

Simultaneous interpretation

The silent, emotionally charged communication between an artist and her subject is explored in Brenda Zlamany's project 888: Portrait of Taiwan

By Catherine Shu / Staff Reporter

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Created by American artist Brenda Zlamany, 888: Portrait of Taiwan (八八八計畫:看我←→畫我←→拍我) explores the loaded relationship between portraitists and their subjects. Over three months, Zlamany traveled to 33 different villages and cities in Taiwan, painting hundreds of subjects including Seediq Bale (賽德克巴萊) star Lin Ching-Tai (林慶台) and a 104-year-old female resident of Nan-ao Township (南澳鄉) in Yilan County.

888: Portraits of Taiwan (the number refers to the amount of paintings produced by Zlamany for the project), which opened on Jan. 19 and runs until Feb. 29 at MOCA Studio in the Zhongshan MRT Station (中山捷運站), combines watercolor portraiture and multimedia art in an installation that allows viewers to get a close look at Zlamany's artistic process and her subjects.

Though most portraits were made in 15 minutes or less, Zlamany deftly creates a narrative about each subject with a few brushstrokes. One man who works at a bird sanctuary proudly poses with a feathered friend cradled against his chin, while an elderly woman wearing a cross pendant looks at the viewer with a direct gaze.

"It's a magical process where you don't know someone and you don't speak the language, but you actually see them go from apprehensive to becoming more comfortable," Zlamany says.

Based in New York City, Zlamany's clients include The New York Times Magazine. 888: Portraits of Taiwan was conceptualized after a 2007 visit to Tibet. During her trip, Zlamany photographed people to use as subjects in paintings once she was back in her studio.

Zlamany, who often paints fellow artists, said she noticed "there is a very different gaze in Tibetan people. It's less narcissistic, less look at me."

She adds, "The thing about artists is that we are professional poseurs. We paint each other, we know what we look like, we know we have to give an image." In contrast, her Tibetan subjects struck Zlamany as "more comfortable in the world, less reaching out."

Disappointed that she had not been able to get acquainted with them beyond taking their photographs, Zlamany decided to create a project in which she would be able to get to know her sitters through observation. She picked Taiwan because she had heard about this country's Aboriginal tribes and was intrigued by the possibility of introducing their culture to Americans.

Funded by a Fulbright grant and accompanied by her 10-year-old daughter Oona, who is fluent in Mandarin and served as her mother's interpreter, Zlamany traveled around the country looking for people to paint.

Many subjects were initially unsure of how to pose or where to look while Zlamany sketched their portraits, though she sensed most wanted to observe her as she worked.

"I just started saying, 'Look at me because I know you want to,' and people really liked it," says Zlamany. "I asked one person why he wanted to be painted. And he said, 'It's because I want to stare at you.'"

In some places, Zlamany had to work fast to accommodate long lines of people who wanted to be painted. Other potential sitters, however, had to be gently coaxed.

"The hardest people to paint are the people who don't think they are attractive and they are worried that the drawing will not be beautiful," says Zlamany. "It's especially true of someone who is older and that was maybe more attractive when they were younger."

Sometimes groups of people would gather to observe subjects in which the portrait "could go either way."

"When you draw someone, you can see both their good and bad sides simultaneously," Zlamany explains. "Where you go with it is a decision that you have to make." One of her sitters was so intoxicated that he took off his shirt and put it back on again. When observers saw that Zlamany strived to be respectful in her portrayals, however, it eased the tension in the crowd.

"I could see it made people happy that I was kind. It was a subtle communication," says Zlamany. "I don't think it's insincere to want to find someone's good side."

Though each portrait session was brief, it could also be very revealing for both Zlamany and her sitter.

Cerita Chen (陳欣昀) invited Zlamany to her home in Taoyuan after sitting for her. "I felt my portrait was different from what I see in a photo or the mirror. I felt she had captured my spirit and what I was feeling," says Chen.

"It was a new experience to have someone from abroad in our house, drawing us," she adds.

Just as Zlamany's subjects warmed up to her, Zlamany also found herself viewing some people in a new light after painting them, including a group of five women who stayed in the same hostel in Chingchuan (清泉), an Atayal village in Hsinchu County. At first, Zlamany was disinterested in painting the group because they seemed like average tourists. During some free time, however, Zlamany asked the women to sit for her. As the group observed one another as each was painted, the depth of their relationship revealed itself.

"There was just something about their friendship that made them come alive as people and seem more special," Zlamany says. "It had a layer of richness that I hadn't noticed."

"I don't know if they were wondering who I was or if they were suspicious of me," she adds. "But

I don't know if they were wondering who I was or if they were suspicious of me," she adds. But afterward I felt that we were close and that some boundaries or barriers had been broken."

Now back in New York City, Zlamany plans to turn 24 of her favorite watercolor portraits into oil paintings. She hopes to repeat the project in Laos and Cambodia, and eventually bring it to Israel and Palestine.

"It's brought so much goodwill and I'm really happy with that," says Zlamany, who keeps in contact with many of her 888: Portraits of Taiwan sitters.

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