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THE IMAGE OF MARY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

*Terrence E. Dempsey, S.J.**

She is the most well-known woman in human history. She has inspired, comforted, and protected the human family. She has celebrated joyful events and has grieved at the suffering of her Son. She participated in the plan of God in a unique and singularly important way, and she has pointed the way to our Lord. Cathedrals have been built in her honor; peoples have defended her images and devotions to her. Many religious orders and lay associations have looked to Mary as model and patron.

In the Eastern Church, her devotion was particularly strong, and she became known by specific titles: as *Theotokos* (The Bearer of God), as *Cathedras Sophias* (The Seat of Wisdom); as *Mater Ecclesia* (The Mother Church left behind); as the *Hodegetria* (She who shows the way); and as *Eleussa* (The Tender Madonna). In the West, she has been portrayed as a young girl and queen; as someone with features of a porcelain doll; as an old, grieving mother; and as a protectress.

With such a strong legacy, have there been any significant expressions of Mary in contemporary art, particularly art that has been created in the past fifty years? The purpose of this presentation is to explore the significant artistic expressions dealing with the subject of Mary in the last half of this century. Have the artists of our own time depicted a Mary understandable to the people of our own time and who reflects the concerns of our own time? Many of the images offered here might at first seem totally detached from the tradition of representing Mary, but Mary has been represented in a variety of ways

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by people from different cultures and different time periods. What may be most surprising is how often the artists of our own time incorporate references from the past, not in slavish imitation, but in a creative contemporary way. (Excluded here will be works that are flippant and disrespectful representations of Mary.)

For many artists, the role of Mary in Salvation History has been as a sign of hope, of tenderness, of faith, of courage, of selflessness, and of love. It is not possible to adequately represent the many contemporary artistic expressions of Mary in one presentation, so I have selected works by seventeen modern and contemporary artists who reflect a wide range of serious engagements with the reality of Mary.

At mid-century, in 1944, one of the great modern sculptors, Henry Moore, received a commission for a Madonna and Child at the Church of St. Matthew, Northampton, England (*Fig. 1*). Moore had long been interested in the theme of the Mother and Child, his earliest work on this theme having been done around 1922. In all of the examples that preceded the Northampton commission, the Mother and Child sculptures by Moore revealed a strong and protective maternal presence. It would be quite appropriate that, at a time when England was at war, this emblem of maternal strength and tenderness would be of considerable importance to the British people. Moore wrote about this commission:

When I was first asked to carve a Madonna and Child for St. Matthews, although I was very interested, I wasn't sure whether I could do it, or whether I even wanted to do it. One knows that religion has been the inspiration of most of Europe's greatest painting and sculpture, and that the Church in the past has encouraged and employed the greatest artists, but the great tradition of religious art seems to have got lost completely in the present day, and the general level of church art has fallen very low (as anyone can see from the affected and sentimental prettiness sold for church decoration in church art shops). Therefore I felt it was not a commission straight-away and light-heartedly to agree to undertake. . . .¹

Eventually, when Moore agreed to do the commission, he had to ask himself how doing a Madonna and Child differed

¹Herbert Read, *Henry Moore* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Pub., 1966), 154.

from a carving of a mother and child or, as he states, "by considering how in my opinion religious art differs from secular art."² These are his words:

It's not easy to describe in words what this difference is, except by saying in general terms that the Madonna and Child should have an austerity and a nobility, and some touch of grandeur (even hieratic aloofness), which is missing in the everyday "Mother and Child." I think that (the sketch chosen for the commission) has a quiet dignity and gentleness. I have also tried to give a sense of easiness and repose, as though the Madonna could stay in that position forever (as being in stone, she will have to do).³

Art historian Sir Herbert Read says of this piece:

For all its "hieratic" qualities, the Northampton Madonna and Child remains human and accessible; . . . The features, for example are just sufficiently stylized (i.e., removed from the realism of a particular model) to make them universal. The austerity or aloofness proceeds from the monumental scale and from the broad simplicity of the style.⁴

In 1947, the Lithuanian-born Jewish artist Jacques Lipchitz was asked by Fr. Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P., to create a baptismal font for the Church of Assy in the French Alps. Entitled *Notre-Dame-de-Liesse* (Fig. 2), the sculpture is part of a most unusual font, as it represents the generalized figure of Mary as the focal point. The moment shown is when Mary is filled with the spirit at the very beginning of the Incarnation. The embracing shape is an inverted heart or a tear form suggesting compassion, with animals suggesting the Peaceable Kingdom at the base. This beautiful font was met with initial controversy, and in some quarters, outright hostility, but its power has outlasted those who vilified it.

Another casting of *Notre-Dame-de-Liesse* was commissioned by Jane Blaffer Owen for the historic town of New Harmony, Indiana. Jane Owen's efforts have been strongly

²Read, *Henry Moore*, 156.

³Read, *Henry Moore*, 156.

⁴Read, *Henry Moore*, 156-57.

ecumenical, as she has commissioned artists from many backgrounds to do art works that celebrate the glory of God and the holy place held by Mary.

John Dillenberger underscores the sense of ecumenism in the Lipchitz sculpture when he states that:

Although Lipchitz believed that Judaism and Christianity were linked like no other two religions, he insisted that he not be misunderstood in his sculptural creation of the Virgin, with its tear-shaped form—Mary with the dove descending and the lamb. On the back of the sculpture—both on the one at Assy and Indiana—appear the words: “Jacob Lipschitz, Jew, faithful to the religion of his ancestors, has made this Virgin to foster understanding between men on earth that the life of the spirit may prevail.”⁵

Bay Area artist Jay DeFeo, throughout her life, created spiritually evocative abstract images. In 1989, at the time of her death, she was regarded as one of the most important artists in the Bay Area. Here we see works that, although small, evoke the sublime. Abstraction and some suggestion of representation overlap to create worlds that take us out of our ordinary circumstances and surroundings. Currently on view at the Art Institute of Chicago is an impressive painting by Jay DeFeo entitled *The Annunciation*. This is a large-scale painting (approximately 10 feet in height). DeFeo has tried to express the moment when the divine and the human meet—the moment of the beginning of the Incarnation. Her brush work and the use of palette knife-impasto application of paint create the suggestion of powerful wings descending, hovering, protecting, embracing—and at the bottom of the painting is the suggestion of human flesh. Never exploitative or vulgar, this painting powerfully and respectfully and vitally captures the moment when Mary uttered the words “Be it done unto me according to thy Will.”

The Annunciation has been the subject of other more recent art works. Los Angeles artist Craig Antrim has long been involved with a visual dialogue with the spiritual. He brings

⁵John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 195.

together his own Christianity, his interest in Eastern spirituality and his knowledge of Jungian psychology to create strongly expressive paintings. At the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (St. Louis) is an installation of his *Icon Wall*—or his meditation on the cross. Sixty-four paintings refer not only to the suffering and death of Our Lord, but also to the more universal significance of the cross—the horizontal line representing matter and the vertical line representing the spirit. As Antrim has stated, it is at the intersection of those two lines that the human drama takes place.

His use of acrylic paint and encaustic wax often creates the sense of a veil, of a type of iconostasis. This is nowhere better exemplified than in his large painting entitled *Annunciation*, also in the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art collection. This painting is eight-feet wide and four feet in height. The richly textured surface has several recognizable shapes—an egg shape, a red handprint, and a partial halo. What dominates this canvas, however, is a shape resembling a curtain that is now only beginning to reveal the truth of what lies behind it—the moment of the Incarnation. The egg form, in the tradition of the Romanian born artist Constantin Brancusi, represents new life, new possibilities, new hope, and, specifically in the Christian sense, it represents the birth of Our Lord. This is reinforced by the handprint, painted a bloody red—a foreshadowing of Our Lord's passion and death. The halo could reflect the angel of the Annunciation, or it could simply indicate the embracing holiness of this event.

The color of the veil or curtain is worth noting. It is predominantly a marble white, with hints of flesh tone coming through. Recently, we took this work out of storage and the flesh color has become much more noticeable; the painting itself over time is changing, and, in its own way, it speaks not only of Christ's divinity, but also of his humanity.

Also using the metaphor of the veil simultaneously to reveal and conceal is Georgia-based artist James Rosen. A devout Jew, Jim Rosen often uses Christian subjects in his paintings. In the mid-to-late 1980s, he did a whole series entitled the *Great Madonnas*. In many of his works, Jim enters into a dialogue with the past. One of his most important works is based on the

Ognissanti Madonna by Giotto. The Giotto painting is located in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Rosen's homage to the Giotto painting is owned by the University of California Art Museum, Berkeley.

Rosen has said that his paintings are about time. It takes a long time for him to finish one of his works, sometimes over a year, and it requires time for the viewer to truly see the painting. Jim has put up to sixty layers of wax/oil emulsion paint on this canvas, to create a different kind of iconostasis. If one looks at this quickly, one sees only a grey rectangle. But if one takes time and lets the eyes adjust, then one will begin to see the Great Madonna. However, the image never fully becomes clear, and it retains the reality of mystery. Revelation and concealment are seldom achieved more sensitively than in the works of Jim Rosen.

A different kind of concealment occurs in the art of Los Angeles artist Nick Boskovich. Boskovich evokes the tradition of symbolic realism of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting. Nick's work is always intimate, but rich with symbolism. To the person without the religious eyes to see, this is a pleasant still life. But seen by someone with a religious background, this painting reveals truths of a far more profound nature. The work is entitled *Annunciation* (Fig. 3). It is the size of a postcard. And when we pay special attention to it, we note that the artist has chosen the lily—often the symbol of the Virgin—in a pristine vessel of water. We note that the tablecloth seems a little overly starched, that the creases form a cross, and we observe a wrapped package on the table with the twine forming another cross. As in the *Annunciation*, the contents of the package are yet to be revealed.

Italian artist Virginio Ciminaghi has depicted the *Annunciation* in a beautiful sculpture, which he completed in 1967. Currently on display at the Saint Louis Art Museum in the exhibition *Angels from the Vatican*, this work has been one of the most well-received of the nearly 100 works on loan from the Vatican. Ciminaghi has conceived the *Annunciation* in the form of a dance—a graceful but active drama in which both the divine and the human participate. To walk around the sculpture is to sense that these figures are truly moving and are in a

type of upward spiral. The sense of respect, tenderness, and intimacy are enhanced by the fact that it is hard to tell who is the angel and who is Mary.

Working in the realist mode, but on a colossal scale is Los Angeles artist Kent Twitchell. Twitchell has painted over a dozen murals throughout Los Angeles. A Protestant evangelical, Kent sometimes depicts Jesus in immediately recognizable representations. More often than not, however, he uses disguised symbolism, masking his religious figures in the form of contemporary people, primarily actors and artists whom he respects. This work, for example, depicts three figures in laboratory coats against a brilliantly white background; it is entitled *The Holy Trinity with Mary* (Fig. 4). For Mary, he chose Jan Clayton, the original mother in the 1950s' television series "Lassie." For God the Father, Twitchell appropriately used Clayton Moore as his model. Moore was the Lone Ranger in the 1950s' television show, and, in that role, it was important for him to keep his full identity concealed. For Jesus, Twitchell chose Billy Grey who starred as Bud (the good son) in the 1950s' television series, "Father Knows Best." The Holy Spirit is represented by the rich white background, which, according to Twitchell, illuminates the glory of God.

Frederick Brown has created strong history paintings and iconic paintings that are influenced by German expressionism as well as his own African heritage. He has also been a strong observer of the history of Western art. Brown's painting *The Ascension* is based in part on the *Transfiguration* by Raphael. But Brown's influences are many—African art, Native American Art and German Expressionism, to name but three. In *The Ascension*, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we see an ascending Christ figure, barely able to be contained by the frame; yet this radiant Christ still bears the wounds of his crucifixion. His divine light illuminates the world below, as symbolized by the walled city. People are looking with a sense of amazement at what is happening before their eyes. How do mere mortals with all their limitations comprehend this event?

Three years ago, Frederick Brown completed a large, five-panel work entitled *The Life of Christ Altarpiece*, which is now

in the collection of MOCRA. I would like to focus on just one panel from this strong polyptych—the Madonna and Child (Fig. 5). Nine feet in height, this panel has an iconic and monumental feel about it. In this panel, Brown has captured the sense of a slightly melancholy Christ child who seems to sense his destiny on earth. But it is the Madonna who towers over us. Her face bears the influences of African art, Egyptian art, Byzantine art, and Oceanic art, and at first she seems severe. Looking carefully at the face, however, we notice that her closed eyelids are pronounced and glistening, as if she is tearing up, knowing the difficult times that face her Son. It is a deeply moving work, and an impressive expression of the Madonna in the last decade of this millennium.

An abstract sculpture of great evocative power is by Southern Illinois artist Steven Heilmer. Entitled *Nativity Stone: Mother's Milk* (Fig. 6), it is made of a single piece of Carrara marble. It could easily be mistaken for a work from Japan, and Steven has been influenced by such sculptors as Isamu Noguchi. But Steve was raised in the Baptist faith and is now Episcopalian. This is a work rich in Christian meaning. The carved stone reflects a protective cove, the womb, where the child Jesus (here represented as a Baby Rock of Ages) is safe. The love of Mary for her son is conveyed through the pool of milk. Heilmer has carved the marble in such a way that it forms a pool of milk just ready to spill over, symbolic of the bountiful love of Mary for her child. The wooden wedge is a foreshadowing of the suffering of Christ's passion and death.

The art of Santa Barraza pays homage to the Latino communities. And in these intimate *retablos* paintings, Barraza blends high art with folk art. She also mingles politics with religion, and she affirms the dignity of her mestizo culture. Women are the central focus of her work. There is the dignity of *La Virgen* (Fig. 7), and the uneasy presence of the Corazón Sagrado (the Sacred Heart) atop a maguey plant which has two gun barrels as arteries. The plant itself is a symbol of life and cultural tradition.

New York artist Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt has created a theology of poverty and glitter. Lanigan-Schmidt has stated that it is not the gold but the glow that counts, and he has made a

body of work that pays homage to the pre-Vatican II devotions and ceremonies. Schmidt, who is fifty-years old, fills his sculptures with evocations of the past, and he has created wondrous, childlike environments out of junk—aluminum foil, Saran Wrap, pipe cleaners, reflector strips, Kleenex, staples—all are combined to form objects that have the wonder of May Altars, Forty Hours' devotional altars, and icons. Here, Lanigan-Schmidt celebrates his working-class roots and the important role that the Catholic Church has played in his life.

Another New Yorker who pays homage to working-class roots and to devotional practices that more commonly occurred in the pre-Vatican II period is the late Adrian Kellard. He made his carved chapels and shrines out of pine wood and latex house paint with Phillips screws fully visible—the materials that any working class person could buy at a local hardware store. Kellard once said that if all the museums and the galleries of the world disappeared, people would continue to make art because it is part of being human. While Kellard was a trained artist, his work has an intentional folk art look to it—and Mary has a central role in the devotions and the artwork of Kellard. His work is complicated by the reality that Kellard was an artist of Irish-Italian ancestry who was Catholic and gay. He brings all of these realities, and especially the reality of his own struggle with AIDS, into his work. For Kellard, it is the Jesus of the Passion who identifies with his own suffering, but it is Mary who very much plays the role of a supportive and protective mother to her son. His works dealing with Mary have such titles as *A Mother's Love Is Unconditional*, revealing his trust in the motherly role of Mary and in her position of intercession. In this detail (Fig. 8) from *The Aids Altarpiece: Healing . . . the Learned Art of Compassion* (dedicated to people with AIDS), Mary is represented as a protective, loving mother whose expression reflects the experience of a parent who has lost a child. She will allow nothing more to harm her son, as she transports him to heaven. The face of the son is a self-portrait of the artist.

New York photographers Doug and Mike Starn (known as the Starn Twins) have created a series of photographs in which the images are allowed to fade and are collaged together with

many sheets of photographic paper and scotch tape. There is a sense of impermanence and change within the medium itself, and yet the Starn Twins often have chosen religious images. Here, they pay homage to the fifteenth-century painting by Flemish artist Deric Bouts entitled the *Sorrowing Madonna* (in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago). Using the photographic medium that came into existence in the last century, the Starn Twins dialogue with an artwork over 500-years-old, to offer a sensitive meditation on the grieving Mother of God.

Daniel Smajo-Ramirez, Professor of Art at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has often had the religious dimension as the subject of his art. In these elegant paintings, made of acrylic paint on canvas, Ramirez uses gothic architecture to visualize both the Magnificat and the Nativity.

New York artist Charlotte Lichtblau is in her early seventies. Born as a Jew in Vienna, Austria, Charlotte converted to Catholicism in the 1950s. Her teachers were the second generation of German Expressionist artists, and she reflects in her own work the powerful distortion of color, line, and form to reveal inner emotions and inner truths that are characteristic of German Expressionism. Her *Crucifixion*, for example, presents us with a Christ whose heaving body reflects the torment of the crucifixion. But Charlotte has done something that I have not seen done by any other artist. Note the almond shape in the abdomen; it is called the mandorla and it traditionally is the shape that symbolizes divinity. Here, for instance, you will see the mandorla behind the Christ Enthroned tympanum in Chartres Cathedral. More often than not it looks like a backrest. What Charlotte has done is integrate the mandorla into the body of Christ, so that his divinity and his humanity are inseparable.

In her painting of the Last Supper, entitled *Blood of the Covenant* (Fig.9), Lichtblau once again takes an event from Scripture that has been painted so often and gives it a fresh interpretation. The colors of deep luminous blue and glowing, fiery reddish-orange dominate this painting, which is also punctuated with green and mustard yellow. This painting loses all depth perspective, as the figures are brought right up to the

picture plane and tipped up almost in the manner of a Cubist painting. Arcing lines create a framing oval shape within the painting, and it is clear that guests other than just the apostles are present. Lichtblau depicts dimensions of good and evil; the Judas figure to the right of Christ appears menacingly Satanic as he seems to anticipate his betrayal kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ, aware of Judas' evil intentions, nevertheless, does not shut him off. Other figures hover about, including a Magdalene figure with a vessel of oil, and an angel.

What is most original about this Last Supper, however, is the figure at the base of the painting. It is a strong, Mother Earth-type figure. It is Mary, and while Scripture never mentions the presence of Mary at the Last Supper, it is clear that Lichtblau introduces the figure of Mary for other purposes. Mary serves as the table or altar. There is no actual table, but Mary's location and position suggest a stabilizing force in an otherwise highly charged painting. There are also numerous insights contained within this painting that are central to the Catholic faith: Mary as Church, as the Bride of Christ, and, most clearly, as the Mother of God. For, the position she is in is reminiscent of a woman in labor. Her legs are partially visible and separated, as if she is about to give birth and immediately above her is the figure of her Son. Emerging from her is a glowing mandorla shape. Lichtblau has collapsed the New Testament—from Christ's birth to his suffering and death and resurrection—into one canvas, and Mary is the anchoring force of this drama in Salvation History.

This presentation concludes with a brief discussion of the work of Southern California video artist Bill Viola. Viola is arguably the finest of the video artists. His work is more of an installation than a number of independent objects set up in a gallery. He takes over whole rooms. In fact, in his retrospective that just closed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, he took over two entire floors. As the viewers went from gallery to gallery, they encountered one work per gallery. No labels were on the walls, but the message that came through is that this artist is profoundly interested in issues of life and death. For example, in his 1992 sound-video piece entitled *What Is Not and That Which Is*, two black-and-white

video monitors face each other with only a few inches separating them. One monitor has the face of a newborn baby and the other the face of an aged woman near death. They face each other, and they are reflected in each other: the cycle of life and death brought face-to-face.

Viola also is interested in the spiritual dimension, the contemplative life and prayer, as seen in his 1983 video-sound work entitled *Room for St. John of the Cross*. On a large wall is projected a stormy mountain scene recorded with a very unstable hand-held camera and its jittery movements. There are thunderous, cacophonous sounds in the background. It is a world without stability or serenity. In front of it is a cubicle, a monastic cell, about seven feet in height. Inside the cell on a floor of earth are a table, a water pitcher, a glass and a small television. The television has a perfectly still image of the same mountain, but it is a gloriously sunny day and the image is absolutely still. The only sound one hears is the voice of a man speaking in Spanish the poetry and prayers of St. John. The juxtaposition is stunning—on the outside a stormy, noisy, frightening world, and on the inside an environment of utmost simplicity that is conducive to contemplation.

Two darkened galleries after the St. John installation, was another work, again without any title visible, of a conversation between two women. The action, recorded in slow motion, lasts ten minutes: a younger blond-haired woman is talking to an older woman who appears to be pregnant. A third woman, dressed in red and also pregnant, enters the picture about four minutes into the piece. She recognizes the older woman but not the younger woman. The moment she enters, a wind begins to blow her garments and the older woman's garments. The younger pregnant woman leans over to the older woman and whispers something into her ear. One can only hear voices but cannot decipher the words. The two women are both joyous. Without any label, I sensed that I was looking at a dramatization of the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. My suspicions were confirmed when I looked at the catalogue; the piece was done by Viola in 1995 and it is called *The Greeting*. It was based on a painting of the sixteenth-century Italian mannerist artist Jacopo Pontormo entitled *The Visitation*. Handled with

reverence and mystery, the work by perhaps the finest video artist in the world shows that the reality of Mary continues to captivate and engage the many artistic imaginations of our time.

Even when using a medium that was developed in our own time, artists still can express their appreciation of the long tradition of visual images that have honored the Mother of God. Indeed, there are many truly gifted artists who, through their own creativity, have demonstrated that it is possible to create a Mary for our own time—one who speaks the truths of our faith but in the visual vocabulary of the late-twentieth century.



Fig. 1. Henry Moore, *Madonna and Child*, 1943–44. Hornton stone, 59" h. Church of Northampton, England.

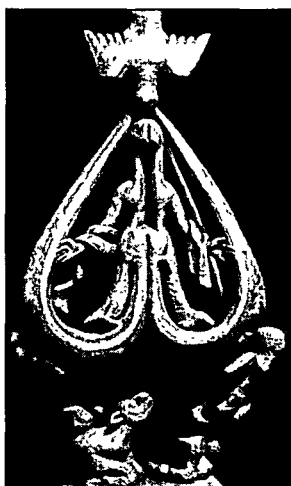


Fig. 2 Jacques Lipchitz, *Notre Dame-de-Liesse*, 1947. Bronze. Assy, France and New Harmony, Indiana.

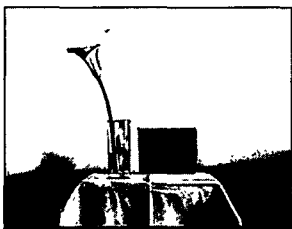


Fig. 3. Nick Boskovich, *Annunciation*, 1989. Oil on wood, 3" × 5." Collection of the artist.



Fig. 4. Kent Twitchell, *Holy Trinity with Mary*. Otis-Parsons Art Institute, Los Angeles.



Fig. 5. Frederick Brown, *Madonna and Child*, 1995. Oil on canvas, 9' \times 4.' Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University, St. Louis.



Fig. 6. Steven Heilmer, *Nativity Stone: Mother's Milk*, 1993. Cararra marble and wood, 27" \times 22" \times 12." Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University, St. Louis.



Fig. 7. Santa Barraza, *La Virgen*. Oil on tin panel, 10" \times 14." Private Collection.

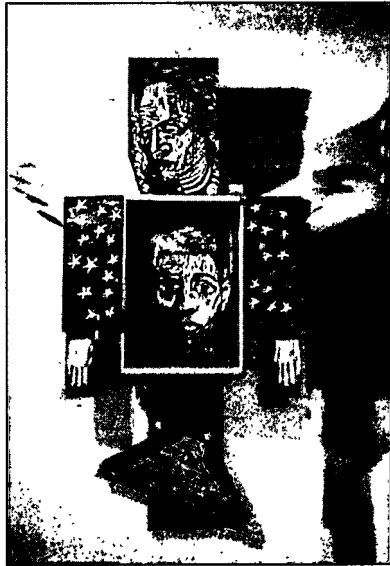


Fig. 8. Adrian Kellard, *Madonna and Child from The Aids Altarpiece: Healing . . . the Learned Art of Compassion*, 1986. Wood, latex paint, hardware, 58" \times 45." Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University, St. Louis.



Fig. 9. Charlotte Lichtblau, *Blood of the Covenant II (The Last Supper)*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 50" \times 60." Collection of the artist.