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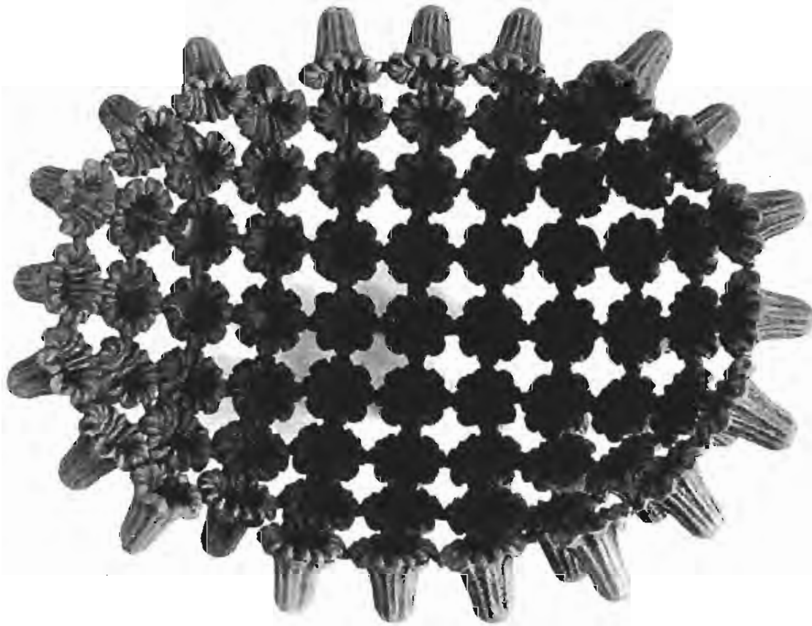

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PLATE 7. Eleanor Dickinson. **Crucifixion of Renée,** *1990. Pastel on velvet. 66 x 53 inches.*

PLATE 12. Eleanor Dickinson. **Crucifixion of Winston,** *1990. Pastel on velvet. 83 x 53 inches.*

SCOTT DRISCOLL

Eleanor Dickinson's Portraits of the Soul

IT'S SUMMER, 1966. A muggy night in Knoxville. In a field away from city lights, a revival tent has been pitched. Hand-drawn cardboard signs staked into the grass warn *Repent!* and *These Are The Last Days.* The circus-sized canvas tent is dimly lit by thirty and forty-watt bulbs. Several dozen worshippers sit in deep shadow, their uplifted arms bathed in light. The preacher, microphone in hand, moves among them, inviting repentant sinners to "hit the sawdust trail," to come forward and join the others who've been saved at the mourners' bench.

Similar scenes are repeated in small towns with names like Yoakum Hollow, Sunset Gap, and Dark Greasy Creek, in Kentucky, North Carolina, the Virginias, and eastern Tennessee—where Eleanor Creekmore Dickinson, touted by art critic and historian Helga Epstein as "one of the foremost draftsmen in the United States," was born and raised.

In her mid-thirties, Dickinson was struggling to forge her identity as an artist. She was working with Walter Hopps, then director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to put together a show with dancers as models, when she attended a revival meeting in Knoxville. She'd attended revival meetings before, as a curious observer, but "Something different happened that night," she remembers.

She sits on a metal folding chair behind the organ, where she can remain inconspicuous. Sketchpad, ink, and pen ready, she watches a twelve-year-old girl begin her walk to the mourner's bench. The girl never makes it there. She falls onto her back, shuddering, in thrall to a powerful emotion. Women in plain smocks and wilted print dresses, their hair swept up into bouffant 'dos, huddle around her.

"Come on," they call out. "You can do it."

The preacher watches. The worshippers are on their feet, the feeble light outlining their upraised arms in sharp chiaroscuro.

"Oh, come into me, Holy Ghost," the girl suddenly screams. Her body goes stiff as a board. She lies unmoving for what Dickinson recalls as ten to fifteen minutes. Elders lay on hands and pray. When she awakens, the girl is speaking in tongues. No one in the tent seems surprised.

"The feeling that night was of an intense emotion surrounded by black," Dickinson recalls. "It was dark, very claustrophobic, dense. I'd seen a lot of people saved, but that night was different. There was this emotional intensity that I knew I wanted to find a way to capture.... I talked to Walter and created a show on the spot. I told him I wanted to work with what I had seen. He said okay."

Walter Hopps trusted her to follow her intuition, and four years later the first *Revival!* show was held in 1970 at the Corcoran. A second show appeared in 1974. The Smithsonian Institute would then send *Revival!* on a six-year national tour, establishing Dickinson's reputation as an artist-cum-anthropologist driven to document a vanishing culture.

Over the next twenty-five years, Dickinson would drive thousands of miles on rural back roads in search of meetings, carting drawing materials and, later, recording equipment. What she saw would inspire three decades of shows that would cement her standing as one of America's leading figure painters.

When she first began the *Revival!* project, she had training and drafting technique, and she had a subject that excited her passion and gave her a focus, but she lacked a method, a medium that could carry the intensity she sought. Out in the countryside in the lower Appalachians, "along twisted, little chopped-up roads," Dickinson encountered people who assumed, when she introduced herself as an artist, that she painted on black velvet. "That was the only art they'd ever seen. It was probably trucked in from Mexico and was usually Elvis crying, pictures of the Last Supper, or Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. I thought it was amusing at first, but I decided to give it a try."

In 1967 at her studio in San Francisco, she began experimenting with a surface most art consumers and critics associate with kitsch. She found she liked black velvet because it reflects no light, and the smooth finish doesn't show the ridges of the threads the way other cloths, even canvas, can. But would it hold up?

After years of trying and rejecting various velvets, sometime around 1975 Dickinson found a densely woven cotton velvet that would both hold paint and stand up archivally; the paint wouldn't crack or crawl. She found that if she treated the back of this velvet with hot rabbit-skin glue, letting the glue ooze into the fibers, the paint would only hit the tips of the outside of the fibers. She says, "I discovered velvet was really a perfectly good ground cursed with a bad reputation."

She started working in oils, using short-haired red sable brushes with Windsor Newton pigment in "flesh," a diluted pinkish brown. She avoided bright, chromatic oils, which she says tend to look gaudy on black velvet. In the late seventies, she switched from oil to chalk pastel stick because she wanted to capture her subjects more quickly, in one session if possible. She discovered to her pleasure that with pastels she could use pure color: "[With pastels], I can try for extremes of chiaroscuro, feathering the colors from the highlighted figures into

the black. The pure coloring on the dense space of extreme black recapitulates the extremes of emotion."

Dickinson later began to move away from contour drawings and toward the foreshortened figures isolated against black ground that would become her signature style. The shift came in part when a dancer and friend, a teacher in the Bay Area, was raped. The rapist broke the woman's hip, and to cope with the chronic pain, she needed drugs she couldn't buy over the counter. Desperate for relief from pain, she invited her drug dealer to move in with her. Then she turned up pregnant, apparently from the rape.

Recalls Dickinson: "At one point, she told me, she was so despairing she fell down on her knees and begged God to take her life." After the child was born, she kicked the dealer out and asked Dickinson to paint her for her *Crucifixion* series. "I painted her holding the child. She looks like Wonder Woman in the painting. That was how she felt. She'd come through her suffering to the other side" [see Plate 7].

Dickinson's use of figures etched out of a black void inspired Debra R. Parr of the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* to compare her work to Caravaggio's, particularly to the old master's extremes of dark and light in *The Conversion of Saint Paul.* Dickinson appreciates the comparison, though she admits that the painters she admired in her formative years—Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, and Hans Holbein—attracted her not for their use of light so much as because they succeeded, to her mind, in drawing the "soul of the person."

With black velvet, she felt she'd found a unique means of showing the soul. By the time she moved to the *Crucifixion* series, she knew she had "the medium and the message in an ideal fit."

Born in 1931, Dickinson grew up in the heyday of abstract expressionism, but was unwilling to turn away from her love of figure drawing. As an adolescent, she'd taught herself to draw by wandering Knoxville in pursuit of the human figure: she sneaked into blue-light tents at traveling fairs to sketch strippers, visited illegal cockfights, and followed the wrestling circuit, drawing vivid personalities like Gorgeous George. Later, as a student of art at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, she won contests with her representational paintings.

In the early fifties, she and her husband moved with their three children to San Francisco for his work. There Dickinson was exposed to the then current post-painterly trends best characterized by Diebenkorn's flat figures in abstract fields, work that tried to merge the figurative with the abstract. She was not above experimenting herself. By her own reckoning, she'd set out to "redefine drawing" in the fifties and early sixties, making figures forty-eight feet high and drawing with a sky-writing airplane—creating work that was more "happening" than frameable art.

It was during a summer visit home to Knoxville with the kids that she first got the idea of drawing revival meetings. She happened to drive by a tent one night, and her attention was caught by the way the meager light carved negative space out of the surrounding dark. Curious, remembering revivals from her childhood, she came back with a sketch pad and asked the preacher's permission to draw during the meeting. He was dubious. He knew very well that much of the outside world viewed his end-of-the-world brand of Pentecostalism with skepticism. After looking at some of her work, he decided that her intentions were sincere (it certainly helped that she could sing the hymns by heart) and agreed to let her draw during the service, if she would promise to stay out of the way. She estimates that her way was also smoothed by the fact that she had Pentecostal cousins in many nearby towns who would vouch for her.

Critics wrote that Dickinson was intent on documenting a vanishing culture—according to them, a dubious artistic aim—but this assessment is off the mark for two reasons. "That culture isn't vanishing," she says. "It's only the revival tents that seem to be disappearing. There are sixty to seventy million evangelicals in the United States who still have revivals." They're everywhere, she says, including the Bay Area where she lives, not just in the rural South. By her count, one in four adult Americans is an evangelical Christian. The world she documented in the sixties and seventies was not then and is not now in danger of disappearing.

More importantly, any anthropological goal of recording their subculture was only incidental to her ongoing fascination with the revivalists as individual human subjects. Drawn by what she sees as an irresolvable conflict at the heart of their identity, she would look to them as the core inspiration for two major shows, *The Mark of the Beast* (1981 to 1990) and *Crucifixion* (1987 to 1994).

Dickinson would get to know some of her subjects personally, and to understand their experience of God.

> They're mostly people trying to be good in what they believe to be the devil's world.... They describe the experience [of being saved] as feeling like a warm bath coming over them. They feel actually possessed by God. This is pretty traumatic for them. It's a big change of life they go through.

Post conversion, having become God's temple, the saved person must eschew all impure acts, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, dancing, and fornication. Pentecostals earnestly accept their calling to bring back an old-style morality.

Dickinson admits that though she was saved and baptized when she was ten, she never felt the calling in the same way that many of these people did. "It just didn't happen," she says from the distance of her studio nearly forty years later. "I'd reach out, but no one ever reached back." She muses that "the rational part of my mind was fighting the emotional."

In response, she developed an interest in people for whom the emotional

dominates the rational. This polarity, the extreme disjunction between their experience of what for them is an immoral world, a world ripe with the devil's temptations, and their perception of their mission in it, lays bare the sufferings and ecstasies of the soul. It's the sufferings and ecstasies of the soul that Dickinson is after. And these are what she captures in a way no one else does.

Dickinson was raised Southern Baptist in what she considered a religious home. Though her family later switched to the Episcopal Church, and though her father, a lawyer, stopped going to services and her mother wrote poetry, her parents' intellectualism was tempered with religion. They kept an altar at home, sent the kids to Sunday school, and prayed together whenever they traveled.

Depression-era woes compelled the Creekmore family to move in with Eleanor's maternal grandparents when Eleanor was very young. Her grandfather, Walter VanGilder, made stained glass and donated his pieces to churches in the area. Her grandmother, Ellen Rachel Bolli VanGilder, was an amateur painter who graduated from the University of Chicago in the 1890s with a degree in carpentry and furniture design, but never strayed far from the house in Knoxville once she was married. This driven woman, harboring thwarted artistic desires, probably exerted a strong influence on young Eleanor.

Their house was a thirty-room Queen Anne Victorian built in the 1840s, with two towers and passageways between walls, "a real Charles Adams spooky house," Dickinson recalls. It stood a mere block from the University of Tennessee campus, where Dickinson would later earn a bachelor's degree in art. Her family's social standing probably liberated them from worrying much about other peoples' opinions, and the strange, dark house was sufficient fuel for the imagination of a curious child. While her mother was busy raising the other siblings, her grandmother noticed that Eleanor showed an aptitude for drawing at as early as two. In her granddaughter, Ellen saw "a second chance at art," and made Eleanor her protégé, schooling her in a melting pot of religious influences, from Rosicrucian to Southern Baptist to "The Great I Am." Her influence was also practical: she recognized the dearth of art school options for a young woman in Knoxville and paid for Eleanor to attend National Cathedral School, a private school in Washington, D.C.

"That really saved my life," Dickinson says. "I grew up thinking I was a weirdo. At school in D.C., I saw a lot of people like me"—that is, people unhampered by the constraints of being a proper southern girl with a sugarcoated view of the world.

Dickinson first realized she had a more than ordinary talent for drawing and painting when she won a gold medal from the city while a high-school student in Washington. She had submitted a small oil painting of a night-club scene, with dancers. She had never been in a night club, but she needed only a visit to the

Eleanor Dickinson. **Nothing Can for Sin Atone, Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,** *1968. Ink on paper. 46 x 35 inches. Collection of Scott Huston, Knoxville, Tennessee.*

theater as research. For the rest, she pulled from her teenage experience sketching at fairs and farmers markets. While studying art at the University of Tennessee, she won the top prize in the Knoxville Art Fair's annual show, the Harold Davis Memorial Award, competing against her teachers.

"It was just a painting of an old bum, standing against a wall on Gay Street in Knoxville. I did the drawing while he stood there." She guesses it wasn't so much the subject as the authenticity of the mood that impressed the judges.

After marrying, she continued her art education at the San Francisco Art Institute. From 1971 to 2001 she taught at the California College of Arts and Crafts, now the California College of the Arts, in Oakland. In her own work, as well as in her teaching, she would never stray from her interest in the emotional aspects of the human figure.

In September of 1970, the first *Revival!* show thrust Dickinson onto the national scene. It opened at Knoxville's Dulin Gallery, then moved to the Corcoran in Washington. The accompanying book, co-written by Dickinson and Barbara Benziger, was published in 1974 and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. It includes a forward by Walter Hopps, who'd left the Corcoran to take over as curator of twentieth-century art at the Smithsonian. He wrote: "Eleanor Dickinson has been deservedly acknowledged as one of the country's most powerful artists committed to figure drawing."

In that show, Dickinson set out to reproduce the "ambience of the southern summer revival meeting" in a museum setting. It included one hundred contour drawings in ink on white paper, most three by four feet, though a few were as large as six feet, all done on site at revival meetings. These spare drawings showed worshippers, preachers, and snake-handlers, portraits of the suffering seeking redemption. But *Revival!* was more than a collection of drawings. In the gallery space, Dickinson set up rows of folding metal chairs with hymnals and fans that she had purchased during her visits, arranged exactly as they would be at the real thing—in fact, she went to such lengths to replicate the details that she came to regard her show as a real revival. It included Bibles, religious posters, road signs announcing meetings, and a twelve-foot red and white banner that read, *Lord Send a Revival,* as well as a six-hour collage of audio recordings of hymns, praying, and preaching. She recalls:

> The audio tape was kept playing. I put ads in the local newspapers announcing a revival at the Corcoran. Preachers came to preach. Their congregations showed up. People got saved. The ecstasy was alive there at the exhibit.

Far from being put off by this unusual use of museum space, the viewing public loved it. "Attendance went way up," Dickinson remembers. *Newsweek*

Eleanor Dickinson. **Just as I Am without One Plea,** *1969. Ink on paper. 27 x 23 inches. Collection of the Library of Congress.*

reported unusual interest in a "happening" at the museum. Even thirty-five years later, Dickinson takes pride in the show's authentic recreation of the feeling of the revival. "The janitor at the Dulin Gallery, a preacher himself, told me I'd succeeded in bringing God back into the museum," she says. She thinks the intensity people felt resided not so much in her drawings as in the "happening."

A sampling of the early *Revival!* contour drawings shows a fierce-eyed young preacher pointing a warning finger accusingly at the viewer, pious women kneeling together in prayer, the washing of feet, men standing expectantly in a river, believers handling snakes, plainly dressed families, young men alone and looking sorrowful. They are sketched without exaggeration; there is no irony in the way she portrays her subjects. In conversation, she's very clear about this: she showed them as she saw them. The drawings have the air of documentation rather than comment.

The figures appear to occupy space, though drawn with a minimalist economy of line to rival the best of late Matisse. While exceptional in a formal sense, they are most notable for the emotions they observe—in the baleful cast of an eye, the lift of a weary head, the bend of a back weighed down by trouble, a mouth open in rapturous wonder. What they seem to lack, seen in light of her later work, is the power to move beyond surface observation, to go deeper.

Later additions to the series, especially after she'd begun experimenting with oil on black velvet, would become more painterly, like the fervently knotted hands in *Praying in the Tent* or *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?* which shows a preacher with both hands raised, fingers stretched taut, mouth open and head pulled back as if calling out to the sinner to repent before it's too late. Other oil-on-velvet works from this period include *Lord, Send that Old Time Pow'r* and *How Great Thou Art* [see Plates 8 and 9].

Even in these works, Dickinson's aim seems to have been accuracy of portrayal rather than intensity of emotion, and the figures seem more reflective than anguished. It's as though Dickinson's respect for their piety persuaded her to go easy on them, not to probe their inner lives too closely.

The second *Revival!* show appeared in 1974. It included more photos, drawings, and artifacts, but with the "happening" aspect removed; the folding chairs and audio tapes and revival announcements were gone, leaving instead a more conventional art show. And in it, Dickinson began to explore new, riskier territory.

Lovers is a six-foot tall contour drawing in acrylic on canvas of two nudes, gender indeterminate, pulled together by a thick rope. Studio sessions allowed her to go further into these subjects' emotional lives than she could when drawing on site. The work seems to push beneath the surface story to get at a purer expression of feeling. There is tension between the figures, a pulling away as much as a pulling together. The rope cuts a swath between them. One leans back,

Eleanor Dickinson. **O Lord, Send the Pow'r Just Now,** *1972. Ink on paper. 45 x 35 inches.*

hauling at the rope that encircles the other's legs. The other figure, supine, head thrown back, pulls at the rope as if to relieve tension. Their postures evoke paired opposites: being saved and being captured; wanting escape and wanting a lifeline. The work's intensity resides in this dualism. In Dickinson's career, it represents a key step away from observation and toward personal statement.

Lovers became part of a series of contour drawings of paired nudes in ink on white paper that showed at the Fine Art Museum of San Francisco and other venues, and that marked a new trend in Dickinson's work. Her subjects were often elderly and overweight, and Dickinson did not shy away from details that a viewer accustomed to renaissance ideals of beauty would find repulsively ordinary: a rolling paunch here, flabby breasts there. The drawings are edgier and more intimately personal than those of the revival tents. More of the angst and woe—and at the same time warmth and desire—of her subjects is on display. We see that which makes them particular. Working in the privacy of her studio, Dickinson began to dig for the story beneath the surface.

As models, she chose people who lived without the protections others take for granted: a reformed drug addict, an unemployed dry drunk living in a flophouse, a young single mother relying on the food bank. In the studio, she listened to their stories: "I traveled through their images of pain to their concomitant shape of praise or hope.... I became one with them." As the boundaries blurred, Dickinson felt she was able to receive her subjects' emotions and render them two-dimensionally.

The following series, *Mark of the Beast,* brought her back to that emotional intensity that had inspired her back on that night in Knoxville. Dickinson recalls a passage from the Book of Revelation that describes how Satan will cause all people, "both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads, so that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."

On one level, says Dickinson, this series is about Pentecostals' fear of the imminent end of the world. She describes their belief that in the last days there will come a world ruler, the beast in disguise. Everyone will have to take his sign on the hand or forehead, and without the mark, no one will be able to get a job or buy groceries. In the seventies, many Pentecostals saw the mark in the Universal Pricing Codes, the barcodes stamped on processed goods [see Plate 11]. They believed that people who refused the mark, who refused to participate in that immoral economy, would be saved, though they would remain marginally employed and poor. At the end of the beast's time, Dickinson says, they believe they will be raptured up into heaven, and Jesus will come back and condemn to hell everyone who has accepted the mark.

Appreciation of the series doesn't require a belief in the apocalypse, claims

Dickinson: "On another level, these paintings of unique people may be seen as shadows of universal human situations.... Dealing with crises, whether personal or of the world, is perhaps the greatest challenge for all of us."

Alice Thorson of the *Washington Times* describes the figures in this series, and in the *Crucifixion* series that would follow, as "excruciating images of human vulnerability, naked, in the darkness, at times so battered by physical and spiritual travails that their very viscera come through the skin."

This rawness makes a radical departure from the *Revival!* drawings. Amid portrait busts holding skulls, anguished, skeletal figures stand in isolation, struggling with the devil for control of their souls. One painting, titled simply *Mark of the Beast,* shows a figure whose chest is a black void, the legs nothing but sinew and bone. The arms are crossed and wrenched overhead, as though to shield the supplicant from a torturer.

Most of the early works in the series were nineteen by twenty-six inches, pastel or ink or acrylic on paper. Later, as the show made the rounds to museums, she added fifteen or twenty studio portraits in oil on black velvet. The more twisted portrayals caused some critics to recoil, so vivid were the emotions.

But even the more sedate portraits in the series show an increased engagement with her subjects, a stronger bond to what they were feeling. *Earth, Earth, Earth: Hear the Word of the Lord!* shows a fully fleshed out, clothed bust of a woman with head raised, eyes closed, hands lifted to either side of her shoulders in ecstatic surrender. The portrait conveys the earnestness of the subject, the purity of her desire for salvation. The viewer needn't believe in the prophecy of the final coming to feel its emotional charge [see Plate 10].

Even to a viewer for whom the Pentecostal vision of the last days is only a metaphor, or only fiction, these works have power. If this is storytelling, then it's storytelling at its best. Neither cryptic nor ironic, the paintings tell a tale with a twisted heart. These are stories of gothic horror and empyrean joy. Troubling to contemplate, they may also offer viewers an opportunity for empathy, when much of modernist art leaves them cold.

The *Crucifixion* series draws inspiration Christ's injunction in Luke that all of us carry our own personal crosses through life. Parr sees in these paintings "suffering and the reminders of suffering figured as internalized and passionate, the subjective wrestling with personal tragedies...which sadly repeat for so many people, at least metaphorically, the sufferings of Jesus on the cross." The extreme foreshortening often thrusts the feet foremost—Parr describes the feet as "grotesquely large," though anatomically they aren't exaggerated—and sees in the prominent feet and seemingly distended anatomy a "theatrical, even hyperbolic technique" that conveys the intensity Dickinson was after.

This series mainly features lone figures laid out as if on crosses, with the

viewer at their feet, looking up past them toward the dark beyond. *Crucifixion of Winston* is typical of the series. We see the sinewy flesh, knobby joints, outsized feet pulled together, arms outstretched—a pose reminiscent of conventional crucifixion paintings [see Plate 12]. The head, seen from below, is turned to one side, the facial expression one of anguish or enduring sorrow. There is a sense of bearing up the weight of a Sisyphean burden. A red cloth is draped beneath the figure, but there is no actual cross. Rather than fixating on the idea of Winston as martyr, the viewer is invited to concentrate on what makes him human. Dickinson has journeyed a long way from her original inspiration in the tent in Knoxville in 1966. Here the pursuit of emotional and psychological truth has all but erased the *Revival!* series' more documentary engagement with its subjects.

The *Crucifixion* series was kept small, only thirty pieces altogether, most seven by ten-foot pastels on black velvet. The collection made the rounds nationally, stopping in the Bay Area at the Belcher Street Studios before moving on to Sacramento, Houston, Saint Louis, the University of Tennessee, and Gallery 10 in Washington, D.C.

Dickinson takes a fairly prosaic approach in explaining her plunge into such personal statements of suffering. After going to so many revivals, "I ran out of things to say at the meetings," she says. Her quest, however, remained unchanged. "By doing the people on the crosses, I'm trying to understand what happened that was awful." One subject, an old tenement-dweller who'd had his social security check stolen, impressed her with the buoyancy of his spirit, even in his desperation. "The crucifixions are about people going through bad experiences, but breaking through to some form of ecstasy beyond that."

Dickinson chose the large format in order "to put you right at the foot of the cross," and worked exclusively in pastels because they allowed quick execution. Oils require meticulous brushstrokes, forcing her to spend hours working pigment into the shadows and light. "I grabbed pastel chalk instead so I could get to the emotions much faster, without feeling held back by small brush strokes."

According to *Artweek,* the most memorable work in the series may be *Crucifixion of Dan* (1991), "a portrait of the longest-living AIDS patient in San Francisco...and an inspiration for all afflicted with terminal illness." Following the onset of his illness, Dan went on to get a masters degree in social work and set up an AIDS switchboard. According to Dickinson, he was the first AIDS patient in San Francisco and one of the first in the US. He lived six and a half years after his diagnosis and died the day before he was to do another sitting for her.

The painting shows a reclining figure tilted slightly toward the viewer, as though on a cross being slowly raised from the horizontal. His knees are bent away from the viewer; his feet are together, waiting for the spike. His hands clasp over a bony chest as though to touch a pained heart. The head, seen from below, is turned to a three-quarter view, the eyes closed. The slightly opened mouth

suggests the exhaustion of one too worn down by unremitting pain to cry out. The perspective exaggerates the cavities around the eyes and the bones of the cheek in a manner reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec's dancers. The unflattering view evokes something unwell, or heroic, depending on the source of light. Here the light comes from above and to one side, à la Rembrandt, rather than from below, à la Lautrec.

The flesh tones are surprisingly warm, and beneath and behind the figure are broad strokes of scarlet, a cloth in tatters perhaps, draped over something box-like that could be the corner of a coffin. It's both a realistic and a nakedly disturbing look at suffering on the threshold of death. Yet, by bathing her subject in light, Dickinson manages to convey a sense that Dan may be dying but not lost. His death is not without hope. Perhaps it is only the viewer, watching the cross lift, who is in a position to see this. Dan has surrendered to the inevitable, but we see that his suffering has not been in vain. Dickinson gives Dan enduring life that we may see through the soul of his torment to his transfiguration in faith.

Since the *Crucifixion* series, Dickinson's work has crossed into the political realm. She recently executed *Abu Ghraib,* a ten-foot pastel on black velvet version of the familiar image of a man standing on the box, hood over his head, electrical wires clamped on his penis and fingers. Most recently, she's been at work on a series depicting the Haitian drive for independence. "I'm not shifting away from my interest in extremes of emotion," she says. Though her current subject may be "more political, and conceptual," her passion remains unchanged: to isolate, to understand, and finally to portray, through images of the body, those feelings that overwhelm our powers of reason.

"In these poignant, self-contained images," wrote Peter Selz in *Art in America,* "Dickinson has managed to universalize individual distress and hope: in Wittgenstein's words, 'the human body is the best image of the human soul.'" What began on that Knoxville night in that tent years ago—in the poor light, amid the folding chairs, paper fans, and hymnals, surrounded by arms uplifted in ecstasy—continued as a life-long exploration of emotional intensity. Eleanor Dickinson has devoted her life to finding a way to show the sufferings and joys of the human soul.