

Through Children's Eyes: Entering Simon Dinnerstein's World

Richard Waller

The artist appeals to that part of our being . . . which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring.

—Joseph Conrad

When we presented Simon Dinnerstein's painting *The Fulbright Triptych* at our university art museum, we chose a special location in the gallery space for its display. Not only did I want to emphasize its importance in the artist's oeuvre, but more important, I wanted to facilitate the visitor's encounter with this complex and intriguing work.

On walking through the museum with guests, I often mention that this particular gallery has ideal proportions. As you enter the space, the far wall is the perfect placement for a work of art, truly a "liminal space," the touted ultimate environment for experiencing a work of art described in discussions about the museum setting. Years ago, we presented an exhibition of the works of Robert Motherwell, and we installed his incredible 1965 *Lyric Suite* series of twenty-four paintings on this very wall. The bench placed in front served as a station of contemplation for this overwhelmingly beautiful series. On one occasion, I was compelled to stay open past our regular closing to accommodate a viewer lost in the power of the experience. Thus, when installing our exhibition of Simon's work, I knew without hesitation where to place his triptych, and the proof of the correctness of this decision was witnessed in our visitors' responses to this sensory feast as they came through the exhibition.

What I did not recall until recently were several of Simon's works in the exhibition that involve the world of the child, especially his drawing *Night*, which was placed on a wall leading to the room with the triptych painting. In this image children are wearing masks made from paper bags, and overhead looms an imaginary world full of witches, bats, and demons. Although this drawing and others dealing with childhood remain enigmatic images, they demonstrate the artist's fascination with the fantasy

world of children and his desire to include a psychological level in his work beyond a factual representation. Considering these drawings with children guides us to aspects of the *The Fulbright Triptych I* I will focus on here.

In the left panel of the painting, Simon's wife, Renée, is holding their daughter, Simone. The child is still very young, but she looks expectantly at us and we know she will soon be determining her own place in this world, she will soon develop her own being separate from her parents. Simon sits in the right section, the pendant panel completing the artist's family; together they enclose the world of the studio with the landscape view through the window that comprises the middle panel.

The background wall of the room is covered with utilitarian pegboard, a practical, inelegant solution in the studio for hanging and attaching various things. However, it is transformed in the painting to a rich surface with nuances of color. Attached to this wall are the flotsam and jetsam of an artist's studio environment—postcards, reproductions, notes, sketches, plants, and other ephemera. These are arranged with the grid of the pegboard clearly showing through. In formal terms, his painted squares and rectangles resonate as if they are the push-and-pull planes of a Max Beckmann abstraction, while undeniably representing bits and scraps of an artist's active mind and studio practice. With almost no overlapping, these odds and ends take on a power that foregrounds their content, and we readily question the artist's intent of their inclusion in the story of this painting.

Looking closely, you find there is order to this seemingly random accumulation of things. Easily recognized are the images replicating icons from the world of art. Looking more closely, Simon has placed several works by children into this hierarchy of images from high art. Further, we notice he has placed them only in the left and right panels, the spaces that he and his family occupy, the panels that bring children's artworks to mingle and be equal to masterpieces of high art.

Surveying some of the children's images, I was first struck by the ballpoint-pen drawing *Bigger head (More Brainpower)*. It is funny yet poignant. Above it, Simon has placed a card with the letter γ . Used by his wife as a flash card in teaching, here it also seems to ask us a question. Elsewhere, we find a masterful dragon, a full-blown battle scene, and even evidence of the struggle with learning to write the letters of the alphabet.

In speaking with Simon about the children's art included in the painting, he emphasized his desire "to inhabit those drawings, to inhabit the childish energy." Not only must he get the "feel" correct, he must also translate the drawing marks of the child artist into the oil brushstrokes of the accomplished adult artist. We accept artists copying the works of master artists, learning from iconic images from many cultures and times. This is a time-honored approach to attaining an understanding of how another master artist has constructed a work, its structure, its color, and its formal elements. It is also a way to increase one's skills as an artist, as many artists attest to the lessons they have learned from studying the works of their progenitors. Turning the tables a bit, Simon also wanted to reach into the art-making techniques of the child, and for a moment to occupy that worldview. As adults, we have forgotten the mindset of the child that allowed us to create with such blithe spirit and joyous abandon.

Other artists have incorporated children's works into their own art, and they have attempted to embrace the child's free-spirited approach to image-making. Many artists long for that lost innocence. However, in this painting Simon seems to be placing the drawings on exhibit with a precision of placement and juxtaposition to give them a certain presence and to tweak our response by giving them such serious consideration. He has inhabited those drawings as he desired, and he has given us a deeper understanding of their unfathomable reaches into the world of the child. The artist explained to me that he felt that "combining the childlike world with another world is a very modern idea." In this painting, he has brought the mystery of the child's point of view to have an unparalleled impact on our experience of his triptych. If not modern, the combination is nevertheless compelling. His fastidious placement and representation of each and every element in the scene is countermanded by the insistence of the child's vision.

The quote by Joseph Conrad at the beginning of this essay also begins the introduction by Lewis Hyde to his book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. The author successfully argues that the work of art is a gift and not a commodity, and in his conclusion he states, simply and to the point, "We know that art is a gift for having had the experience of art."

As we contemplate Simon's gift to us of this painting, we find this enduring experience. As we stop in front of *The Fulbright Triptych*, we should all match Simone's open, expectant gaze as we immerse ourselves in the elements of this painting, from Simon's careful arrangements of objects and space to childhood's unexpected entrée to aesthetic experience.