

**Bruce Payne**

***The Courage to See: Insight and Presence in the Paintings of Charlotte Lichtblau***

**1. The City Triptych**

A few days after the September 11 attack on the New York's World Trade Center, Charlotte Lichtblau hung a painting of burning skyscrapers on the wall of her Manhattan apartment. "The End of the Brownstone Era," painted more than thirty years earlier as part of her City Triptych, seems a dark and violent foreshadowing of the destruction that has terrorized this city.

I have been avoiding this painting and its two companions for decades, and recent events have them no easier to bear. Lichtblau's colors are often darkly dramatic, but in the paintings I have loved most—still lifes, portraits, mountain landscapes – the intense greens, the earthy browns and reds, the occasional deep, dark blues, almost always draw one into closer involvement with the images. The colors of these city canvases, amplified by the violence of their imagery, seem intended to push the viewer away.

The opportunity to write about Lichtblau's work has been the impetus for thinking more carefully about these images and for considering more intimately my own long-standing aversion to them. Somewhat to my surprise, doing so has clarified my connection to Lichtblau's work more generally, paintings, drawings and prints about which I have been learning since I first began to look at them thirty-four years ago.

The city paintings represent an especially intense moment in the dialectic of Lichtblau's engagement with the world. The feelings, the evocations of memory, and the passages of great beauty so strongly present in many of her canvases are very strongly absent here. The compelling force of this absence helps to register just how much is at stake – psychologically, personally, and intellectually – along the whole continuum of this artist's work.

Beginning with these difficult and extreme paintings requires postponing for some pages any specific discussions of paintings I have long cherished. To talk about these challenging canvases at all, however, seems to require a brief and very partial characterization of that larger body of work to which the city paintings stand opposed.

Perhaps the best-known dimension of Lichtblau's life as a painter is evident in works that portray the mountains of the Austrian Alps as both memory and geography, and more

profoundly as a region of the heart. These works go back to at least the late 1940's, and they are, I think, intimately connected with childhood experiences of drawing in the mountains around Altaussee, where her family spent summers before the Anschluss and their subsequent escape to Yugoslavia, then to England and America.

Another very large group of Lichtblau's paintings and drawings is made up of repeated encounters with the power of eros, the presence of death, and the experience of hope in Biblical stories and in other myths—in stories, that is to say, that are among the most memorable and powerful our culture has to offer. Among these paintings exploring narratives of myth and faith, the most successful images, like the finest of her landscapes, have an intense presence that might rightly be called soulful, or perhaps soul-filled.

This same quality – psychological intensity matched with a deep sense of intellectual and even spiritual inquiry—is present also in the still life paintings of the 1950's and 60's, and in the portraits of friends and family members that appear throughout Lichtblau's career.

Soul is a problematic notion in the modern scientific and scholarly academic world in which I work. In other communities, however, the idea of soul seems hardly problematic enough. Though most Americans claim church membership of some kind, few seem troubled by the possibility that this conception, this idea of a soul, might bring into question many of the ways we think and live. In any case, if we are going to look at Lichtblau's paintings seriously, this word soul, which is arguably the most reasonable translation of Freud's Greek word *psyche*, may turn out to be indispensable.

What I mean by this has partly to do with questions of psychological complexity and insight. Emotional realities, not least sexual desire and a sense of mortality, are present in the faces and the bodies that fill many of the paintings, and they are implicit even in the clay jugs and draperies of the still life paintings, or in the barely contained energies of the mountains. Wild narcissus blooms spray green hillsides with white; and picked flowers in a pot speak of the sparest and most temporary loveliness. Funerary rites and images of grief among Alpine villagers are complemented by depictions of Biblical violence. And Lichtblau has painted several versions of Christ at that last supper, celebrating a Passover while trying to prepare his loved friends for his impending death.

The emotional intensity of these subjects is ratcheted up time after time by the palpable struggle to create them. "Action painting" was a term devised for the New York school of the 1950's. Yet at least to the extent that the phrase means letting viewers in on the

revisive and even messy processes by which paintings are made, Lichtblau is an action painter, as were those German Expressionists who are her most obvious forerunners.

In Lichtblau's case the struggle is not merely to depict emotions, but to embody them, to cope with them, in some sense to understand them. The paintings connect inescapably with the old deep human questions: Who are we? From whence, and whither? Is life so sweet and death so final that each day's radiant joy must carry with it some particular inflection of grief and loss?

Lichtblau's work has thus been in large part a quest for meaning, a search to understand and to express the deep emotional parts of her life, a quest to see more truly the world she encounters and to face more honestly those enduring mysteries of death and loss. She is unwilling to abandon the notion that our deepest inner selves have some mysterious connection to the natural world and the mysteries of its ordering.

When I first saw the work in the late 1960's, I saw only dimly the relevance of such questions, and Lichtblau, though willing to talk about many aspects of her work in detail, was often indirect or silent about its deepest meanings. Still, one could soon discern the values that mattered most. One could hear in her conversation and see in her work that a profound humanism paralleled her evident theological curiosity and commitment. It was also plain enough that beauty, even if hard-won, or fleeting, or fugitive, was a resonant and constant force in her painting and a deep source of joy in her life.

None of this growing knowledge of Lichtblau's work and ideas, however, prepared me for the city paintings that suddenly began to appear some time in 1968. They lacked anything that spoke to me of beauty; they seemed inhuman. Nothing that mattered most to me was visible in them. They offered powerful structures, impressive compositions, but nothing of love, or solace, or hope, or reconciliation.

"The End of the Brownstone Era" shows a world with no indemnity against the fires, frail humans powerless against cruelly exploding violence. On the right, the harsh blue-green structure and black windows of the falling rectangular building turn bright yellow-orange at the top, illuminated from the left by burning buildings. The tall dark central tower twists upward into purple orange-edged clouds, while from behind, parts of a stone church emerge to form a kind of large dog's face. There is at the bottom center a mauve and whitish pavement in the shape of a fish, its eye a manhole cover. To the left, sickly green open tombs or coffins expose brown-green bodies.

At or within the base of the central tower, three white-faced women in dark hooded robes stand with a child. To their right stands Charon, oar in hand, on a small boat with a single

seated figure hunched in front of him. What must be the River Styx flows toward us at the picture's base, broken pipes flooding blue into its black waters.

Charon is a familiar presence in Lichtblau's work, his Alpine garb and lake boat connecting him to half-submerged memories of antlered sacrificial victims (and very possibly to Lichtblau's own childhood memories of folk festivals on the lake at Altaussee). But even in those somber lake paintings where this complex and ominous figure plays a central role, he is less grim than in this version. Far smaller here, but backlit by the fire's glow, and floating on black water past patches of bright orange reflection, Charon seems to have embarked on a unique and possibly final voyage.

In the Greek myths and plays, as in the ancient Germanic rites and stories, life and death are always intimately connected. The king or sacrificial victim dies; but afterward, in the satyr plays and the festivals, the community is restored. Charon will always have his work, of course, but he is, ironically, more often present in the comedies, mordantly humorous, than in the tragedies. Death and life will both go on – that is the human story. "The End of the Brownstone Era" suggests a worse fate: the end of any restorable community. Some losses may be irretrievable; some communities may die. Charon might eventually be unemployed.

"The Plague" offers a similarly grim image: small, weakened, dying victims amid the tall buildings, a wrecking ball suspended threateningly above them. The dominant aspect of the painting, transcendent at least in its visual presence, is an awesome and all-too-human design: the angular and uneven circle of gray-purple sky is a contemporary mandala, its irregular edges the tops of skyscrapers. Amid inhumane structures, we look straight up at this dazzling form, only to see, in the central swirling vortex, a sun. It seems too lifeless and too far away to offer hope that any natural colors will soon return.

The title may come from Camus' great work, but the hard-won and cautious hope that animates that novel's end seems utterly absent here. The stark buildings – functional, mechanical and ambitiously tall, but blank-sided even when the walls are glass – offer no accommodation to the human needs evident at the bottom, much less any promise of sympathetic shelter.

Nor does the right-hand painting, "The Rebirth of the City," proffer any more by way of hope. In it we can easily make out remnants of the old faiths: gothic spires, onion domes, even, amazingly for New York in 1968, the simple domes of Middle Eastern mosques. If the sun, now blood red, is brighter here, the palette remains essentially

devoid of nature's colors. Human beings seem here to be in the deepest trouble; we see a spectral, praying monk, and at the center, a large dark fetal figure.

At the lower left of this canvas there are two women in Biblical dress – ancient Jews or, more likely, contemporary Arabs. Though a small element in the painting, they, like the disquieting fetus, might be agents of rebirth. Who knows? The arches behind and to the left could be memories of Renaissance nativities, and the circumstances of that earlier birth were famously unpropitious. Next to the women stands an armed figure, seeming not to add any element of security for them, or us. But one wonders. Renaissance painters also told the grimmest story connected with Christ's birth, cruel soldiers slaughtering the innocents.

The dominant elements of the painting are nevertheless the sharp teeth of downward facing fish head, and on the upper right, the skeleton of a bird echoing the Gothic architecture of the portal over which its neck is craned. Rebirth seems entirely against the odds.

The terrible absence at the heart of these city paintings – the absence of hope or of its ancient color of spring green, the absence of compassion or even comfort in the face of terror – calls attention to the fact that most of Lichtblau's paintings are notably not about absence but about what can only be called presence. They are about the reality, and the weight, and the value of persons and objects, and though they often set obstacles for the viewer, they seem ultimately to invite any of us to find her or his way to rich and even transcendent experiences.

The absences of the city paintings thus seem a drastic warning. They predict a grim future that will be avoided, as the Hebrew prophets argued, only if we can profoundly change our ways. Amos and his angry brethren saw it this way in their time: without faith and its resultant works, and without the decisive rejection of false idols, Jerusalem will most surely fall.

Three decades ago, still determinedly an exile in a city she had lived in and in some ways delighted in for many years, Lichtblau feared that the forces of inhumanity and cruelty, so vivid in the memories of her European childhood, might indeed win out again – that what was rich and varied might be made uniform, that what was special and individual might be overwhelmed by an oppressively conformist and unimaginative materialism. These paintings were her protest – prophetic, explosive and uncompromising.

## 2. New York, 1968-1970

My own involvement with Lichtblau's art began with a piece unsettling good news. In the spring of 1967 I had organized a show of wood and stone sculpture by Seymour Gresser, an inaugural exhibition for a small art gallery in the new student union of Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the historically black college where I was teaching government and political theory during a year off from graduate school in political science at Yale. Some time in early March, Gresser called to tell me that he had just sold a torso in mango wood. This very piece, shown in a New Haven gallery in 1963, had led me to visit Gresser at his home in Maryland, that visit the beginning of our friendship and my steadily deepening involvement with his work. Now that I was earning a modest salary, I had meant to buy the torso.

The news of Sy's good fortune made up for my disappointment, and I could share his excitement as he told me about the buyer. She was, he said, a "terrific German Expressionist." "Her name is Lotte Lichtblau," he added; "you've got to meet her."

So it was that in June of 1967 I drove a rented truck to Washington, returning Gresser's sculptures, and then to New York bringing Gresser along with me. At a dinner for artists in a Chelsea loft, I met Charlotte Lichtblau and her husband, John, and after a warm and exciting conversation, drove on late at night to New Haven, where my second two-year stint at Yale was about to begin.

A few months later, the novelist, John Hersey, then Master of Yale's Pierson College, asked me as a resident graduate student to organize art exhibitions. Charlotte volunteered to design a show of forty of Gresser's sculptures, which we put on in early 1968. Soon after, Hersey and I concluded that the college's large paneled white-painted Georgian dining room should be a gallery, and one of our first efforts was a triumphant show of Lichtblau's large paintings, supplemented by twenty smaller works hung in the adjoining common room.

Occasionally employed at the commercial Athena Gallery during my intermittent graduate student career, I had gotten to know a few artists of real talent. But Lichtblau was a revelation. Passionate and decisive, she cared about content as well as form, and she worked in many genres. Her ambitions were not minor. She believed, I gradually came to understand, that people's lives could be transformed if they could only learn to see more fully. She wanted them see just how complex and remarkable even simple objects are, to grasp and to internalize how rich and evocative and surprising the world around us can

be. She wanted them to feel a sense of awe in the face of "ordinary" realities of things and persons. She valued the great artists largely for their ability to alter the ways we think and see, and though modest about her own talents, she clearly meant to do the same.

Similar hopes had been in the minds of the politically engaged American artists of the thirties – their paintings the first I had gotten to know well as I began, around the age of 22, to take visual art seriously. The hope that seeing could change us was also the animating vision of the greatest of American documentary works, the bravura writing of James Agee and the intensely clear photographic images of Walker Evans that combined to tell of the profound dignity and deep humanity of some of America's poor and rejected citizens, the white Alabama sharecroppers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Lichtblau's approach to these matters was for me excitingly European, and altogether different from the often naïve optimism of the American 1930's. Though her still life paintings showed that she had taken Picasso seriously, other strong, and to me, far more interesting influences were at work: Max Beckmann's mythologies of violence, suffering, and exile; the dark mysteries of Emil Nolde; the edgy colors and strong textures of painters like Ludwig Kirchner, or Paula Modersohn-Becker, or Max Pechstein.

The context within which I was looking at this new world of art was, on the other hand, far removed from the tension and anxiety of Central Europe between the wars, and from the horrors of the Holocaust that occasionally surfaced in Lichtblau's work. The Lichtblau home on West End Avenue was by 1968 becoming my principal New York City connection. It was a place of extraordinary warmth. We talked about music, or opera, or psychoanalysis, or current affairs. The apartment was full of books and miscellaneous interesting objects. While the Lichtblau paintings on the walls were strong, even troubling, they did nothing to diminish my joy at being in such rooms, and nothing, either, to challenge my own deep ideological confidence in eventual social and political progress.

I knew of course that both Lichtblaus had escaped from Vienna in the late 1930's, and that family members had perished in the camps. I knew also of the nightmare world of the Occupation. In 1946 Charlotte had joined her husband, John, in Germany, where he served in the U.S. Army, and then with the OSS. Among his duties was collecting evidence of atrocities for the Nuremberg trials that were to come. All this gave a context for looking at Lichtblau's more disturbing works – fearsome scarecrows with gas masks, knives, and German helmets, superb drawings in ink and watercolor, the works undertaken, Charlotte explained, to "paint out" the nightmares of those years.

That our present world, and not only the past, was full of injustices and horrors was, moreover, a given, part of what liberal and cosmopolitan New York then seemed to comprehend. Still, none of this prepared me for the city paintings, which were in 1968 emerging from the small room off the living room that served as Charlotte's studio. I remember my fascination with her means of getting distance on these works – binoculars turned the wrong way around. Yet neither closeness nor distance helped me to like them or even to make sense of them.

The simple fact is that I could hardly believe these paintings represented anything of this metropolis I found so full of wonders. I could not or would not imagine that the horrors they depicted were even remotely metaphorically appropriate to the city that excited me so much. What was so inhuman about tall buildings? Why imagine New York as a necropolis? I looked away, barely forming such questions in my own mind, never giving them any voice. Now it seems clear to me: I did not want to know.

Lichtblau's protest raised questions about those human losses for which modernist art and progressive politics, both then waning influences, had little restorative power. It seems hardly surprising that the works had only a limited impact then. In fact, neither Lichtblau's harshest critiques of our increasingly soulless world, nor her Sisyphean labors to invest works of art with some real presence, had any likely lasting connection to the style-driven art world that was then developing. Lichtblau went her own way, from outsize protests to other differently disturbing works. Only small numbers of thoughtful people saw and valued the unusual and highly original paths she followed.

### **3. Biblical subjects**

The works I could admit to being troubled by posed questions that in those days seemed more interesting, and that were also, in retrospect, far less threatening to my ways of thinking. Almost all of these had some explicit religious content. Here, my own intellectual background gave grounds for inquiry. A lapsed Congregationalist, I had (then as now) little that might be called religious faith. But I had worked as a deacon in Yale's Chapel when William Sloane Coffin was chaplain, and his sermons had shaped many of my ideas. A participant in the struggle for civil rights, I knew also that the strength of the movement had for fifteen years been centered in the southern black churches. Martin Luther King, Jr., found not only inspiration in the old stories, but profound psychological and moral insight. Beyond that, I was studying seventeenth century English political thought, a field dominated by theology, some of it brilliantly reasoned and deeply felt.

My curiosity ran deep enough to look carefully and to ask questions. I soon learned that some years earlier, hoping to paint pictures that spoke more directly to a broader audience, Lichtblau had rejected the arcane and hard-to-decode mythologies of painters like Beckmann in favor of those more familiar Biblical stories, from the Old Testament and New, that had been so long at the center of western traditions of painting. In these, her images were stark, sometimes powerfully sexual, and often involved directly with death. The old stories were given new and urgent life by their connection with the darkly teeming subconscious.

There was a complete edition of Freud's works on the shelves at West End Avenue, and in my own ideas both Freudian thought and the moderately post-Freudian views of Erik Erikson were gaining ground. I soon saw that the illumination of Jewish and Christian tales with these ideas was a major force in Lichtblau's work.

For several years I looked every day at an image of a tense and terrifying Abraham holding a long knife above the bound body of his son Isaac, the saving ram in the bushes not yet evident to the faithful, miserable father. I remember beginning a Thanksgiving dinner by answering a six-year-old's unexpected question: why is that old man trying to kill that boy?

About such images Charlotte was always forthcoming. She said that the only way she could make sense of this scene she has drawn repeatedly, this worst of moments in the Abraham story, was as a foretelling. And indeed, on a second look, the crucified Christ appears at the corner of this picture. Angry and incomprehensible though he might be, Yahweh didn't finally require the sacrifice of Isaac, and he did, in time and in history, give up his own son.

The image, however, offers this resolution without quite making it an argument. Abraham's ferocity and the strange savagery of this old story remain undiminished in Lichtblau's picture. Against the fanaticism of faith or the unthinking claims of patriarchs, we can always hope for grace – a ram in the bushes, or a savior on a cross to make up for our crimes. But surely recognizing and depicting the murderous sincerity of Abraham is the place to begin. This is what we have to struggle with, whether our weapons are reasoned arguments, or intervention, or active, faithful hope.

This facing of hard facts is, at it turns out, the leitmotif of Lichtblau's recurrent turning to the Abraham story. In one painting, "Sarah Presents Hagar to Abraham," Abraham's old and childless wife is shown helping the old man force himself on her Egyptian slave-girl

Hagar. Another, "Hagar and the Angel," shows Hagar in the red desert, at Sarah's urging cruelly exiled with her child, Ishmael. The child lies under a shading tree in the upper left of the canvas, abandoned, we know from the story in Genesis, by his mother who could not bear to watch him die of thirst. A great black cloud, seemingly shaped of beating wings, hangs over Hagar, seated in the foreground. A few blue drops at the center of the cloud suggest the fountain of water the story says saved Hagar and her son. What we see, however, is not the promise fulfilled, but the fearful feathered darkness of faint hope. (Who was the Puritan divine who said, "It is an awful thing to fall into the grace of God?")

In one early conversation I learned of Lichtblau's sad discovery, when after a few years she began to show such paintings. The old stories, which were once the common intellectual property of both ordinary and well-educated people, had largely been forgotten. Without the help of dictionaries or Bible study classes, these more "available" works were for most people as hard to read as Beckmann's.

For me, such difficulties were more intriguing than off-putting, and soon I wanted images like these in my own home. In 1977, a student asked me why there were so many grim and potent pictures in my living room. I answered, surprised into self-discovery, that if we have such pictures in our heads it is probably a good idea to put them up on our walls and get a look at them. After all, we live with troubling thoughts, anger and violent desire, grief, despair, and terror, images that seem to slip, as it were, from tree to tree in the backs of our wooded and only half-illuminated minds.

There are, it turns out, even better reasons to look at Lichtblau's paintings. Augustine said that God allowed much that lacked all goodness to exist in the world because, as he put it, "the world is like an exquisite Greek poem, set off by antitheses." If we can see what strikes us as fearsome or evil, we can also apprehend beauty strong enough to stop us in our tracks. Singing sings because it knows what crying is.

#### 4. The Mountains of Altaussee

On my wall in Durham, North Carolina, there is an ink and wash drawing, a self-portrait of Charlotte Lichtblau, with one of the mountains of Aussee in the background. She is sitting outdoors, painting. Across the lake, on the side of the mountains, one can discern the face of her mother, Erna Adelberg, in the rocks, and a little above that, her father, Ernst, is similarly sketched in the geological structure. Only the explicitness of memory in this attractive and unforced work is unusual. Recognisably drawn in or not, the memories are always there for her, shaping both the pictures and the experience of making them. Over thirty years the usual rule has been that the paintings I find most troubling at the start are those I end by liking best. Many of these come out of images and experiences of the mountain country in Austria where Lichtblau spent the summers of her youth. When, in 1990, I finally got there for the first time, I found myself well prepared by her works for the intensity of the light and for the overwhelming might and beauty of the mountains. I was also ready for the darkness – not only the deep lakes, the dense forests, and the awesome storms, but also the various dark memories bound up so intimately with all this dramatic scenery.

In "The Funeral of a Salt Miner," the lineup of pallbearers from the procession looks at first like a bunch of refugees from one of Hitler's camps. Their figures are painted in high relief, and their caricature-like faces are carved from heavy paint. The coffin they carry and the dark figures entering the Gothic church behind speak eloquently of death. Three black umbrellas may be shielding a few heads from rain, but in the foreground puddles are forming around the feet of those still waiting to go in.

This dark canvas is nevertheless full of life. The gothic walls are formed mostly of thick whitish gray brush strokes, with fragments of rough canvas showing through, along with bits of red and underlying darker colors. The painting's insistent materiality suggests the substantiality of the masonry it depicts. Whether one sees these walls as evidence of the strength of faith, or as the astonishing achievements of stonecutters and early architects, they are wonders, soaring upward. Wonderful too are the peripatetic musicians, their brass instruments here for the music of grief, which can nevertheless be played only with the strong breath of life. In the face of death, we know the music will continue to be heard, brass bands as available for triumph as for tragedy.

Another even darker painting from this same time, "The Birth of the Lake," has no people at all in it, but there are tumultuous storm clouds at the top, and from them the high mountain's sheer face comes down steeply to the lake beneath. The painting's beauty is

matched by its extraordinary tension, arising not only from the gathering storm at the top and the huge mountain on the right and center, but also from the thin waterfall's lighter colors tumbling into the dark lake's depths.

This point of view, the mountain and lake, the hills on the left, recurs dozens of times in Lichtblau's work. Sometimes there are people walking along the path, and often one finds an image of a small votive shrine among the pine trees on the hill. (In 1990 one could still make out the image on this shrine, where more than a century before a girl had drowned, pushed into the lake by one of the cows she had been herding.)

Memories are rich and varied in this region, and some reach back, like the ancient salt mines, as far as Celtic times. The crucifixes of the village festivals fit comfortably with vestiges of older celebrations, flowers and high spirits obscuring any sense of the early struggles to Christianize the Alpine villagers. Visual evidence of more recent troubles seems almost as hard to find, but in Altaussee everyone knows that in the early twentieth century the region was especially favored by Vienna's cultural elite, many of them Jews. Mahler wrote symphonies here, Theodor Herzl's bicycle can be seen in the local museum. These mountains were later as appealing to the Nazis as to their victims. Hitler's vacation retreat at Berchtesgaden is only a few hours away.

Although seldom part of any conscious process of creation, memories of the Holocaust underlie more than a few of Lichtblau's Alpine paintings. One darkly lovely image of the hillside, the lake, and the little votive shrine, for example, has large and powerful rocks set to the right of a seated nude figure, these rocks echoed by others set along the curving edge of water. What is ominous in this picture is that the rocks get their strength from the way they mimic the shapes of skulls, and perhaps also, the way they suggest traditional images of Jewish faces.

The weight of memory and history in Lichtblau's mountain paintings is nevertheless only half of their story. Even in the 60's, and more surely in the 70's and since, the mountain paintings are centrally concerned with hope, with eros, and with transcendence. All this is most evident in the three paintings that form an Ausseer Triptych, paintings that speak as eloquently of living and creation as the city paintings do of dying and destruction.

The center of these three, "The Middle Point of the World," has been for fifteen years almost as hard for me to look at as "The End of the Brownstone Era." A woman with a rather blank face sits in a field of intense greens, the more yellow among them so extreme as to be almost toxic. The man who stands facing her, directly in front of her, though obviously at some distance, seems nevertheless half enveloped by her, his broad

and angular shoulders surrounded by her feminine skirt. His rounded buttocks and thighs, clothed in black pants that only heighten the anatomy, are set off and yet held by the deep green field. To make the imagery all the more sexual, a pink tower with a sharp and dark-blue spire stabs into a billowing blue-white sky. The man, the woman, and the tower are all on the same central vertical axis of the picture.

Unlike these elements, the houses to the left of the tower, the trees, and even the mountains of this painting might easily find place in some more conventionally scenic image. But the circular yellow road angling left and curving right from the man, and then curving from both sides toward the church, adds to the painting's air of hyper-reality. The road and the figures could hardly be seen any place outside of our imagination. One's tendency is to say, "Too much," or "Why has this painter broken so many rules?"

The other two paintings of the triptych, "The Stones that Know," and "Wild Narcissus," are set at that now-familiar point, the deep blue of the lake on the right, purple gray mountains at the end of it, rocks, green grass, and wooded hills on the left. In the left foreground of "The Stones that Know" a woman bends down to pick large leaves from the ground (once, Lichtblau says, they were made into festival hats). At a distance, on the path, are two figures, the protective arm of the larger around the shoulder of the smaller.

In "Wild Narcissus," by the lake on the lower right, and next to the tops of two great stones, four or five figures (one of them pregnant) stand looking up toward two hills arrayed with white flowers. Next to the figures, in the bottom right corner a large face appears, eyes closed, perhaps an image of the painter herself.

On the second hill we can see pine tree trunks beginning at the edge of the grass and flowers, their tops beyond the painting's edge. A dark figure is stepping, or more likely, kneeling nearby. Visually, this can only be Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Questioned about this figure, Lichtblau admitted the close resemblance, but at the same time said that while she was working on the painting, no such identity for this figure was conscious in her mind.

Far less labored and more thinly painted than some of the earlier Alpine canvases, each of these three large works seems to me to point to beauty and knowledge beyond anything that can be captured on a canvas. They are, I think, about the mystery of generation and about the deep connection to nature that each of us mortal beings carries within ourselves. Two of the images embody great beauty as well as pointing beyond it. "The Middle Point of the World," however, is more ambiguous, offering a connection to joyous feeling and startlingly beautiful passages, but in a painting that will not let us rest

with these advantages. It thus asks even more insistently than the other two that we do for ourselves the work of imagining – not only thinking, not only feeling, but truly becoming, living more fully than we ever have before.

Aussee before the war was not Eden, nor is it now. But imagining Aussee, then or now, as a kind of Eden, can give us back for more than a moment that original Adam and that primal Eve we carry with us. It can, for more than a moment, give back our memories of awe at the narcissus, or the mountains. Imagining Aussee might also help to ready us for the awe of actually seeing the world from that mountain's crest.

## 5. Portraits

Throughout her career Lichtblau has painted portraits of the people she knows best: family, friends, and sometimes children of friends, people close enough to participate in the intimacy of her portrait making. Because she has lived a long time, a number of the subjects are now dead, some gone in ripe old age, others cut down grievously young—Tamar by multiple myeloma, Tony by a heart attack, Richard by AIDS, Charley by a random gunshot in Harlem..

In all of Lichtblau's portraits the memorial impulse seems quite strong. Each one represents an attempt, always in some way successful, to see deeply into a life. The strategies vary: sometimes she is predictive, and people do indeed grow to look increasingly like their painted images. In others, like that of the painter Joseph Floch, she notes and even magnifies illusions of identity and strength her subjects offer to the world.

The portrait of Richard recalls the passionate, ascetic clerics sometimes painted by Velazquez. An Australian, an Episcopal priest who had earlier been a Catholic priest, and then a painter of rapidly blooming talent, Richard lost his sight and then his life to AIDS in a few short days, early in the epidemic. As fine a memorial as I know anywhere, this painting might be said to embody the full presence of his absence from us – an absence at once both final and unacceptable.

The end of a poem by Borges offers, I think, the right lines for the Lichtblau gallery of portraits:

“Surely these are talismans  
But useless against the dark I cannot name  
Useless against the dark I must not name.”

Jorge Luis Borges (from "Talismans" in *The Unending Rose*, 1975)

It may be that these are also appropriate words for a gallery of her landscapes, or indeed for any exhibition of Lichtblau's work. To be sure, they speak of far less than the whole story, yet they capture an important aspect of this artist's lifelong project. She has painted partly out of an impulse to protect or to recall what she has loved. There is no magic that can do this successfully, nothing that can preserve us or our perceptions intact, nothing that is proof against the depredations of age and loss.

For all that, there is a talismanic magic in these works. That is to say, they carry with them the unexpected alchemies of their creation, victories won for vision and insight from the simplest of elements, from turpentine and oil, pigment and canvas. The courage to see is the courage to live, to face chance and fear and death without looking away, to express one's highest hopes, to stand one's ground in a life. Day after day, and year after year, Charlotte Lichtblau has done this, her life's work to make wonders out of wondering.

**Bruce Payne** is a lecturer in the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. He is Director of "Leadership and the Arts: A Duke Semester in New York City," which began in 1996, and which offers students planning careers in law, business, government and teaching an opportunity for an experience of deep immersion in the arts.

On the Duke faculty in public policy since 1971, Payne has taught courses in leadership, ethics and policymaking, policy and the arts, philanthropy, rural poverty, ethnic politics, and other subjects having to do with public choices and values. In 1983 he received Duke's Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award.