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Making 888 connections in Taiwan

by Heather Senison

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Brenda Zlamany, a Williamsburg-based artist, spent half of 2011 forming close bonds with Taiwanese natives through sketching and watercolor portraiture.

With the help of her Mandarin-speaking daughter Oona, who was 10 at the time, Zlamany spent three months trekking around Taiwan, convincing 888 Taiwanese people, most of whom are of the indigenous population, to pose for 15 minutes while she drew their portrait.

“Somehow the slowness of drawing sets up a real relationship and makes a real connection,” Zlamany said.



She used the drawings as a base for watercolors and oil paintings, which are now on display in the “888: Portraits in Taiwan” exhibit at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office at 1 East 42nd Street in Manhattan.

Zlamany was born in Manhattan but grew up mostly in College Point, Queens. She moved to one of Williamsburg's first artist buildings in 1984, settling in a loft she still lives in with Oona, their dog, and many of her works from before she traveled to Taiwan.

Zlamany took her daughter to Tibet several years ago, where she took thousands of pictures of monks and nomads. However, the photography made her yearn for a closer relationship with her subjects – Zlamany didn't like the idea that people may not have known she was taking their picture.

So she devised a plan, applied for a Fulbright Fellowship, and headed with her daughter to the Taiwanese countryside on July 1, 2010.





The pair visited 33 villages and cities across Taiwan, staying in each place for about a week. They also spent time in the country's capital, Taipei, where her work was displayed in January in a multimedia exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Although Taiwan's countryside involves a range of natural dangers, including typhoons, earthquakes and avalanches, and the two often needed permission from police to travel down certain roads, Zlamany said their journey was a safe one.

“I think because we were a mother and daughter we didn't have that many challenges because everyone was protective of us,” Zlamany said. “We were welcomed everywhere we went and we would be protected.

“We would participate in every kind of ritual - anything that was going on, we would be in on it,” she said of their involvement in the villages. “It was really the best thing I've ever done in my life.”

Her subjects spread across social, economic and age ranges. She

painted everyone from diplomats, to a movie star, to a 104-year-old aboriginal woman, along with four other generations of women from the same family.

News of a woman painting portraits spread through the country quickly, Zlamany said, which fueled the diversity among her subjects.

Everyone she painted received a signed copy of their portrait, allowing her to further her connection with her subjects.

Zlamany said she is also friends with some of the people she met in Taiwan on Facebook.

Because painted portraits are usually reserved for those wealthy enough to afford them. she





inadvertently transcended political boundaries in the country.

“People in the cities got to know the Taiwanese aboriginal people, things that they didn't necessarily already know about them,” Zlamany said. “What I discovered was that actually making art is kind of like a political tool.”

This got Zlamany to thinking about intentionally transcending political boundaries as part of her and Oona's next trip.

Zlamany is looking for funding to plan a trip to Cambodia to paint portraits of women in the sex-trafficking market there.

“I'm thinking I'd like to do a project



where we work with the girls, and that way we can help get some attention through the exhibition and maybe get more help for them,” she said. “Because I've discovered that there's such a positive effect [from portraiture], I want to take it a little farther and see if I can actually make a difference in a situation where it's really needed.”

However, setting a political agenda is not the basis of Zlamany's artwork.

“I don't think I need to have a direct agenda,” she said, “all I need to do is make connections and record what I see and the work will speak for itself.”



“888: Portraits in Taiwan” will be on display at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Manhattan until June 30.





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