

The Skin and Body of Looking

John Yau

At once sensual and remote, insistent and reserved, tactile and reflective, Brenda Zlamany's stark yet opulent paintings compel the viewer to reconsider the nature of, as well as the desire for, representational images. In this regard, she is as much a representational painter as are Vija Celmins, Chuck Close, Gregory Gillespie, Mark Greenwald, Alex Katz, or Catherine Murphy, all of whom have thoroughly reenvisioned aspects thought to be inherent to abstraction (all-over, gridded, minimalist, and gestural composition). What Zlamany shares with these intensely strong, older artists is a highly focused concern with the relationship between looking and knowing, image and tactility, and subject matter and paint. The emotionally complex shifts between the frozen time of paint and the passing time inhabited by the body are very much at the core of Zlamany's work. For more than a decade, she has worked in modes such as portraiture and still life in order to speculate upon, as well as to dissect, the nature of representation. In recent years, she has added landscape and sculptural objects to her oeuvre.

Less about the immediacy of seeing than about looking as a form of examination, Zlamany synthesizes a wide range of diverse techniques not only to prolong the viewer's engagement with subject matter, but also to transform it into a disturbingly paradoxical state of both wonderment and aversion. This latter aspect of her work not only sets her apart from both the older generation of artists and her peers, but, despite the coolness of her work, it also unexpectedly connects her to artists such as Alice Neel, Otto Dix, and Ivan Albright, all of whom were interested in distortion and decay. That Zlamany's affinities with these artists is not a matter of style, for she certainly isn't an expressionist, should underscore the degree to which she has developed a wholly original approach to subject matter. Seldom has decay been painted so lucidly, and certainly by no one else in Zlamany's generation.

While Zlamany's techniques recall the dramatic, chiaroscuro lighting of some seventeenth-century Northern European portrait painters, as well as evoke the tactile brushwork and rough surfaces arrived at by some of the Abstract Expressionists, she is neither a nostalgist nor a parodist. Thus, in contrast to many of her peers, who, working in a representational mode, tend to flaunt, exaggerate, or highly stylize their imagery, Zlamany is more disturbingly conscious of time's unavoidable devastations. Consequently, her work is more subtly haunted, more disquietingly remote, and more seductive. It is this latter aspect of her work, its seductiveness, that the viewer might find harrowing. For often what she shows us isn't necessarily a subject, but a specimen, at once beautiful and perfectly preserved.

Until very recently, the artist depicted her subjects against, and within, a dark, reflective space, which evoked a mirror seen at night. The monochromatic space in which she poses her subject matter tends to be anonymous, sensual, and opulent. It's a hushed world, one that is seductively tactile and yet gloomily opulent. Reminiscent of Caravaggio's penchant for a psychologically charged, dramatically lit atmosphere, Zlamany deliberately controls the passage of dramatizing light, so that it illuminates, as well as collects on and across, the face or body. Zlamany's light seems at once artificial and imaginary, the harshness of spotlights and the glow of warm fleshtones. In contrast to Caravaggio, however, it is not the drama that the body is engaged in that interests Zlamany; it is the very drama of the body or face itself. The viewer isn't confronted by a crucial moment, but by a bright or glowing form which shifts effortlessly and provocatively between paint and illusion, insistent thing and detailed image.

Zlamany applies the paint incrementally on highly prepared panels, which are often intimate in scale. Starting in the mid 1980s, when many of her panels measured around six by twelve inches, the artist has gradually but consistently increased the scale, as well as worked on very different formats including narrow verticals, diamonds, and large, seemingly square panels. Thus, by the early 1990s, she did a full-length portrait of her sister and, more recently, a large portrait of two seated figures. Each of these changes in scale conveys her determination to extend beyond what she has accomplished, thus not only consciously testing the possibilities of her growing mastery, but also registering in paint both the intensity and breadth of her ambition.

Zlamany's wide range of marks include abraded strokes, carefully orchestrated tonal shifts, and faceted patches—malleable bits of paint. Through her careful attention to both texture and the interplay of light and shadow, she is able to push the coherence of subject matter to a richly opulent, yet austere, almost restrained fruition. The provocative paradox of opulence and austerity suffusing through her paintings reverberates with her delicious, yet almost morbid interest in skin and texture. It's as if she is using the brush to carefully caress her subject matter back into existence. Flesh, skin, scales, feathers, and fur are transformed into paint, which, in Zlamany's vision of the world, is glowing matter.

In her paintings of dead birds, a recurring subject since the mid 1980s, the surface of their bodies is simultaneously tactile and tonal. The viewer is made to feel like both an animal lover and a mortician, someone who has a reason to begin carefully scrutinizing the objects placed before them. One is equally fascinated and disturbed by the amount of careful attention that Zlamany has been able to articulate into paint. Although the images seem life-size, Zlamany has in fact enlarged the subject to

around one-and-a-half-times life-size, thus bringing the viewer into a more intimate relationship with her subject. Typically, the size and shape of the birds echo the painting's shape, with the horizontality or verticality of the prone body extending to the painting's dimension. At the same time, Zlamany subverts the rhyme between subject and format by focusing our attention on disorienting poses. Are we looking down at the bird? Is the bird asleep or dead? Is it floating or resting? These questions inevitably lead to others.

In *Bird #4* (1993–94), for example, the pose is simultaneously erotic and disquieting. It's as if the bird has suddenly keeled over, stricken by an immediately fatal ailment. And yet, the outward thrust of its leg extending into the air, as well as the downward thrust of its head, imparts a comically erotic component to the painting. And with this eroticism comes a disquieting isolation. For seemingly neither lying down nor floating, and thus truly cut off from both the world and the effects of gravity, the bird in *Bird #4* becomes the sole inhabitant of an impenetrable, death-like state. Zlamany has not only seamlessly cojoined a hedonistic sensuality with a potentially bleak recognition of mortality, but she also conveys strong erotic presence which seems at once familiar and alien.

Zlamany's eroticism is disturbing because it is embodied in an image that is vibrantly, glowingly present, yet sealed off and remote. The layers of glazes embalm the subject, while also drenching it in a rich, tactile light which ranges from warm to harsh. Further echoing this tension between insistent presence and complete isolation is the fact that Zlamany places the luminous body (or face) of her subjects against and within a dark, monochromatic space reminiscent of Zurbarán. And this space, which is anonymous and thus contemporary, as well as religious and thus connected to such extreme states as penitence and ecstasy, becomes in Zlamany's paintings far more than a device; it becomes the world of the body, rather than the world the body inhabits.

Thus, in her depictions of snakes—the faceted patterns of their ridged skin, the gestural power latent in their coiled and outstretched bodies, and their phallic shapes—Zlamany articulates the erotic as a cool reptilian body whose lithe form is both seductive and dangerous. That Zlamany manages to dislodge the snake from the realm of the feminine, and such art-historical precedents as the late Romantic paintings of Franz Von Stuck, as well as imbue it with associations with male sex and masculinity, must be regarded as a truly subversive retelling of the myths upon which much of our history and social perceptions have been built.

Nothing less than the reenvisioning of the world lies at the core of Zlamany's painterly project. In her first full-length portrait, *Christina* (1994), she chose to depict her sister, who was visibly pregnant at the time,

nude. At the same time, her subject is wearing earrings. Rather than being depicted as a repository of male creativity or as a symbol of fecundity, she stares confidently out at the viewer, a proud, self-contained, and distinctly sexual being. Thus, among other things, what Zlamany interrogates in her paintings is the gaze itself, and how it has been historically conditioned in its expectations.

More than likely, Zlamany's interrogation of the gaze played a role in her decision to work on a series of portraits of bald men (1993–95) who have established themselves in the art world as either artists or critics. In choosing bald men, and then depicting them up close, within rather confined, anonymous circumstances, Zlamany is able to subtly transform portraiture into a subversive critique of power and hierarchy within any and every social milieu. She does this by focusing our attention on the distinguishing features of a particular bald head. In her portraits of bald men, the shifts from the crown's smoothness to the face's lines, wrinkles, sags, and, in some cases, the movement from the head's smooth, rounded crown to the face's tactile beard, implicitly echo the inherent features of the male sex organ. Underlying these associations is the similarity in both their physiognomy and shape.

Zlamany further underscores the visual rhymes between a phallus and a bald head by depicting the head, lined face, beard (in some cases), and neck rising vertically from a white T-shirt, say, or a soft, open-necked shirt—their folds caressed by the brush into tactile visibility. At the same time, like the birds, the men inhabit a state of both ecstasy and coldness. They are assured, remote, used to being in control. Zlamany, however, has turned the tables. By concentrating on details, she dissolves any power her subjects might have over her. It is she who is making the painting, doing the gazing, not they.

Is the power which these men are used to possessing now a death-like state? Are they alive? Or are they perfectly preserved, reminding us that they were once alive? Seen within this context, the chilliness of their seductiveness gains in both complexity and resonance. Zlamany's paintings are sites of speculation. Her figures are haunted by history. We, in turn, are about to perform an autopsy and thus at long last begin to see for ourselves. In bringing the viewer to this place, Zlamany stands at the forefront of her generation.

Moving from cadavers and dead animals to living subjects and the landscape, as she has done in recent years, Zlamany continues to embark in unexpected directions, confront and master new issues. Looking is just the beginning, her work tells us. During the journey we take, as we look from here to there and back again, we must never lose sight of what is before our eyes.