as *Smoke*, 1967, *Smog*, 1970, and *Smug*, 1972-73. Despite its small size, this rich and surprising exhibition suggested the complex history behind Smith's well-known works of the 1960s and '70s.

—Joan Pachner

## Brenda Zlamany at E.M. Donahue

Having for the past several years painted, almost exclusively, dead humans and animals, Brenda Zlamany is now branching out to tackle live models. A portrait head of Bill Arning and a full-length nude, *John #1*, were included in this show. But the emphasis of her work continues to be on *nature morte*, both in the sense of still life and in its literal meaning, "dead nature." She studies animals floating in jars of formaldehyde and brings back shark and goat heads from the fish and butcher shops to

paint and photograph in her studio. A friend who works in a medical school admits her to the morgue during off hours, where she sketches human cadavers left in various stages of dissection by surgery students.

The results of these studies are medium-sized oils on panel. They are not morbid or grotesque as might be expected, but instead have a kind of eerie beauty and moody charm. Many of the subjects are posed or positioned in such a way as to suggest that they are still alive. The artist has stated that her pictures are not about the pain, violence or horror of death but rather how death affirms life. To this end she attempts to "resurrect" these creatures, both through the selection of their images and through the process of painting them.

Each subject is isolated on the panel and enveloped in a dark negative space with no clearly defined horizon line. Many of the creatures appear to be floating. *Iguana #3*, a long, narrow horizontal panel, is a dramatic asymmetrical composition depicting the animal in an upright position squeezed into the extreme left of the picture as if pressed against the glass wall of a dark aquarium. *Dogfish #1*, a tall, vertical painting, shows a pair of intertwined fish that appear to be swimming upstream in some murky river.

All of the paintings have a rich surface texture achieved by much overpainting. No black paint is used in creating the dark backgrounds, which are built up with layer upon layer of deep greens, browns and blues. This technique gives the illusion of wrinkles and deep crevices in the flesh of many of the subjects and is particularly effective in the rendering of reptile skin. The two paintings of human corpses in the show, *Asian Man #1* and *Caucasian Woman #1*, have an extremely leathery, shriveled look that calls to mind some of the fig-

ures painted by Ivan Albright.

Zlamany strives to emulate the work of Rembrandt, Zurbarán, Ribera and Chardin. But her pared-down compositions are rooted in Minimal art, and her approach to the subject matter is more allied with the work of contemporary painters such as Gregory Gillespie than any of the old masters. Her handling of the themes of decay and renewal have little to do with nostalgia and are very much of the moment.

—David Ebony