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I came to portraiture during my high school years, through frequent hitchhiking. I'd go cross-country or pick a general direction for a daytrip—completely open-ended. When a car pulled over I would just poke my head in the window. I had only a few seconds to read every line in the driver's face. Get it wrong and there were consequences. Faces then became my obsession. Through these impromptu glances I became an expert on them.

Portrait painting for me is a deep, intimate relationship, had alone. I admire the electricity and eroticism of the photographic moment, I begin my painting process by taking hundreds of photos of a subject. Then I move on to the primary sketching. Next, I retreat to the studio for months. I am too intensely focused on the painting—having the subject around is a distraction. But during the project I'll arrange a visit with the subject only to talk. Engaging in a dialogue, especially the act of listening, is like sketching. These conversations can completely alter the course of painting. Aside from visiting with a subject, I'll journey to the museum and look at pieces that relate to what I want from my painting. Specific areas of a Holbein for the red in the Alex Katz portrait. A Jean-Michel Basquiat; Lucien Freud

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and Rubens for the flesh in Fred Woolworth. A collection of Fayum or mummy portraits from Ancient Egypt, for their mood and frontality. Paintings, while viewed in the museum are alive for me, and help me with my own work. If my subject enters my dreams at night, then I know that I'm almost there.

Once I've painted someone, the reality of my painting is also the subject's truest reality. If the subject gains weight or

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Painter of Modern Life

changes hair-style, the change is like a mistake in a drawing.

I don't think it is necessary to know people closely to paint them, partially because I don't think it is possible to really know other people closely, but also because portraiture is more about the transference. If there is depth in a painting, it comes from the intensity of the artist's fantasy. I choose my subjects carefully, owing to that indescribable something, their unspoken inspiration. I've picked people up in the elevator and subway because I had seen that certain something in their faces. The best paintings are not of the people I know best but of those I can best develop a fantasy about.

I've recently been working on a series of paintings of men, mostly bald, who go unnamed in the titles. To me it's fascinating, reversing the traditional direction in which the male artist gazes at the female subject.

Most of the men I select for a portrait are artists. It helps to empathize with their work, because it informs my painting. I choose subjects whose work is self-referential or who have been previously represented by other artists. This history creates a triangle, the subject, the preexisting images of the subject, and the blank page. When the face is of a subject whose work deals with the notion of being familiar, the audience can become engaged more complexly.

I am often asked about the relevance of the painted portrait in the photo age. For me, a photograph portrait captures a still moment, whereas painted portraits are created and exist over time, like a motion picture. A finished painting is the sum of months of slow and careful mark-making. As a face is repainted each day, the previous face joins the others below the skin—it vanishes, but still remains there, in relief. A slight change in light or viewer's angle, continually reveals the inexhaustible pleasures of creating painting.

Painting is my passion and I live, love and relish every aspect of it. **by Brenda Zlamany**