

Lent in Advent: Meditation at an Exhibition

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The paintings and drawings of Charlotte Lichtblau, which I have known for more than forty years, have deeply influenced the way I think and the way I pray. I first met the artist and her husband in August 1966 through a mutual friend under whose direction I was studying that summer. Two years later, when I was ordained a priest, I received the gift for my ordination of my first Lichtblau, a drawing on the same theme as *Water and Wine* in this collection of her works.

In a brief scope I would like to meditate with you on some of these paintings and drawings. I will not comment on every one of them, but I find each one of them fascinating. I am delighted that Father Jones and the Dominicans of Saint Vincent Ferrer Church are making it possible for these sacred images to be seen in what is simply the most beautiful Catholic Church in New York City.

This show of Lichtblau's paintings is taking place during the season of Advent and Christmas. In Lichtblau's vision there is no room for the sentimental understanding of these seasons. The themes of Lent—the shadow of the Crucified One—penetrate all. Lichtblau's *Gothic Madonna* starkly combines the Mother and Child as Infant with the Mother and Child as the Sorrowful Mother at the deposition from the Cross. This is the woman who heard the prophecy of Simeon in the Temple: “This child is destined to be a sign that will be rejected; and you too will be pierced to the heart” (Luke 2:35). The fourth joyful mystery of the rosary, the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, looks ominously forward to the sorrowful mysteries.

The same ironic crossing of nativity and death on the Cross appears in Lichtblau's painting *Madonna of Mercy*. This painting follows the Austrian tradition of *Schützmantel* madonnas—statues of Mary that open up to reveal not only the crucified Jesus but also a multitude of devotees within her mantle. Mary gives birth not just to any child but to the Child “who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Revelation 12:5). The whole community of the faithful is mothered by Mary as she mothered her only Son, the crucified Lord.

The painting entitled *Stabat Mater* refers to a thirteenth-century Latin sequence or hymnodic interlude sung just before the Gospel in the liturgy of the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15th). It begins, in Latin, *Stabat mater dolorosa/ Juxta crucem lacrimosa/ Dum pendebat Filius* (“The sorrowful mother was standing next to the Cross, weeping, while her Son was hanging

there”). In Lichtblau’s painting on this theme, the Mother is holding the dead corpse of her Son over which the Spirit, in the form of a dove, broods. An ambiguous dark head contemplates the entire event, seemingly mouth to mouth with the dead Jesus—Evil momentarily triumphant, but the brooding dove has other thoughts. In *The Death of the Virgin* there is a hint of the same presence of Evil, but also hope for the Assumption.

Even so joyful a mystery as the Annunciation in Lichtblau’s imaging forth of what is going on in it features a somewhat fearsome angel swooping down and curling about the Virgin’s head asking her assent to a mystery that threatens her future with terrible demands. There is in this painting a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem *The Annunciation*:

Not that an angel (realize this)
scared her. Just as others would not startle
if a ray of sunlight or the moon at night
busied itself in the room, the form in which
an angel walked did not scare her;
she barely had an idea that this stay was
difficult for angels. (O if we knew just how pure
she was. A doe once beheld her in the forest and
became so fond of her that within her was conceived
the unicorn, the animal from light, the pure animal.)

It did not scare her that he entered
but that he was so utterly present, the angel,
bearing a young man’s face, and turned to her;
that his face and hers, looking up to him, collided
as if everything outside had become empty,
and everything that millions saw, did, wore
became condensed in them: only her and him;
Seeing and seen, nowhere else except in this very spot
--see, that scares, and both startled.

Then the angel sang his melody.¹

I am reminded also of Ignatius Loyola’s meditation on the Incarnation in his *Spiritual Exercises*, where the Annunciation is placed in world-historical, God’s eye perspective:

Here I will consider what the people on the face of the earth
are doing: How they wound, kill, go to hell, and so on. Similarly,
what the Divine Persons are doing, that is, bringing about the
most holy Incarnation and other such activities. Likewise, what

¹ Translation of Jonathan Harvey.

the angel and Our Lady are doing, with the angel carrying out his office of ambassador and Our Lady humbling herself and giving thanks to the Divine Majesty.²

The Virgin of Nazareth takes on in this painting her majestic title as Queen of Angels.

The strange and otherworldly creatures in Lichtblau's *About the Nephilim* are a meditation on anti-incarnation or the wrong sort of divine enfleshment. The curious story in Genesis 6:1-4 is heavily condensed, nearly suppressed at some point in the literary evolution of the Hebrew text of the Book of Genesis. It tells the origin of the giants or heroes of old who were born from the intermarriage of "the sons of God" (angelic figures, not necessarily benevolent) and "the daughters of mortals" (other Eves). In the Book of Genesis, it is exactly this sort of illegitimate divine-human contact that prepares the way for the Flood (Genesis 6: 5 ff.). The sin of "the sons of God" and "the daughters of mortals" repeats the sin of Adam and Eve who wanted "to be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). The eyes of the Nephilim suggest that all these anti-incarnations knew was evil. Every self-divinizing tyranny of the past century—National Socialism, Soviet Communism, numerous more local tyrannies in countries like Burma and Zimbabwe—continue the primal sin of human beings who want "to be like God" and who do not want to be human.

Jesus in Lichtblau's painting and drawings is definitely flesh and blood: Jesus is God successfully becoming one of us, perfectly becoming human. The Incarnation—the enfleshment of God in Jesus of Nazareth—did not make him into a pre-Raphaelite youth with lank blond hair and the meek look of a frightened lamb. The fierceness as well as the love of Jesus emerges in many of the drawings and paintings in this exhibition. This is a very concrete, very Jewish Jesus.

In *Temptation of Christ* all three of the temptations elaborated by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are envisioned as one: the temptation to escape the bonds of human frailty. On the Cross that temptation returned to Jesus: "Save yourself, and come down from the cross!" (Mark 15:30). But from the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus committed himself to saving not himself but others. By refusing to save himself, refusing to feed himself, refusing to try the providence of God, refusing to attain worldly power by prostrating before Evil, Jesus proved that he was the perfect Son of God precisely by remaining the perfect Son of Man, refusing to respond to the demonic temptation/challenge: "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:3).

The face of Jesus in Lichtblau's paintings is often off-center, and not always totally visible, and yet it draws the viewer's eyes as it draws the eyes of the

² *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 108, translated by George Ganss, S.J

other figures in the paintings: the two disciples who recognize Jesus at the breaking of the bread (Luke 24: 31) in the painting *Supper at Emmaus* and in the ink-and-wash drawing (*Emmaus: Supper*) used for the cover of the invitation to the exhibition.

In the painting called *Thirteen: the Banquet*, Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, a child sleeping on his breast, are in the top left corner of the painting, the face of Jesus cropped on the top, as is the face of Peter, who is dipping into a common dish with Jesus and watching him warily and without total understanding of what his master is saying and doing. Judas, in lurid green profile, occupies the top center of the painting. The other disciples, one of them female (Mary?), are less definitely drawn. A fish dominates the center of the table: why? Jews after the destruction of the Temple never eat lamb at the Seder. Is *Thirteen: the Banquet* a modern Seder? Is it perhaps also the breakfast of bread and fish Jesus provided for the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21) in the aftermath of the Resurrection? But then how is Judas present? Only as a green ghost, the thirteenth at the table? In *Thirteen: the Banquet* we catch a glimpse of all of the great commensalities that are found in the Gospels—the repeated, even indiscriminate table fellowship of Jesus with sinners

In *The Raising of Lazarus* only the feet of the living and life-giving Jesus and the feet of the dead Lazarus are visible. The face of Jesus is completely hidden from the viewer as well in *Water and Wine*. The generous rotundity of the jars that were the locale for the first of seven miraculous signs in the Gospel of John stands in marked contrast with the angular, hidden figure of Jesus reluctant to come to his hour, but coming to it nonetheless at the urging of his mother: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). The hour of Jesus—to which the seven miraculous signs inevitably led him—was the hour of the Cross: “It was before the Passover festival, and Jesus knew that his hour had come and that he must leave this world and go to the Father” (John 13:1). No one takes on such an hour easily, not even the incarnate Son of God.

The two Crucifixions in this exhibition—*Triple Crucifixion* and *Light of the World*—capture two moments of that central event in the history of salvation. The former painting suggests that the two thieves crucified with Jesus are already on the paths they have chosen. The thief on the right of Jesus (the viewer’s left) is beginning the downward journey that he expressed in his taunting of Jesus: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). The other thief, on the left of Jesus (the viewer’s right) is already beginning his ascension: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). In between, Jesus stares forward in the agony of his dying, judge of the living and the dead.

Light of the World, one of the most startling paintings ever created by Lichtblau, requires good lighting to be able to discern the extraordinary image

of the crucified Jesus. In the darkness that “came over the whole land” (Matthew 27:45) Jesus on the Cross radiates “the Light of the World” (John 8:12), His dying and rising Selfhood. As in many of her best paintings, Lichtblau achieves this image as much with the palette knife as with the brush. The viewer is drawn into the painting as into a vortex, a darkness that whirls downward into a light beyond any merely mortal light.

Several other images in this exhibition, and especially the mixed media *Head of Abraham*, derive their imagery from the Hebrew Bible. *The Birth of Isaac* catches the pathos in the rejection of Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, once Sarah has given Abraham a son within the family tent; Ishmael and Hagar, excluded from the tent, wend their weary way into the desert (Genesis 21: 1-14). *The Golden Calf* shines brightly in the darkness of those who created it and called it their deliverer (Exodus 32:4).

In this Advent and Christmas season we are all privileged to meditate here in the shadows and light of Saint Vincent Ferrer Church on the mysteries of death and rebirth. What better way could we spend the season of darkness giving way to light?