

# Wide Open

Valerie Sayers

## *Those Days*

Simon Dinnerstein brings his whole life to-date to *The Fulbright Triptych*, but a viewer might bring some dates, too. 1971 to 1974, the years when the painting was produced, were years of collective and massive discontent: idealism looking bedraggled, the war slogging on, the last days of peace and love dwindling (Simon's striped pants! Renée's luxuriant skirt!). *Those days*.

I've studied the painting in reproduction with great pleasure: its maximalism appeals to me enormously. The three panels' multiple manifestations of the human face and form—especially the Holy Family Dinnerstein creates of his own family—are as enticing to me as the centrality of the copperplate on the engraver's worktable (we artists are all in favor of placing our tools dead center). Safely ensconced in a book, the *Triptych* has already conveyed to me an air of gentle authority: the artist says he will bring not just the craft but the vision of the past to painting the present. He will reconcile them.

But when I travel to the Palmer Museum of Art to see *The Fulbright Triptych* in person, I'm not at all prepared for time to wash over me the way it does. Up close, the painting puts me under a completely new spell. For starters, the size of the panels produces a much more insistent, if good-humored, authority. This painting *demand*s equal time for concept and affect, for form and substance, for grand narrative and scraps of the quotidian, for a man's work and a man's family. If this artist celebrates Great Men of Art History he also celebrates Great Classroom Teachers; if he makes an icon of his wife and daughter he also remembers his forebears in shards and fragments, as if in a dream (and, in one of my favorite mysteries, in the narration of a literal dream). This painter says that in these times—those times—he won't be pinned down: not by school, not by concept, not by rejecting history and not by getting mired in it, either.

## *Balance*

I look at *The Fulbright Triptych* for hours, moving from image to image, puzzled, drawn in, eager to skip away to the next fragment, and the next. Who needs hyperlinks? The scope is exhilarating: this is what the engraver chooses to do for his *first* painting? Far out. The graceful form of the triptych is also funny, with its strangely reverent jokes that art is what is worshipped here, and that the artist's best patrons may be his own family. The subverted form summons centuries of sonnet pranksters (Anne Sexton, Tony Harrison, Shakespeare himself), but the thread of time pulled through centuries calls up novelists who trade in time: E. L. Doctorow, Toni Morrison, and—I can't help it—Proust and Tolstoy. I am humming Mozart and Dylan. The artist offers narrative puzzles and clues but look at him there, transcending time, an off-center Zen master overseeing a study in balance.

To see the painting in person is to lose a sense of time as well as to gain one, but when I finally allow my gaze to settle, I'm not meditating on time but on paint. The brown walls and floors were there in reproduction, all right, but now I'm taken aback by the abundance of brown, even as the walls dance with unexpected hues and texture, by the thick heavy brown of the floor, its layers of shellac scruffy and scuffed and glorious. Even the prickleballs beneath the engraver's table celebrate the grub and grit of daily life. And maybe it is the meticulousness of these browns that makes that central copperplate summon a golden egg in my mind, that makes every homage-laden, precise reproduction that covers those walls all the more delightful. One thing to pay Holbein the honor of exactitude, quite another to honor the *floor*. But the floor is where I start: at Renée's feet.

A wife-and-mother's presence in this context moves me deeply, but I am just as moved by the images that cover her end of this altarpiece to art: the weeping Virgin above her is red-rimmed, her tears glassine, but Renée is alert, contemplative, in control of whatever it is she's feeling as she holds her little girl. She's surrounded by happy family photos, but the child artists Dinnerstein has tacked around her reveal their fears, even their terror (dangling nooses, attacking war planes, bodies stunted "from smoke," the artist, Jean Miele, notes). We think we specialize in eco-consciousness these days, but in those days, too, even children saw that the future we were creating might well

All visible  
objects man are but a pasteboard masks. But in each  
event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there some  
unknown but all reasoning thing put forth the mouldings  
of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man  
will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner  
reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me,  
the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes  
I think there's naught beyond. but tis enough. He tasks  
me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an  
inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is  
chiefly what I hate, and he the white whale agent, or be  
white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

go up in smoke. How steadily Renée sits next to the clocks with the disappearing faces and the exquisite letter *γ* (why?). This woman isn't about to sit around weeping, not in these changing times. The work of women and children is honored here in a way that strikes me as not just prescient but joyfully subversive.

I skip over the central panel to get to the artist himself, and am struck by how decisively I've moved from female territory to male—maybe it's the severe stare from the van Eyck portrait above the painter's head, or maybe it's the ritualized violence of that sword-wielding angel who hovers so close to him. The breadth of Dinnerstein's visual devotions is a challenge, the familiarity of many of these images a solace. This artist won't forget where he comes from, but we who don't know him well will have to guess. (Whose emigration papers are these, and what does the Cyrillic signify?) I slide back to the upheavals of 1918 and forward to the sexual revolution: an erotic charge emanates from above. What an embrace, what a smooch, what long fingers on that hand between her legs. But the children's work has migrated into this world too, the Dinnerstein family, past and present, high above the artist—and off to the right is another Madonna to link Simon to Renée.

The center panel is as limitless as that gauzy blue horizon, as fecund as those green fields. To a dweller of the twenty-first century, the tidy town suggests, all at once, the richness of community and tradition, a life conjoined with nature, and the worst excesses of conformity (as Guy Davenport points out in some amazement, Dinnerstein started painting this German landscape barely a quarter century after the Shoah). To settle into the center panel is to settle into the contradictions and reconciliations of the whole: the conjoining of engraving and painting, male and female, the past and the future of figurative art, the artist's studio and the bourgeois world of houses, fences, and gates. Dinnerstein hops over the fences, and it is his movement back and forth between worlds that has kept me moving across, around, through the triptych.

But the museum is closing now, and like the stopwatch above the artist's tools, I really am running out of time—when the artist has taken all the time in the world (all right, three years of his life) to honor the work he esteems. In my last moments with the triptych, I move back and forth between Saint Francis and this gruesome elegant *pietà* I am ashamed not to know. My childhood was filled with magnificent images

of Raphael, Botticelli, and contemporary Catholic kitsch, and Dinnerstein sends me back to those often surreal juxtapositions, his impulse to capture the worldly accumulations of time in this painting akin indeed to the grand ambitions of altarpieces and cathedrals. For me, the wonder of this arrangement of work that spans so many centuries and sensibilities is that it is so precisely ordered, and that it might take a lifetime to crack all his codes.

### *Our Moment*

And I can't help wanting to crack them. I am not the Zen master the painter is, and as I take my leave I find myself clutching after meaning in these loaded images—maybe I am a little like Renée, whose aerogramed baby dream, directly above her husband's tools, cries out: "What does all this mean!!!!??\*?" Wittgenstein, to her left, answers: "To the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer."

There is no answer: certainly there is allegory in this imposing and inviting work, but this is also a painting that seeks to deepen its own mystery, to summon the artist's dependence on the sacred and the profane but also the mundane and the workaday, the demands and the comforts of family. Dinnerstein has tacked up Melville to remind us that "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," but if he surrounds himself with masks he just as surely surrounds himself with (well, there's no other word for it) love.

I could stay for hours more—the triptych is already an old friend, its world my world—but time's up. I step back to see the whole one last time, and I'm struck all over again by how precisely Dinnerstein captures not just his moment as an artist, but those days, 1971 to 1974, when modernism is getting that played-out look and the crudest ironies of conceptualism are, already, just too easy; that moment when we're feeling betrayed by the past but longing for wisdom and order; that moment when the whole world is either stoned or gazing through smoke but an artist, however laid back, decides to keep his eyes, and his work, wide open.