

# Review

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## Brenda Zlamany

Recent Portraits & Landscapes  
Stux Gallery through January 2

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**W**HAT BREATHES THE life into Brenda Zlamany's paintings is the astonishing quality of light she instills in them. It's as if it emanates from within the figures and radiates out around them. Clearly an extension from the tradition of chiaroscuro in the Renaissance and tenebroso in the Baroque, it is one of her acknowledgments to the rich heritage established by her painterly ancestors. She also paints with a meticulous realism.

A couple of years ago I took my NYU class to an exhibition of Zlamany's snake portraits in a rather small gallery space. Some of the students could not even enter the space as if we were literally entering the snake pit in an Indiana Jones movie. Such a reaction is consistent with the psychological confrontation one experiences in a room with Zlamany's portraits. Similar to the experience one encounters with Gregory Gillespie's paintings where every inch of the human figure is dissected and bared in front of the viewer, Zlamany displays the extraordinary patterns our skin or clothing reveal.

The result is no less a psychological investigation where issues of life and death are the stakes. Take, for example, *PORTRAIT # 30 (MR. R. FREDERICK WOOLWORTH) 1996/7*, where the subject's bare torso has all the patternings of snake skin, yet he displays an arrogance almost solely reserved for the human species.

While the exhibition includes figurative and landscape images, it is the portraits which distinguish Zlamany in this exhibition. In *PORTRAIT #35 (MAURICE PAYNE)* she

seeks to extend the established tradition of studio portraits of Goya, Manet, Whistler and the like. Just enough of the floor and white wall are showing on the left of the painting to establish the spatial location. This is truly a portrait in blue and white. How subtle the alignment of foreground and background becomes in the interplay between the wall and the subject's tee shirt. Surely Zlamany is very fond of this individual. He has a very soft quality to his face, and the internal light is all the more accentuated by how sharp it seems in the blue atmosphere. She has taken his ordinary draperies: denim, a tee shirt and work boots, and made them almost regal, certainly glistening. Yet with all of the blue, and it is lush, there is a sadness present which helps in communicating the sitter's complexity. Although he faces straight out at us, his mind seems elsewhere off in thoughts.

**Z**lamany's shrewdness in capturing the human complexity can be seen in *PORTRAIT # 34 (ALVA STUX) 1998*. Dressed in pink with a pearl necklace, the sitter seems anxious to burst on to the next stage of life, and yet the light and shadowed side of her face betray a sense that she has already experienced some of life's tribulations. Across the gallery from this painting is a painting of a dead bird, appearing in a similar dark abstract space. Zlamany's handling of the light and patterning of feathers displays a reverence for life and death which encompasses our memories and reflections. I had the feeling that if one could get a very close view of the bird's torso, one would begin to see it transform into a landscape (representing a return to nature?)

Zlamany's landscapes are new to her oeuvre and result from a trip she

took to Southeast Asia. Alone they seem to lack the authority of her portraits. She seems caught up in their abstract qualities and showing a metamorphosis between the landscapes and her birds and snakes almost as if she is trying to paint landscape as portrait, but as of yet without the same quality of light.

The showstoppers for me, though, are the two sets of self-portraits, one bare torso, and the other in complete profile. It seems a shame to me that each of these sets of two mirror images may not stay together. In these profiles, she once again boldly confronts tradition. This time one recalling Piero Della Francesca or Botticelli where the female sits in complete profile in front of a landscape where presumably the two were somehow equated. Here the metamorphosis between animal, human and landscape is successful. They are integrated through color, brushstroke and temperament. The result is a psychological smorgasbord where Zlamany shows off her painterly acumen and we, the viewers, cannot but associate and identify with her and our life's travails.

Equally as compelling are the nude torsos, especially *SELF-PORTRAIT # 3, 1998* (with woodpecker) or "dead pecker" as Zlamany herself referred to it. There is no sensuality here, rather the sense of a very quiet contemplative act where Zlamany lets us know just how close to the birds she actually is. The mirror image is presented without a bird. The source for these was a painting from the School of Fontainebleau where two nude women (actually mirror images with different hair color) look out at the viewer while one tweaks the other's nipple. For Zlamany, it would seem that the tweak is internal and yet somehow symbolized by the dead bird.

There is nothing left in the bag when Brenda Zlamany paints. She boldly confronts long-standing traditions with a bravura which asserts her own style and identity and in so illuminating, forces each of us to contemplate our present and future with a recognition and memory of our near and distant past.