

Art for the Masses

Brenda Zlamany's show entitled "Twelve Men and Twelve Birds" presents portraits of middle-aged men hung beside representations - painted from 'life' as opposed to photos or taxidermed stiff - of dead birds.

The first thing I thought of when I entered the E.M. Donahue Gallery was that here's a woman artist who's having her cake and eating it, too, (managing to paint in luscious oils the images of men in their prime yet in an aura of criticality) and: that a lot has changed in art since Delacroix first juxtaposed a man and a rat, and Rowlandson sketched his comparison between a young man and a cock.

The show has a lot going for it in terms of viewer - experience, if only from the standpoint that so much is murky and unexplained about the juxtapositions, and so much is pleasant about the renderings (finely painted oils in the sixteenth-century tradition), that it is hard to imagine anyone leaving without something to 'like.' But are we supposed to 'like' these paintings? Or, as a review in *Artforum*, 1993, of the artist's work stated, are they representations of a '...half-feared, half-desired stirring of irrational cathexes'?

In choosing her portrait subjects, the artist has selected men of middle age, most from the artworld, one of the more famous being the artist

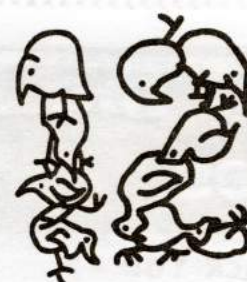
Since the gender of the birds is not known, the show thankfully does not compel memories of those vivid television documentaries where male birds are shown prancing, replete with nature's mating 'extras'- extra plumage of enhanced color, extra song abilities, extra wingspan.

Men can seek the restorative properties of commercial hair-loss remedies; the birds cannot be restored to life except on the canvas, which yields them to us as dead, dead, dead. (No last-minute fluttering eyelids on these birds!). There seems to be something going on that has to do with loss, but resurrection? By definition, hair cannot be said to equal life, but the loss of hair can suggest human frailty and the inevitability of aging and eventual death. But death comes to women as well as men; there are no women on the canvases. It is useful, at times, to hear the artist's intentions. In an interview with *Cover* magazine in April of '93, Ms. Zlamany states that she is interested in the 'buzz' she gets from painting in the same room as the deceased animal (no doubt a potent one when combined with the Spirits of Turpentine her oils require!). She does believe that, through her act of painting the dead subject, a certain resurrection does occur.



Men and

by Lauri Brett



Birds

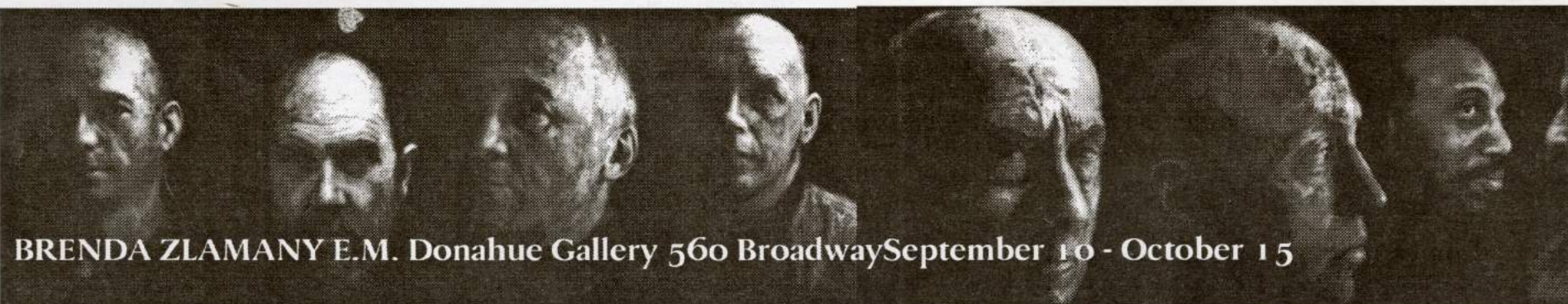
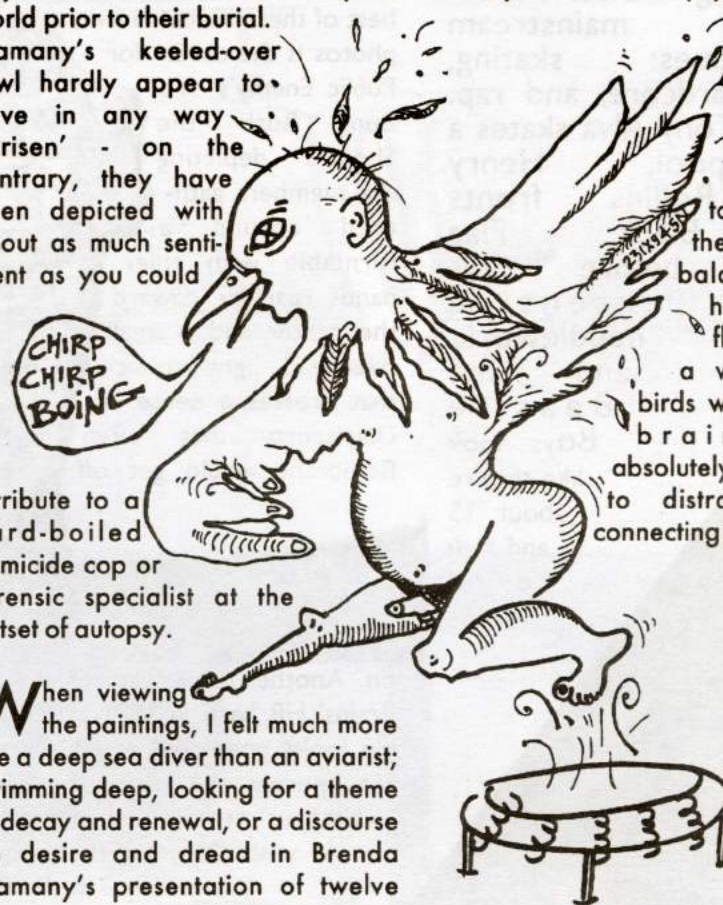
The impulse to 'capture' a deceased by preserving its image is not new; it was a popular use for studio photography in the medium's early days. That practice, however, grew out of the grief of losing a loved one and the desire to capture some lasting essence from them while stayed at the threshold of the 'spirit' world prior to their burial. Zlamany's keeled-over fowl hardly appear to have in any way 'arisen' - on the contrary, they have been depicted with about as much sentiment as you could

attribute to a hard-boiled homicide cop or forensic specialist at the outset of autopsy.

When viewing the paintings, I felt much more like a deep sea diver than an aviarist; swimming deep, looking for a theme of decay and renewal, or a discourse on desire and dread in Brenda Zlamany's presentation of twelve

alive men and twelve dead birds. I did see a glimmer - but it was brief and dark and glimpsed through a sea of polluted fish (the fish being the multitudinous representations populating art's postmodern waters). Nevertheless, it is definitely worth it to don the gear and get wet, and if you find your tastes keep you nearer to

the surface than the depths, there's always the humor to be found in the discovery of balding round heads of men floating along a wall next to birds with pea-sized brains... and absolutely nothing else to distract you in connecting the dots.



BRENDA ZLAMANY E.M. Donahue Gallery 560 Broadway September 10 - October 15