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Portraits in Taiwan | Brenda Zlamany

by Liz on August 2, 2012

in [Art & Design](#)





The human gaze is a powerful thing. I realized this the other day as I was watching a [video](#) featuring MIT Professor [Sherry Turkle](#) as she spoke of the emergence of sociable robots. These imitators look you in the eye, gesture in friendship, and practice face recognition, that last piece of trivial technology now the bread and butter of online photo albums. Once a robot can complete these simple tasks, Turkle goes on to explain in the video, we come to “believe there is a sentience there, a sentience that not only cares, but one that we *want* it to care about us.”

Over a month ago, I met and chatted with [Brenda Zlamany](#), a Brooklyn-based artist who traveled to [Taiwan](#) for a year on a Fulbright grant. In addition to her prolific production of 888 watercolors, Zlamany also completed several oil paintings — seen here — of teenaged Taiwanese boys who took great pride in their hairdos, their dance skills and motorcycles. To the artist these boys

were kindred, rebellious spirits. And as each portrait shows, there is quite a bit of sentience there, along with a good dose of individuality and depth. We can see these boys have feelings — feelings about themselves, possibly about each other. And if we spent enough time with them, we'd probably want them to care about us.





It's partly true cameras have replaced the function of the portraitist, the patient, curious artist who details the contours of your face with an unblinking eye, capturing the waves of your hair, or the slight perspiration on your skin. That kind of care in this fast-paced, tech-driven world is probably a thing of the past. But I also imagine the moments when the eyes meet, a chemistry between artist and subject is born, and along with it an acknowledgement that there is a powerful human behind the gaze. That acknowledgement, as Turkle reminds us, is so visceral and gripping even technological imitators will draw our attention, and as Zlamany shows us, transcends cultural and geographical differences.

In many ways then, Zlamany relived an instant but rarefied moment over 888 times. Each time she was brought together to new friends via her art, and as she traveled she could observe how people in Taiwan, much like elsewhere, “were really craving the relationships,” relationships of more profundity than merely selecting to ‘Like’ your friend’s snapshot on Facebook.

Zlamany in turn, said she was “truly struck by the beauty and grace,” of her numerous Taiwanese subjects, an experience of compelling, staying power.

“With each painting, I felt a new relationship emerged,” relationships, she says, she maintains even after returning home.



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