

## *Edward Knippers*

ONE of the enduring myths of the twentieth century is the idea that art is really about the artist. According to this myth the art object, regardless of its ostensible subject, is a mirror of the artist's soul. This idea has a complex lineage. Certainly Freud contributed to it. So too has art history, with its efforts to contextualize art through biography and social analysis. And it is a fact that many modern artists have believed that they were the most interesting thing around, and made their lives the touchstones of their work. Finally, there is the long gradual conflation of art with entertainment which suggests to people through the pages of magazines like *Elle* and *Vanity Fair* that artists probably lead extraordinary lives, as do the stars. Given these conditions, it is not hard to make assumptions about artists based on encounters with their art.

I met Ed Knippers's work before I met Ed Knippers. The work that I saw in 1975 was a series of large watercolors of heads—gaudy, primitive, and aggressive. The colors were intense and sometimes punctuated with areas of glitter. The heads obviously drew upon the French painter Georges Rouault's images of prostitutes. They also owed something to the hard, crystalline leer of the women in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and returned the spectators gaze with cold, interrogative stares. The effects were unsettling. A friend observed that they were "not something you'd choose for the nursery." I had seen another work of Knippers, too, where the paint surface crawled from the canvas onto the frame as if motivated by an obsessive need to animate everything.

Because of these encounters, and the fact that I knew that Knippers was a Southerner with strong Christian convictions, it was easy to develop expectations about the artist. The expectations—fueled by art mythology—were that Knippers would be something of a cross between one of Flannery O'Connor's preachers and the painter Nick Nolte played in *New York Stories*. In other words, he would be the mythic outsider—intense, quirky, driven, barely

domesticated, and given to visionary, religious extremes.

The Ed Knippers I met in 1977 didn't match the myth. Courteous, articulate, coated, tied, and blow-dried, Knippers resembled a professor at a small Kentucky college—which in fact he was. There were no visible twists of personality to account for the high-voltage quality of his paintings. In fact, Knippers looked like a mild-mannered evangelical whose taste in art would run toward pleasantness. How then to understand the relationship of the artist to the art?

Ed Knippers's life unfolded between two immutable conditions. He is Southern and he is Christian. Ed was raised in Lakeland, Florida, where his father taught business math and administration at Florida Southern College. Both parents were devout members of the Church of the Nazarene, a Protestant denomination in the holiness tradition.

There is no dearth of literature about the problems of being Southern, being Christian, and being an artist. Both Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, two writers that Ed has read carefully, addressed the subject several times. In the larger culture, particularly the artistic culture, the words "Christian" and "Southern" are occasions for aesthetic as well as social stereotypes and stigmas. This forced O'Connor and Percy to think about ways to penetrate the biases of their audience. They thought critically, but also strategically about their work. Knippers has followed suit, although he is quick to point out that he doesn't approach art intellectually.

Initially, the experience of being Southern and being Christian did not lead to strategy, but to a sense of distance. The Protestant holiness tradition emphasizes a purity of lifestyle that takes a "don't look, don't touch, don't do" approach to the pleasures and temptations of culture. So while Ed took painting lessons, he didn't go to movies or dances. When Ed's cousin from Philadelphia visited in the summers, she brought along the sense of superiority and condescension that the North has regularly visited on the South since Reconstruction. This was also the period of the growing struggle over civil rights, which in its early stages was thought to be a Southern problem. During Ed's youth, a white Southerner was seen as part of a problem whose solution would be imported from somewhere else.

Distance can be experienced as either crippling isolation or liberation from collective practices. For Ed, growing up Southern and Christian did not so much lead to a sense of being outside of the acknowledged centers of real artistic and social vitality as it gave him room to find his own direction as an artist. One of the dilemmas of modernism is that the developing artist must confront a noisome and contradictory multitude of ideas, subjects, schools, methods, techniques, and allegiances. This is the downside of the much-vaunted artistic freedom found in modernity. The effect on many aspiring artists is

uncertainty, or a long incoherent stammer as the artist tries to find an authentic voice.

The distance that Knippers felt was coupled with his approach to art, which is much more intuitive and emotional than it is calculated and premeditated. The result was an artistic growth marked by an organic quality that is absent from the work of many of his peers. By the time he left Asbury College, he already knew that Christianity was his subject. He also knew that he was a painter whose interests were fairly conventional given the art world's penchant for innovation. In graduate school, all of the critical debates about the merits of minimalism, pop, or conceptualism were of only peripheral interest to him. There is no body of minimalist Knippers in a closet somewhere. So today, when people say to him as they sometimes do, "But that's not what people are doing in *New York*," with all of its implied cultural authority, Ed seriously asks, "So what?"

While he knew the direction he wanted his work to go in, he was not at all certain about the best way to flesh out a Christian vision. There were several problems to overcome before Knippers could begin to approach the large Biblical narratives that are his hallmark, and that indicate the start of his mature work. While Ed had been a precocious painter as an undergraduate, it was a mixed blessing. The faculty at Asbury College tended to leave him alone, which he liked. But no one insisted on a solid foundation in drawing. Of course he would not have been able to draw from an unclothed model anyway, given the conservative Protestant conviction that such an activity is at least immodest, if not an outright invitation to lust and sin. There were no nudes in Wilmore, Kentucky.

This lack of solid drawing skills hampered Knippers's entry into graduate school. Once in the MFA program at the University of Tennessee, he began studying drawing in earnest, and says that "I felt like I was playing catch-up all the time." But he persevered and gradually began to understand how to construct form. Like all serious artists, his growth in the craft and knowledge of his art did not stop with the end of his formal education. Ed began to teach after graduate school, but was frustrated because he knew he still had so much to learn, and now had less time to do it in. He knew more than the students, but said "I felt like we were all in the same boat together."

Another problem faced by young artists is where to look for examples and inspiration. While modernist mythology has promoted the ideal of the artist creating in Promethean freedom without regard for roots, history, and tradition, the reality lies elsewhere. Knippers wasn't drawn to the artists being discussed in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, most of the art since World War II didn't quicken his pulse, though he admires DeKooning as "a fine painter."

Later on Ed realized that the art of the post-war period was propelled by

ideas that he was at odds with. Some movements, like abstract expressionism, were predicated on a cult of personality, while others, like minimalism or color-field painting, were largely dedicated to the manipulation of art's formal properties. The former tended to degenerate into celebrity, while the latter, despite the most elaborate critical panegyrics, never rose much above the level of inflated decoration. So Ed looked further, to the early part of the twentieth century.

"I was drawn to the German Expressionists because they believed art could have some transforming influence on society," he relates. At first he didn't like the individual artists that much, but found their boldness and simplicity attractive, as well as the emotional and confrontational quality of their work. Also, the German Expressionists were quite willing to use religious and Christian imagery. For this reason, Knippers also admired that misplaced expressionist, Georges Rouault, who never took pains to mask his Christian beliefs. He learned a lot about color and paint-handling from Rouault, as well as from the Russian painter Alex Jawelensky.

Ed recalls that he had often prayed that he would be guided in the art that influenced him. He was aware of the need for formative influences, and wanted to find common ground with other forms of Christian expression. Both the German Expressionists and Rouault had looked back too, back beyond the Renaissance to Medieval or Byzantine sources. There was one place Ed never looked, though—the Baroque period. "I was taught to hate the Baroque, with all of those arabesques and overworked spiritual sentiments."

While he was coming to terms with the complexity of drawing the human form at the University of Tennessee, Ed was never attracted to the kind of naturalistic or academic realism that often grows out of studying the figure. This approach seemed unable to hold the emotional and spiritual weight of the Christian story, and its demands for a kind of detachment and the faithful description of appearance were antithetical to Ed's interests. He was, however, concerned with imagery. In undergraduate school he had tried some abstractions, but people told him these paintings "looked like landscapes." So from that time on he accepted the representative nature of art. But how best to represent the Christian faith?

About half way through his graduate study, Ed was feeling this problem acutely. He was trying to make figurative paintings, but things weren't working, and his teachers were telling him he was trying too hard. He had recently married, and his wife Diane asked him, "What is it that you'd really enjoy painting?" The question made him realize that what he really wanted to do was paint still lives.

Ed used to spend a lot of time with an aunt combing the countryside for antiques, and he found the clutter of old implements, dishware, furniture, and

the bric-a-brac of country stores visually arresting. He was also struck by how each object had a history, and that the character of the object in some mysterious way represented the previous owner. Thus began a series of paintings using objects in a symbolic way. Ed's understanding of symbol was more poetic and associative than it was conventional. A goblet might look like a chalice, which in turn called to mind the Last Supper and its complex of meanings—but it also was a here-and-now piece of 1930s Depression glassware, and it didn't insist on one-way sacred readings. Some of these paintings were traditional still lifes, while others deployed assembled objects in rooms and architectural interior spaces.

One of the interior paintings depicted a series of chairs arranged in a room. Ed thought of them as “thrones,” representing all of the false gods that we so easily enshrine in our lives. He painted a rather Byzantine, planar Christ, standing among the chairs, with large staring eyes.

Ed liked the painting and decided to enter it in a juried show at the Tennessee Fine Arts Center at Cheekwood in Nashville. The show was open to all artists in Tennessee, and many of Ed's professors also entered it. When one of them, Walter Stevens, saw the painting ready to be taken to the exhibition drop-off space, he questioned Ed's choice: “God, you're not going to enter that bug-eyed Christ painting, are you?”

This didn't deter Ed, who felt more than a little vindicated in his independence when the juror picked him to have a one-man exhibition at the Center the following year. Ed spent the next year preparing for the show. He was also in his first year of teaching at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky.

One weekend he took a group of paintings back to Knoxville to show to Stevens. The paintings contained more “surrogate” chairs, piled junk, and patterned wallpaper. There were also some big open white spaces around the top of one of the interior paintings. Stevens looked at the shapes for a moment and asked, “What's that?” Then a moment later he chortled, “Oh I know, that's *God!*”

This good-natured tweak, a tossed-off observation about the clarity of some things (the chairs, the junk), and the fuzziness of others in Ed's work, was received like a shaft of clean hard light cutting through a tangible but ill-defined artistic fog. It illuminated the problem of Christian content. Ed was using things, both concrete objects and formal elements like the white areas, in loosely symbolic ways. Ed's intentions were clear enough to people who knew him well, or understood something about the artistic lineage he was absorbing. But the content of the work didn't have the clarity, impact, and conviction that he was after. Like much of the visual art made in the twentieth century, his paintings were locked within a framework of personal meaning.

It was at this point that Ed began to understand that the Incarnation had implications for art. White areas deployed in a painting might be spiritually evocative, or suggest an ethereal presence of God. But they didn't really say very much about who God is, or what his presence with us means. Ed wanted something that spoke in more concrete and provocative terms—just as God spoke in more concrete and provocative terms in Christ.

This insight didn't result in an immediate change of artistic practice. But it was reinforced by his reading of Flannery O'Connor a little later on. By this time Knippers had begun a brief teaching stint at Asbury College, his alma mater. Paul Vincent, a friend on the English faculty, introduced him to O'Connor's work.

In O'Connor, Ed found both an example of what he was looking for, and a kindred spirit. O'Connor had a deep faith, but was realistic, clearminded, and unsentimental. She understood what an artist with Christian convictions was up against. Ed liked her work "because it catches you off guard," and because O'Connor was concerned with the way Christian verities are rooted within the texture and rhythms of everyday living.

Popular opinion would indicate that the "Christian verities in everyday life" look like lives lived within a kind of spiritual Saran Wrap, a prophylactic to keep good people safe from sin and pain. Intellectual opinion, on the other hand, tends to yawn and look blankly away from discussions of evil, original sin, and the human need for redemption. O'Connor argued that the Christian artist facing these distortions and denials "may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across. . . ." She also recommended "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

In 1982, Diane was invited to take a position in Washington, D.C. Ed had already quit teaching at Asbury, and was painting full-time. They moved to Arlington, Virginia, and Ed found a studio space in the Arlington Arts Center. The move to Washington gave Ed access to all of the museums, galleries, traveling exhibitions, and special collections in the nation's capitol. Since the Kennedy administration, Washington had become an important center for the arts. In the period from 1960 to 1980 several museums had opened, existing ones expanded, and the National Gallery of Art began to mount shows that rivaled or surpassed anything staged by the Metropolitan in New York. Ed spent a lot of time in the museums or special collections like the print room at the Library of Congress, particularly on summer afternoons when it was too hot to paint.

Shortly after they moved to Washington, the National Gallery opened a large show devoted to examining the influence of Caravaggio on Neapolitan painters. "Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano" began with a huge,

dynamic, and startling altarpiece by Caravaggio that depicts *The Seven Works of Mercy*.

Caravaggio's name is synonymous with the advent of the Baroque, and all of the Baroque conventions of energetic movement, dramatic light, ambiguous space, and emotional extremes were in this painting. The show was full of Christian images—Christian stories—that were charged with emotional substance. Ed was bowled over by the experience. Here was work that palpably conveyed the pressures of spiritual conflict within and upon the human body.

All of Ed's biases against the Baroque were dissolved by this show. He began to see that the theatricality of the Baroque, which is an affront to the reductionism of modernist aesthetics, sprang from the impulse to narrate a story as vividly and dramatically as possible. Here indeed were the "large and startling figures" O'Connor had called for.

After seeing the show several times, Ed knew he needed an intensive period of figure study. Figures like the staring Christ had occurred in his work, but now he wanted to use the body as a central means of expression. Figure drawing used to be at the heart of the artist's education. But that long slow apprenticeship to observation and craft did not fit the spirit of the 1960s. It was undermined by the impatient belief that study impedes self-expression. Thus figure drawing had become a marginalized activity, a cumbersome appendage in a curriculum of freedom.

Ed wasn't interested in going back to school anyway; he just wanted to spend as much time as possible drawing from models. He didn't believe he could find the situation he needed in the United States. In the late spring of 1983 he went to Paris for six weeks to draw. He found a room in a church located in the working-class quarter of St. Ouen, and worked in an open studio situation, where artists could pay by the day to draw from models. Ed drew six to eight hours a day, and completed reams of figure studies.

Right at the end of his stay, Diane flew over to Paris so the two of them could have a brief vacation together. On the last night of their stay, they went to see a new production of George Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son*. The production included the original sets painted by Rouault, and Ed was struck by how each painting fit within the entire set. It occurred to him that the drama of art could be greatly increased through making a cycle of paintings. A cycle of paintings would also expand the possibilities for developing narration.

When he returned to the States, Ed immediately began to utilize the weeks in Paris, and to digest the experiences and thinking of the last few years. He started a series of paintings dealing with the departure and return of the Prodigal Son. The paintings were on 4' x 8' sheets of luwan, a light wooden panel used in construction. They were meant to be seen together, like Rouault's sets, and to visually narrate Christ's parable of rebellion and forgiveness.

*The Departure and Return of the Prodigal Son* marks the beginning of Knippers's mature work. The *Prodigal* series contains all of the thematic, formal, and stylistic elements that he would explore and refine over the next decade. Large-scale series like the *Prodigal* have been exhibited nationally, and have given him a measure of critical recognition in the art world.

It is important to point out that Ed's development paralleled shifts in the art world. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there had been renewed interest in the figure, as well as history, myth, and narration. One manifestation of this was Neo-Expressionism, a movement with European roots (Germany, Italy) and a penchant for highly-charged images that had affinities with German Expressionism. Understandably, Ed's work has sometimes been seen in the light of Neo-Expressionist concerns.

Certainly a painting like *The Prize (Salome with the Head of John the Baptist)* [see Plate 1], with its grotesque subject, its large scale (8' x 12'), and its mannered extremes of color, light, and form, is a highly-charged image. It is part of a series on the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist. The story is ripe with possibilities for a culture that is "entertained" by the routines of sex and violence.

The painting depicts the moment when Salome presents John's head to her mother, as Herod watches, and executioners lounge in a doorway further back. The naked Salome has the beefy, used body of a wet T-shirt contestant in a biker's bar. She is sexually available and repulsive at the same time. The expressions of Herodias, Salome, and Herod suggest a slow dawning awareness of the enormous bloodless head in the extreme foreground. They also exhibit a stunned vacancy. The glazed stupefaction of the characters—Herod's red nose suggests cocaine use and Herodias lifts another glass to thick lips in a gesture that fuses a toast to John's severed head with the woozy clutch of an alcoholic—portray senses that are both engorged and anesthetized. As a result, they are able to accept the unacceptable.

For all of the horror of the painting it also has comic and absurd aspects. For instance, Ed built the character of Herodias on his memories of the "small town society lady, with all of her ideas of elegance, importance, and social control." The high-strung vanity of Herodias, outfitted like a child who has been rummaging in a dress-up box, fuses comic pretensions with dark ambitions. This idea of mixing contrasting psychological and emotional states is directly related to Baroque concerns, as is the suggestion that the physical senses mirror our moral condition.

One of the most striking—some would say oppressive—aspects of Knippers's paintings are their insistent physicality. It is found in the way he works, with his obvious love of the juicy, oleaginous properties of paint, and the tactile record of gesture and movement. But it is the oversized bodies—fleshy, sweaty, and



often wounded—that really command our attention. Though the size and musculature of the figures suggest artistic forbears like Michelangelo and Rubens, these are not the ideal bodies of classicism.

What is particularly disturbing to some people is that the figures in the Biblical narratives are usually nude. *The Pest House (Christ Heals the Sick)* [see Plate 2] is one of a series of paintings about the character of Christ. It presents a nude Christ, his back to us, turning from his ministrations to a figure on his left who is writhing in agony. He is reaching out to touch a standing man whose body is covered with Kaposi's Sarcoma, the skin cancer frequently associated with AIDS—our contemporary version of leprosy. The few other figures in the painting sprawl and writhe, or shrink back into the darkness, in fearful anticipation of Christ's visit. And then there is a particularly disturbing corpse, evidently advanced in decay, lying on a table in the right foreground.

Thematically, Ed's painting owes something to Antoine Gros's *Napoleon in the Pest House of Jaffé*. This nineteenth-century Romantic painting was based on a visit of Napoleon's to French troops afflicted with the plague. Gros had Napoleon touching one of the soldiers, with the clear implication that Napoleon was a Christ-figure. In fact, Gros's painting is a good example of the Romantic appropriation of Christian iconography.

With the *Pest House* Knippers turns a Romantic source back on its own Christian roots. More importantly, though, the painting turns back our romantic picture of Christ as the great fixer. Although the light on the ravaged body Christ reaches toward suggests that something supernatural is happening, we see no easy healing. The painting's central concern is with a different and more difficult order of miracle. The painting shows Christ with us—in the flesh—ministering to a sick and infirm humanity as much through his willingness to share our circumstances as through his ability to get us out of this pest house. It is neither a painting nor a theology designed to support desires for an easy and painless visit from “the great physician.”

It is interesting to note that the centrality of the body in Knippers's work assumes the centrality of the body in Christian theology. Basic Christian affirmations like the Apostle's Creed are full of references—“born of the Virgin Mary. . . was crucified. . . arose from the dead. . . resurrection of the body”—to the flesh. Yet the importance and role of the body in Christian thought has not checked the human impulse to separate spirit from flesh, and to insist on the superiority and priority of the “spiritual” apart from the material world. This abstracted view of spirituality is well established in modern art, stretching back to the work and ideas of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian. It is what Ed rejected when he turned to Biblical narratives.

Many American Christians, particularly conservative Protestant Christians, are profoundly uncomfortable with the body. Protestant theology, being Pauline in

its orientation, stresses that the body is something to be “tamed,” and that the appetites and passions of the flesh wage war on the life of the spirit. So Ed’s paintings stand in the Catholic tradition in art (due in part to the paucity of available Protestant models), which is both theologically and practically more comfortable with the body. But even though Ed’s paintings represent Christian stories familiar to all conservative Protestants, they have had an uneasy reception in the tradition that nurtured him.

Last fall Ed opened an exhibit at Huntington College, a conservative Protestant school in Indiana. The show, “Passionate Grace,” included paintings from a series on the Passion of Christ, like the recent *The Crowning of Thorns (Christ is Mocked)* and *John and Mary Wash the Body of Our Lord*. Compared to the *Pest House* or *The Prize* these paintings are relatively sedate. The palette is darker, and inflected with a warm silvery light that owes something to Ed’s exposure to shows of Poussin and Titian at the National Gallery. As befits the subject matter, the emotional tenor is more somber than the earlier paintings.

In *The Crowning* [see Plate 3] Christ crouches in the foreground, locked in a great compositional X, as the blows and anger of his torturers press down upon him. A wine glass, with references to both the cup that He must drink and the cup of the blood shed for many, is perched on a rock in the foreground. Christ’s body is lovingly painted in thin glazes of color, and is covered with a skein of bruises and cuts.

This same body, whitened and grayed in death, sprawls across the two panels of *John and Mary Wash the Body of Our Lord* [see Plate 4]. Christ’s arms are distorted and enlarged by the crucifixion. The left arm embraces Mary while the right arm, its hand beckoning, circles towards John. As John watches, Mary washes Christ’s body. In a tender evocation of the limits of human nurture, Mary’s bare breast presses against Christ’s lifeless body. Her gesture to give life through her flesh is stymied by the deadness of death.

The administration of Huntington College knew that there might be some risks with Ed’s show, but they believed the works’ content and artistic merit would allay criticism. When the show was unpacked, there was concern that the painting of Mary and John washing Christ’s body would offend some people.

Ed agreed to keep the painting out of the show. Because of a groundswell of controversy the administration assembled a group of faculty members to preview the show. They wanted to assess the risk of mounting the show in a conservative community, given the fact that the gallery is visited by people from the surrounding area as much as it is by the college community. After looking at the work the committee thought the educational and artistic merits of the work would overcome negative criticism.

Ed stayed for the opening and talked to anyone who wanted to discuss his paintings. Many people expressed support for what he was doing and he left the

school thinking that the work had managed to overcome the objections of the squeamish and easily offended. But the complaints did not die down. The administration found itself facing increasingly vocal opposition to the show, both from the student body and the larger community. Finally, with reluctance, the school closed the exhibit five days after it opened.

In the gallery director's letter to Ed explaining the decision to close the show, he remarked that "docetism is alive and well, in spite of our insistence that we believe in Jesus' full humanity." The director thought that the criticisms of the paintings, which often centered on questions of historical and Biblical accuracy, were actually motivated by "discomfort with seeing Jesus so human." Certainly a nude, gendered Jesus confronts viewers with the humanness of Christ in a fundamentally different way than the Sunday School work books and stained glass windows that are the staples of American Christian visual experience.

But there are other reasons to portray the Biblical characters as unclothed, beyond a desire to strip away the fig leaves of familiarity and doctrinal reification. All artists who have worked with biblical material have had to make choices about how to portray the events. Some artists—the pre-Raphaelite Holman Hunt is an extreme example—have tried to faithfully reconstruct the artifacts and landscape of first-century Palestine. Others, like many fifteenth-century Netherlandish painters, dressed characters and set stories within the styles and environments of their own culture.

By using nudes and setting the stories in general, loosely described landscapes or interiors, Ed is able to concentrate his and the viewer's attention on the narrative. His goal is not the appearance of accuracy, with its attention to the facts of anatomy, dress, and locale. Rather, Ed wants to serve the narrative and unfold its meaning by creating a visually compelling drama. He believes that artists create a poetic parallel to reality, and his idea of being faithful to his subject is guided more by Matisse's maxim that "truth is not exactitude" than it is by any idea of scrupulous transcription.

But conservative Christians are not the only group to react negatively to Knippers's work. His acceptance and continuation of the great Western Christian traditions in art have been a stumbling block for some people. There is some hostility to this tradition in the art world and in contemporary culture. Ed recalls the director of a well-known gallery in Washington telling him that while he loved Ed's work, he'd never exhibit it because it would "mark the gallery." This view has also affected audiences one might expect to support Ed's work.

In the fall of 1991, Ed was invited to place a painting at the Festival Center. The Festival Center is a community center, a "servant workshop school" for inner city and social justice ministries, and a conference and meeting facility affiliated with the Church of the Savior. The Church of the Savior is a large, urban church in Washington, D.C. with a record of support for the arts and a

liberal social agenda.

Outside of the Festival Center is a sculpture of Christ washing someone's feet, an image that speaks of the center's dedication to service. A friend in the Church of the Savior knew that one of Ed's paintings, *The Foot Washing (Christ and His Disciples)* [see front cover], depicted the same subject. She arranged for the painting to be placed in the Center, with the understanding that the Center might buy the painting.

Part of the arrangement included an evening where Ed talked about his work to the staff and members of the Festival Center. The talk went well. In the question-and-answer session afterwards, one person asked Ed about his reliance on the Western European tradition, and his appreciation of other cultural traditions. Ed responded by saying that he worked within the European tradition because it was his tradition, and that he didn't really know other traditions well. He went on to suggest that people from other cultures couldn't fully understand his work without knowing something about the arts and ideas of Western culture.

Because of this, some people perceived Ed to be slighting the achievements of other cultures. David Welsh, a staff member, says that Ed seemed insensitive to other cultures, which was problematic for a ministry in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. Welsh explained that Euro-American art was over-represented at the Center anyway.

Welsh admired *The Foot Washing*, which pictures a crouching Christ surrounded by a semi-circle of five disciples. Christ twists to wring out a rag in a bowl to his left while the disciple in the immediate left foreground wipes his just-cleansed foot. The disciple behind him seems to be gesturing as if to restrain Christ, while the group in the painting's right express some consternation that Jesus might occupy himself with such a demeaning task.

People agreed that the painting looked great in the space, and that its content was appropriate for the center. The nudity of the six figures was not offensive to anyone at the center. According to Welsh the only problem with the painting was that it depicted Christ in the heroic tradition of Western art, which is "associated with the domination of other cultures." Welsh said that it was a committee of white people that brought Ed's paintings in, and they—along with Ed—had not been sufficiently sensitive to the sensibilities of other groups. So Welsh, along with a few other staff and community members, successfully argued that *The Foot Washing* should be removed. A few days after Ed's talk, the painting was returned to his studio.

While the issues are different, the similarity to the situation at Huntington College is striking. In both instances people recognized the quality of Ed's work, but felt that the work presented a danger to the community because it was an affront to sensitive members in the community. In both instances the

decision to remove the work was made by a few people on behalf of the many. There are of course differences—there was more public outcry at Huntington, and the decision at Festival Center seems to have been less carefully deliberated. But in both cases it was questions of politics, not art, that determined the fate of the work.

The point of relating these encounters is not to suggest that Ed Knippers continues in the tradition of the avant-garde. That myth, founded on the struggles of Courbet and Manet with the salons, exists today only as a ritualized parody in the battles over public funding for artists. The point is that Knippers has created a singular body of work that stands in a tradition and yet approaches Biblical content from a fresh direction. It confounds the expectations of people who insist on either the decorum of tradition, or the nostrums of the moment.

In 1986, Ed was one of four artists included in an exhibit called “Setting the Stage” at the Los Angeles County Museum. The show’s premise was that the artists included all made work that was theatrical in nature. In the catalog essay Howard Fox, a curator at the museum, concluded his discussion of Knippers’s work by noting that: “Through his painting, Knippers creates a visual metaphor for his devout faith in Christ’s humanity as well as his divinity, a painterly corollary of the artist’s belief in the presentness of the Savior in the world.” This is still true.