

Mother-Daughter Duo Sketch 888 Taiwanese Faces

New York, N.Y. — I met the most amazing mother-daughter duo the other week. Americans, they were speaking at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York ([TECO-NY](#)). They were explaining to an appreciative crowd of mostly Americans and Chinese how they had spent four months recently on the Isle of Formosa, sketching and painting the faces of 888 Taiwanese — an auspicious number in Chinese culture. What amazed me was that the mom, a Fulbright scholar, did not speak Chinese. Her 11-year old daughter did — and interpreted for the trip.



Brenda and Oona were invited to a Rukai celebration and were encouraged to wear traditional costumes. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

Meet Brenda and Oona [Zlamany](#). Brenda was raised by first generation European immigrants who wanted her to assimilate in our melting pot, so they refused to speak their ancestral languages — just English. Regretting and resenting this her whole life, Brenda put her only daughter at a very early age into school in Chinatown where she would have total emersion into another culture and language — Chinese. Coincidentally, I explored placing my own son into the exact same Mandarin-speaking school in the 1990s.



Brenda uses the camera lucida, a drawing device that dates back to the renaissance enabling the artist to plot the points of a person's features. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

Brenda explained that their project, entitled "888," is a project that has several different stories. The first story is a personal art story:

For the past fifteen years I have been painting portraits of my artist friends. Many of us paint ourselves and each other. In some ways you could say that we are professional posers. Our gaze is external. Very look at me. In 2007, I took a trip to Tibet with my daughter. On this trip, I took thousands of photos of monks and nomads with the intent of making oil paintings when I returned. When I painted the portraits of Tibetans, I noticed that their gaze was more internal. This interested me. I wanted to explore the idea more deeply by working from direct observation.

I wanted to learn how to use the camera lucida, a drawing device that dates back to the renaissance and enables you to plot the points of a person's features and to get a likeness more quickly. I looked for a population that like the Tibetans was somewhat removed from the mainstream culture and I came upon Taiwan's Aboriginal people.



Oona made friends everywhere she went. This Rukai woman enjoyed dressing Oona up and dancing with her in her shop. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

The second story Brenda related was a parenting story:

I believe that it is important for children to learn languages, so I enrolled my daughter in a bilingual immersion school in mandarin called Shuang Wen Academy on the lower Eastside, when she was three. I wanted to reinforce her language skills and I like to work on projects with her, so I looked for a mandarin speaking country for my project. So I wrote a proposal for a Fulbright to Taiwan.



Brenda Zlamany giving a talk at the opening of '888: Portraits in Taiwan' at

the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

Brenda's third story involved the Taiwanese native or aboriginal people:

There are many different tribes. We visited sixteen. They have distinct customs, languages, social order, traditions, music, dance, arts, crafts and even food. But what they have in common is a remarkable generosity, warmth and curiosity. We stayed for several days to a week in each village and were invited to participate in all aspects of daily life: harvest festivals, religious ceremonies, sporting events, craft workshops and various aspects of socializing and relaxing. Many families invited us into their homes and cooked delicious foods for us. Some even held special painting events where they invited family members to be painted. They helped with our itinerary by making introductions in other villages. We have learned so much from them and are grateful for their trust in us and the project.



Brenda paints a portrait of a young Tao man in Lanyu. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

Eventually Brenda opened up the art project to include all people living and working in Taiwan. The fourth story is thus a Taiwanese story:

Taiwan was the perfect country for this project. It has beautiful landscape and excellent infrastructure. The people are very kind, generous and honest. We always felt safe there – in fact coming back to New York was a shock, as we had to relearn being on the defense. The Taiwanese people encouraged us, even when Oona and I thought that

we would never reach the goal of 888. And MOCA Taipei and various organizations in Taiwan such as AIT, MOFA GIO and RTI all got behind the work and helped shape it into an exhibition that opened at MOCA Taipei only 4 months after the project was completed! I could never have done this project without the support of the Taiwanese people.



Oona Zlamany 'signing in' at the dedication of a road from Sandiman to Wutia.

Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

The fifth story and maybe the most important story is about the positive effects of art:

Through the painting, intense bonds were formed. As I traveled from place to place, people were introduced to people from other cultures by flipping through the sketchbook pages. And as the exhibition travels from place to place, people will learn about the rich cultural heritage of Taiwan and about Taiwan's indigenous population. In this high speed, digital age, I discovered that there is a longing for the slow and immediate communication that takes place when painting a portrait from direct observation. 888 is the first chapter in my ongoing project: The Itinerant Portraitist. In this project I will continue to travel to areas of the globe to explore the positive effects of portraiture.



Oona's job was to find interesting subjects for paintings. Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlamany.

Brenda Zlamany is my kind of mother. In fact, she is the type of thought leader and global citizen needed to make this world a better place. Embracing the arts, global and local culture, and good parenting, Brenda personifies the best of humanity. Her daughter Oona is the kind of kid humanity needs so that we don't self-destruct. Wise and worldly beyond her years, she cares deeply about her family, her friends – and her neighbors. It is unsurprising that Fulbright recognized this family for the gem that it is. I look forward to the next chapters of this Itinerant Portraitist and her daughter. Not many families contribute so greatly to humanity.



*Brenda and Oona stop to admire the view while traveling from their home base in Hualien to an Amis harvest festival in Dagangkou on Highway 11.
Photo courtesy of Brenda and Oona Zlaman*

Short MOCA Taipei interview with Brenda Zlamany entitled Project 888 on YouTube.

See Other Video: 888: Portraits in Taiwan (56-min. video on [Vimeo](#))

See Stories by [Jim Luce](#) on:

[Art](#) | [Brooklyn](#) | [Children](#) | [New York](#) | [Peace](#) | [Women's Issues](#)

The James Jay Dudley Luce Foundation (www.lucefoundation.org) is the umbrella organization under which The International University Center Haiti ([Uni Haiti](#)) and Orphans International Worldwide ([OIWW](#)) are organized. If supporting young global leadership is important to you, subscribe to J. Luce Foundation updates [here](#).

Follow Jim Luce on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

Originally published in [The Huffington Post](#), July 3, 21012.

Tags: [888](#), [Art](#), [Brenda Zlamany](#), [Brooklyn](#), [Camera Lucida](#), [Children](#), [Chinatown](#), [Chinese](#), [Chinese Culture](#), [Chinese Language](#), [Drawing Device](#), [Fulbright Scholarship](#), [Itinerant Portraitist](#), [James Jay Dudley Luce Foundation](#), [Jim Luce](#), [Mandarin](#), [Manhattan](#), [MOCA Taipei](#), [Mother-Daughter](#), [New York City](#), [Oona Zlamany](#), [Shuang Wen Academy](#), [slider](#), [Taiwan](#), [Taiwan Aboriginal People](#), [Video](#), [Women's News](#), [World News](#)