

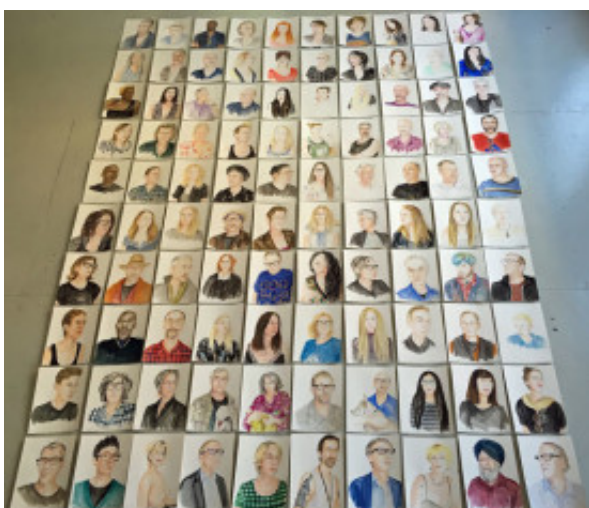
# A Portrait A Day — And Back In The Day: A Studio Visit with Brenda Zlamany

[Mary Jones](#)



Brenda Zlamany painting her daughter Oona in her Williamsburg studio, 2015. In the background, portrait commission destined for Yale University Sterling Library with working materials. Photo: Mary Jones

Brenda Zlamany has long been known for exploring and revitalizing traditional portraiture. Her technique is impressively old world (Rembrandt and Holbein are cited influences) and her command of oil painting affirms serious dedication and mastery of the medium. But Zlamany's work is decidedly contemporary in the way it questions and sometimes confounds the usual relationship between subject and artist.



A batch from the series, "Watercolor"

This exchange is central to Zlamany's current work, which has become more openly interactive than ever, even performative, as she paints the portrait in front of the subject as they observe her. For a project in Taiwan funded by a Fulbright grant in 2011, the artist painted 888 watercolor portraits on location, which led to 12 paintings of aboriginal

Portrait a Day" by Brenda Zlamany. Photo:  
Brenda Zlamany

teenage boys. Now, she's taken on an equally difficult demographic: the New York art world. Her year-long project, "Watercolor Portrait a Day," is actively underway with artists, friends, family and casual acquaintances all coming through the studio in an intricate web of connections. Each sitting is concluded with the artist taking a photograph of the subject holding his or her portrait. The photo is then posted to Facebook and Instagram, one portrait every day.

It's become quite the phenomenon. She gets hundreds of "likes," comments and criticism with each post and was thrown off Instagram once for a day, (see the posting of day 193). No money changes hands and the portraits remain Zlamany's property.

And every subject entering the artist's studio encounters the nemesis and progenitor for this project: an imposing oil painting, in progress, of seven women in 19th-century costume. This is a commissioned portrait from the Yale Women Faculty Forum, and the depicted women are the first women to receive PhDs from Yale, in 1894. The painting is set to hang in Yale's prestigious Sterling Memorial Library.

I met with Brenda in her Williamsburg studio in late November where she lives with her 15-year-old daughter, Oona. At the time, the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" count was in the low 200s.

**MARY JONES: You've said this project began as a way to counteract the pull and the gravitas of the Yale commissioned portrait. The women in the Yale painting are all historical, they've felt like ghosts, people that you're divining or bringing to life, and you wanted some live people coming through as a counter balance.**

BRENDA ZLAMANY: It's coming along, don't you think? I knew the Yale women were going to want a lot from me, this painting was going to take me to the depths. I needed to keep one foot out the door and a portrait-a-day project would keep me from getting over involved. It was such an injustice they weren't painted in their lifetime that I do feel there's a pull from these women, such a desire to be painted. I want it to seem like I know each and every one of them. I have to know them to the point that I'm dreaming about them and they're real to me—that's part of the technique. Most of my reference photos of the actual women aren't very good and there's too few of them. To create their personalities I've got to place them all into a certain age that's quite different than my source photos. I have to create the color, make hairstyle adjustments and they need clothing. I have to imagine their

bodies, and to do that convincingly I've researched and found living surrogates for each of them.



Walter Robinson holding "Watercolor Portrait a Day" #184 by Brenda Zlamany.  
Photo: Brenda Zlamany

**It seems like the Yale commission is very private, and the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" project is very public. We see pictures of it every day on Facebook.**

But the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" project has made the Yale girls public too, because everyone who sits comments on the painting and on the women. So the portrait-a-day feeds the Yale commission but it also makes me anxious. The "Watercolor Portrait a Day" is dangerous because it's freaking Oona out, it's hard on

her to have all these people coming through the studio. She even referred to a sitter as "fucker" the other day, and these girls also would not like it to be here. So I'm struggling against different interests.

### **Why would the Yale women object to the "Watercolor Portrait a Day?"**

I don't want to seem like a mystical person, but you can't help but get into these women. They want my undivided attention, and they would squeeze every ounce of painting ability out of me if they could. Things in the late 19th Century weren't good for a lot of people, and these women had such privileged lives that you don't have to feel sorry for them. They were educated, they traveled, but they were not welcomed by the boys at Yale. One of the reasons that I'm right for this job is that I know to get this done well I have to subjugate my ego. I'm a vehicle for *them*; this painting is not about me, or my art.

### **So is the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" about you?**

It's about relationships. In the Yale project, I might spend a whole day on a detail, like an eyebrow, trying to figure out, "Is this person thoughtful, angry, or happy?" and make all sorts of changes. But the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" has rules. Among the rules are that I have to accept whatever I get and I can't change it after the person leaves. I'm not driving it intellectually. The Yale painting is a purely intellectual pursuit. All the pistons have to be firing 100% for me to do it. If I feel distracted or tired I could lose somebody. I could lose a face, I could lose a personality. I was working on Cornelia till midnight last night, painting her and then photographing the work every

hour. I kept going over the photos on the screen to see if I was losing something because I could see she was starting to come into being. I saw the glimmer of who she was going to be and it was really fragile.

But the other thing about the "Watercolor Portrait a Day," and I was talking to Alex Katz about this yesterday, is that I'm learning you can get incredible things if you let go of control. If you can see things without intellectualizing them it might be more than what you could have done if you were trying to stay in control. So it's interesting to have one project that requires such focus and control up against this other project, which is about accepting what happens.



Ariane Lopez-Huici holding "Watercolor Portrait a Day" #220 by Brenda Zlamany.  
Photo: Brenda Zlamany

### **And you open up yourself and your home and encounter all kinds of people.**

Portraits are really an intense experience and most people who come want something more than just a portrait. It can be anything, something to divulge or confess, or something to prove for so many reasons. Sometimes they have an agenda, and it can be really big. Most of the people I've painted are artists and they tell me about their careers, or their lack of a career, their rent, their illnesses and their fears. Do I secretly believe I have any

healing powers? Maybe I do a little bit. I feel it's important to have this kind of interaction. It's not a product-oriented project although I like it when the portraits are good. It's experiential, we're sitting down and we're trying to achieve some kind of closeness. Whatever happens on the page is the evidence of that. You never know what you're going to get, and sometimes it's more than you've bargained for and I take that into the day. It all happens in a very short time, and I have to think on so many levels and stay focused to actually make the art. I let them talk the entire time and I've heard a lot about people and their lives. But it's a two-way street: I'm talking too, and confessing things, too. I find myself telling something to someone that I've never said before. It does create closeness, but right now I don't know if it will last.

### **How do you connect to the subject's appearance and character?**

At any given moment you can choose what you want to see. Recently I painted a woman who at first looked nondescript or even plain. In fact, she

came in telling me that she wasn't attractive and that she wasn't photogenic, either. I was really conscious that there was a side of her that could be attractive; you can go either way with anybody. I worked on the angle. I saw that her lips were full and her eye color was beautiful. Right away I could see her best lines and most attractive features and I knew that not only could I paint it but that I could photograph it, too.

**I see the photographs as a collaboration, and sometimes a compromise between you and the subject. You want the portrait to look good, but your subject is also invested in having the photograph be flattering.**

The photos are just as hard as the painting. Nothing is accidental. I usually take about 100 photos and they're really careful and discussed. The photo begins with the painting. I have things I've learned to do, some conscious, some unconscious, to put the subject at ease. I know the problem areas and how to address them in a particular way to relax the person. They're telling me things without knowing it. I'm reading them and taking a lot of cues from watching their face as they're watching me paint them. When you're painting someone and they're watching and judging how you see them, you also become the subject in some way.



Kyle Staver holding "Watercolor Portrait a Day" #153 by Brenda Zlamany. Photo: Brenda Zlamany

**After painting all these people, has it changed the way you judge character?**

I used to hitchhike everyday after high school for fun, and that's how I became a good judge of character. I got out of school at 1 PM and I had nothing to do so I just hitchhiked till dinnertime. You put your head in the car and you look at the person's face. You have to decide in 10 seconds whether you'll get into that car, if it'll be a good conversation or whether you'll get raped or murdered. That's good training for portraiture.

**Did your parents know?**

My parents weren't paying attention, they had an infant at home, and I was a teenager and they didn't notice. I was invisible to my parents.

**You got yourself into art school away from home at an early age, 14. How?**

It came out of hitchhiking. Somehow I ended up at the home of Allan Shestack of the Yale University Art Gallery. He and his wife Nancy had some Jim Dine prints, so I showed them my drawings. They were impressed and hooked me up with the Educational Center for the Arts in New Haven, and the Yale College Before College Program. I hitchhiked an hour every day to New Haven to go there, and gradually I just didn't go home.

**You also got yourself to the San Francisco Art Institute for a summer when you were just 15. How did that come about?**

I had a fake ID that said I was 18, and I applied with it and I got in. It was a good thing that I wasn't on my parent's radar at that time, they would have stood in my way, and I wouldn't have been able to get anything done.

**That's an unusual way to start. It's also kind of unusual to see someone working today with a camera lucida. You've told me they're pretty hard to find. How did you discover it?**

I was in David Hockney's studio in the late '80s when he got his camera lucida and Maurice Payne, his printer, also spontaneously gave one to me. I later heard that David wasn't too pleased about this, and maybe felt Maurice was giving away trade secrets. I kept it in storage for years. I was curious about it but didn't use it; I was busy with other projects. When I went to Taiwan to paint aboriginal Taiwanese people I thought to use the instrument so they could see the painting happening. I practiced before I left, and really learned to use it there.



Katherine Bradford holding "Watercolor Portrait a Day" # 7 by Brenda Zlamany.  
Photo: Brenda Zlamany

**What does it add to the current project?**

It's about speed. Because you plot the points, you can go very quickly and you also cover the whole page. But you still have to redraw it and paint it, so it's not going to give you any art. It does help shorten the phase of looking at the blank page and thinking about what to do. Still, I spend about 5 minutes with the blank page figuring out the best angle and how I want to compose it. But then immediately it's on, and you have to move. It gets you moving very quickly and that's really

useful.

**How do you organize and choose the subjects?**

I'm only booked a week ahead. Every Sunday I panic that I haven't gotten it all lined out. I really can't fall behind and, so far, I haven't. I worry about a cancellation on a day without a back-up person. There's always someone who wants to be painted but I have to manage the schedule and set it up. The more I go into the "Watercolor Portrait a Day," the less it becomes about the product. It's about the ritual, about somebody sitting down and me making them comfortable, my contacting them and their response, posting it on Facebook and their friends all seeing it and commenting. The portrait is a very small part of it, but now having done so many I have more control and they're getting better. Now I know I can do it, and I think more about what I can bring to the table, what I can learn about them and how I can say it in the portrait.

**You're known for your portraits of men. You've painted Chuck Close a number of times, also David Hockney, Glenn Ligon, Alex Katz, James Siena and Leonardo Drew, just to name a few. Now with the Yale portrait, and the "Watercolor Portrait a Day" project, you've also painted lots of women. What are the differences?**

Before, I felt there was something about male beauty — or, let's say male vanity — that's more painterly. Also, I really like, and am interested in, men. But now after painting these Yale women, and having talked to so many women through the project, most of them over 40, I've become interested in women as they age. I don't think we've looked at them enough. The next body of work will be portraits of 24 women. From the "Watercolor Portrait a Day," I'm less afraid of dealing with the emotions of female vanity. When I post the paintings of really pretty women there are always comments that "she's prettier in real life." So if you're painting someone really beautiful the portrait is never going to be good enough. We really judge women. I never wanted to take that on before.

**And the men on your radar?**

Fred Wilson — I've gotten really good at painting hair. I love his hair, I love his face. I think he's a terrific artist. He's got all the elements that I want. And I want to paint Dawoud Bey, because he's a portraitist. He's fabulous looking and I love to paint the portraitist. He said he would do it, but I have to get him when he's in town. He's amazing, and he's a really big guy. But I also want to paint Oona in her latest phase. And I'm due for a self-portrait.



Brenda Zlamany with examples of her portrait paintings in her Williamsburg studio. Photo: Mary Jones, 2015



Walker Ginzel (son on Sarah Walker and Andrew Ginzel) holding "Watercolor Portrait a Day" #180 by Brenda Zlamany. Photo: Brenda Zlamany

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