

## Simon Dinnerstein: Artist in the Round

by Doug Turetsky

*Any strong piece of art should be accessible to the laborer as well as the university*

**professor** comments Artist Simon Dinnerstein, waving his hands as if he could wipe out so much of today's art. "A person like well-known American artist Phillip Pearlstein would say, 'There is no subject, there's just the medium.' The way the figures are cut off it's sort of like taking the emotion and vacuuming it out of the picture."

But Dinnerstein defies such popular trends in art, seeking instead to capture what he terms "the roundness of the person." Dinnerstein plainly states his conviction: "I think the most interesting thing in art is pictures and drawings of people." Most of Dinnerstein's works are portraits, and the physical representation of his subjects are an expression of this spiritual or emotional roundness.

Dinnerstein's own background has something of a well-roundedness to it. Unlike many artists who have much formal training, Dinnerstein spent just three years as an art student at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. He grew up in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville and graduated from The City College of New York in 1965 with a B.A. in history. While he always enjoyed art, it wasn't until his junior year in college that he began his art studies. "I felt that I wanted something that would lift me up, give me a real passion for doing something, sweep me away." He found the liberal arts disciplines that he'd been studying too limiting. "The art seemed to take up the different kinds of disciplines that used all the different parts of me."

His work gained quick recognition, and in 1970 he was awarded a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship to Germany. During his year in Germany he painted what remains one of his most outstanding works, "The Fulbright Triptych." This immense 6-foot-7 by 13-foot painting depicts Dinnerstein, his wife and young daughter against a backdrop of many of the artifacts and influences in Dinnerstein's life. John Russell, *The New York Times* art critic, wrote of the triptych: "It succeeds as an echo chamber, as a scrupulous representation of a suburb in the sticks, as a portrait of young people who are trying to



make an honorable go of life and as an inventory of the kinds of things that in 1975 give such people a sense of their own identity."

The triptych, like many of Dinnerstein's more recent works, reveals a pictorial translation of the many influences upon our lives. Many of Dinnerstein's recent drawings have little scenes of daily life floating dream-like, in a negation of real-time, above the head of the subjects of the portrait. "We are the sum total of pictures and images of our families," Dinnerstein reflects. But there are other influences and experiences which shape our lives as well, and Dinnerstein tries to "deal with the baggage of the person, and what they bring with them" in his portraits.

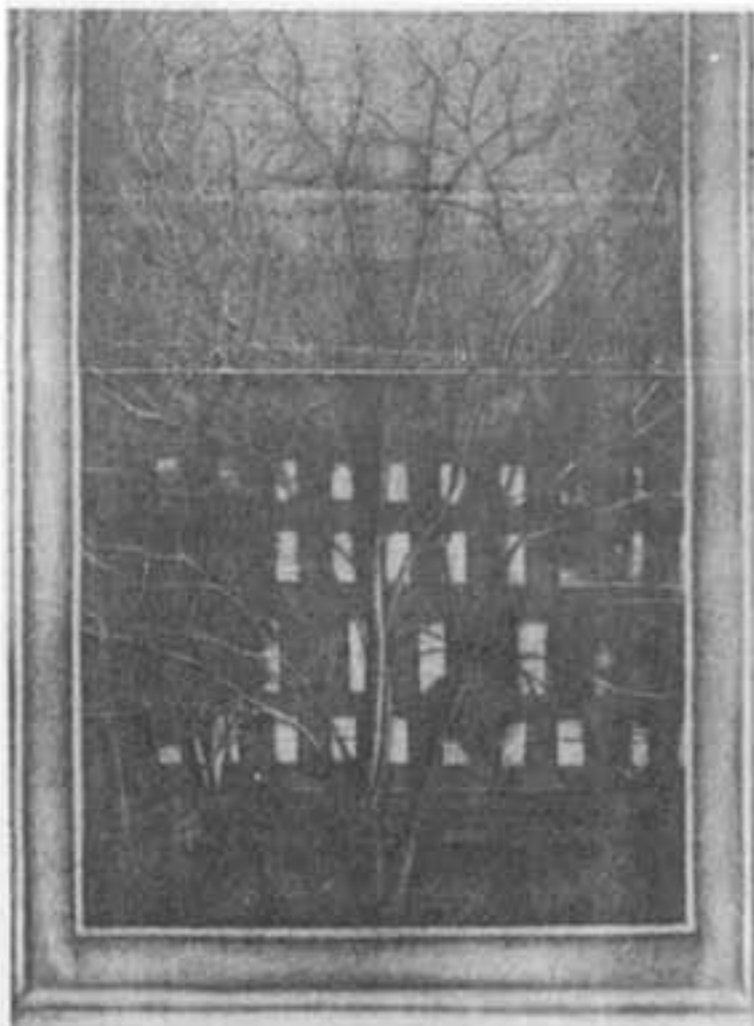
Perhaps the biggest influence in his own life was his father, Louis Dinnerstein, an ardent supporter of The Drug and Hospital Workers' Union and an avowed Communist. Dinnerstein rejects much Communist ideology but still feels it has a particular value "in its concern with human beings." He feels that his father, like most ideologues, "saw the big ideas rather than the individuals. He didn't see inside the person." To Dinnerstein, that's the antithesis of good art. "I feel that seeing inside the person is what makes a good picture."

In one of Dinnerstein's recent drawings, "About Strange Lands and People," a newly-arrived Polish immigrant is pictured sitting in a windowsill overlooking a row of Park Slope brownstones while images of Gdansk and the Solidarity movement float above the skyline. This drawing aptly reflects Dinnerstein's own sense of politics and the self. "My work is not overtly political, but it is overtly human."

While a certain political sensibility does infuse his work, Dinnerstein does not see himself as a political artist. "In today's world, if you draw something that looks like a person it can be construed as being political because most art is not about people. Most art is totally uninterested in the figure." Dinnerstein adds about his own work: "It's not meant to jump up to the barricades." Although Dinnerstein contends that the most important aspect of his work is the subject matter, he has a very strong interest in







1. *In Sleep*, 1983; conte crayon, colored pencils, pastel. Photo: Studio Nine.  
 2. *About Strange Lands and People*, 1984; conte crayon, colored pencils, pastel. [Note enlarged detail.] Photo: Eric Pollitzer.  
 3. *Nocturne for a Polish Warrior*, 1982; conte crayon. Photo: Studio Nine.  
 4. *Night Scene*, 1982; conte crayon, Cumberland Derwent pencils. Photo: Studio Nine.  
 5. Detail of *January Light*, 1983; conte crayon, colored pencils, pastel. Photo: Studio Nine.  
 6. *Kim 1984/85*; conte crayon, colored pencils, pastel. Photo: Eric Pollitzer.

the medium as well. There's a distinct spark and animation when he discusses the material used in his recent drawings. "I'm amazed at what colored pencils can do. These are the same pencils that my 12-year-old daughter uses." He also enjoys experimenting with new materials and claims that his students at The New School for Social Research and at New York City Technical College influenced his choice of pencils, pastels and conte crayon in his recent series of drawings. "It's really strange—you usually think of the teacher being in charge—but in this case I watched the students work with mediums I never worked with and learned from them."

His choice of materials and subject matter is part of a belief in an artistic balance of tradition and experimentation. "There's a period in art at the turn of the century when art was changing but using the tradition that came before it: in other words, looking *avant garde* but carrying the traditions with it." Dinnerstein continues: "What I would like to do is carry on a certain tradition, yet see things in a new way."

Simon Dinnerstein is not yet a household name, but he has certainly had his share of public recognition. Besides his Fulbright Fellowship, he has been awarded the Prix de Rome Fellowship, grants from the Louis Comfort Tiffany and Ingram Merrill Foundations, and three purchase awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has exhibited throughout the US and Europe, including one-man shows at Staempfli, the American Academy in Rome, the Institute of International Education, and The New School.

But perhaps one of the most important indications of his recognition is that his work sells. A recent drawing, "In Sleep," was purchased by the Sara Roby Collection for the Smithsonian Institution. And his "Fulbright Triptych," which John Russell said belonged in a museum, was purchased by The Pennsylvania State University Art Museum. His work has been sold to numerous private collectors as well.

Dinnerstein is definitely a "working artist," living primarily off the proceeds of his sales (coupled with his teaching positions). While many of his works command substantial fees, he has not nearly attained the wealth of some of today's more fashionable artists. In fact, selling his paintings and drawings is something Dinnerstein has not quite come to terms with. "There's something off about it," he states flatly. There are times, he insists, that he must sell a picture that someone has inquired about so he can pay the rent, even though he would much rather keep it.

"You end up putting so much emotion into a picture for a month or two and then the picture gets sold, and even if it's for thousands of dollars... you just end up with a photo [in your portfolio]." Dinnerstein continues: "What do you have to show for what you've done?... You get the money and you spend it. The person that gets the picture gets to keep it."

Essentially, Dinnerstein believes the process of creating and selling his art is one of buying time. "The way I feel about this is that you're given the time to think about things and to set down what you believe in." But for the "working artist" it's a very ephemeral relationship. "It ends up to be unfortunate because it's like something in the air, something you're just reaching out at. You can't show anyone that you had 20 years of this time."

The most important thing to an artist like Dinnerstein—and something of an affirmation of "this time"—is the knowledge that his art is somehow effecting those who see it. Confirmation of this came in something of a backhanded compliment. Not long after selling a large painting of a flower merchant to a Wall Street law firm, Dinnerstein received a phone call from the firm's art curator. The curator said that the lawyers were complaining that "the flow of traffic was being interrupted" where the painting had been hung. Apparently people were stopping to admire and discuss it. Dinnerstein responded: "Isn't that what a painting is supposed to do?" The curator admitted, yes, he thought so, but the lawyers felt that it was disturbing their clients when they should be focusing on legal matters. Dinnerstein suggested they move the painting to a less conspicuous area, but "the problem" persisted. Eventually the curator asked Dinnerstein to take back the painting, which he did, and loaned it to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Tying to sum up the experience, Dinnerstein says: "If you wrote a book and someone told you it was causing them to think, causing them to respond, causing them to reevaluate things..." He shakes his head, still perplexed, and sighs. "What a mixed-up bunch of values."

Simon Dinnerstein has a firm fix on his own artistic values. If anything, the experience with the law firm only reaffirmed his desire to create moving, evocative works. "I like the image to surround you, to take you in," states Dinnerstein, "not just be wallpaper." BA

"Simon Dinnerstein: Recent Drawings and Selected Paintings" will be on view at Gallery 1199, The Martin Luther King Labor Center, 310 West 43rd Street, from April 4-May 29. Call (212) 582-1890 for further details.