

To See and Be Seen

The Fulbright Triptych of Simon Dinnerstein

Robert L. McGrath

The deeper one dives into his private world, he finds the most public, the most universally true. The people delight in it.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

plates. 4, 7, 11-16

I no longer recall precisely the first time I saw a reproduction of Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* but it was probably around 1975 after his first one-man show at the Staempfli Gallery. At the time I was deeply absorbed in the study of early Netherlandish painting and, having recently emerged from graduate school, still firmly clung to art history's dirty little secret: the further removed an image was from its actual source the better.¹ I do remember, however, my startled reaction to the colorful simulacrum of this seemingly magisterial work. Here at a moment of intense aesthetic pluralism in American art (ranging, *inter alia*, from minimalism to color field and photorealist painting) was the product of an artist who sought deliberately and studiously to ally himself with those traditions and practices of representation to which I most fervidly responded. Here was a pictorial intelligence so engaging, a sensibility so firmly aligned with my own, that I was drawn to ponder the meaning of his work on several levels at once. Splendid in technique (as far as I could discern from a color reproduction), challengingly complex with its plethora of arcane signifiers and intriguingly elusive in meaning, *The Fulbright Triptych* seemed to resonate ardently with my own interest in the fifteenth-century pictorial dialogue between symbol and reality. Informed by an appealing ceremonial gravity, the painting further possessed the disquieting allure of posing more questions than it answered. Here at last was an art historian's artist and a live one at that!

1. This notion has nothing to do with the modernist cult of originality. The belief, somewhat facetiously held, was that a photographic reproduction of a work of art was superior to the original; an engraved copy once or twice removed, better yet; and a line drawing after a no-longer-extant original, still better. The best-case scenario called for a line drawing after a work of art that had never existed. Much of art history's best fictions have adhered to this schema.

Now twenty plus years later, I realize that my early disdain for the contemporary (in my view the only good artist was a dead one) was at least partially misguided. Nonetheless, my enthusiasm for Dinnerstein (which admittedly was grounded as much in an aversion to the present as in an attraction to his work) has increased as I have come to realize the complex originality and profound modernity of his vision. While initially I was attracted to the disciplined astringency of his style (no inchoate gesturalism) and the apparent homage to tradition (no tedious fields of monochrome nullity), I have come with the benefit of hindsight and experience to appreciate the subtly subversive, even transgressive, nature of his art. Simultaneously conservative and progressive, ordinary yet surreal, humble and arrogant, Dinnerstein's great painting is as old technically and aesthetically as it is structurally and conceptually new.

For starters there is the traditional format of a monumental triptych, a charged configuration that only very few moderns have essayed. Implicitly religious in purport, the triptych (*pace* Rothko) has not fared well in our remorselessly secularized world. Moreover, the hieratic connotations of a wider central panel—that is, its rhetorical claim to authority—militates against the broader democratic ethos of our times. With characteristic modernist inversions, however, Dinnerstein locates the trinity of his holy family in the wings while privileging the instruments of the artist's passion in the central panel. Much as *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* is enframed in late medieval paintings by the nails, thorns, scourges and flails of His torment, the portraits of the artist as secular *Schmerzensmann* and his madonna-wife (in the eccentric albeit traditional locations of donors) are deployed as figurative parentheses to the burins, burnishers, scrapers and halo-like copperplate of the engraver's craft. Consecrated artifacts, enshrined upon a table-tabernacle, they inscribe (literally) the agon between *teoria* and *praxis* that seems to be one of the principle subtexts of the panels. In addition, this encyclopaedic display of tools located on a workbench evoked for me the famous Joseph panel of the *Merode Altarpiece* in the Cloisters in which the gentle craftsman plies his artisinal trade. Above all, the familiar modernist trope of the sacralization of art as religion provides the ideational imperative for this secularized altarpiece, a deliberate displacement of orthodox religious iconographies (only the *Annunciation* panel on the exterior of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* affords a strikingly similar void separating two lateral figures). Despite the artist's remarkably well assimilated understanding of early Netherlandish art, only a twentieth-century painter, fully cognizant of the strategies of the New York school, would so aggressively decenter the traditional focus of pictorial interest. This deliberate figural purgation of the main panel (despite, or because of, the marginalization of the authorial self to

the wings) seemed to me to denote a radical subjectivity as ego-driven as the most angst-ridden canvases of Pollock or Rothko. Things are declared, then concealed while, as a consequence of the process, the seemingly private becomes apparently public.

plate. 11

What historic persona is this bearded, frontally posed figure, fixing us with his stark iconic gaze, supposed to recall? A reincarnation of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal (black and white reproduction of an anointing genie to the left of his head) or Van Eyck's God the Father from the *Ghent Altarpiece* (detail of Metropolitan Museum's *Last Judgment*, below left of right-hand panel)? Perhaps the hairy Christomimete Albrecht Dürer (despite the absence of a single visual referent to the greatest of all engravers)? Arguably we are solicited by the relentless frontality of the image to adduce all of these associations (as well as some I haven't thought of). Those singularly inactive hands of the artist (no benediction, no assertion of manual dexterity—the gesture is loosely derived from Dürer's 1498 *Self-Portrait* in the Prado) surely play a role here. At least there can be no ambiguity concerning his uncanonized sponsor, Van Eyck's *Baudouin de Lannoy* (Berlin), whose head sprouts from a planter like an exploded Romanesque capital. In the left wing the artist's wife and child also appear miraculously suspended in a canonic pose derived from Donatello's sphinx-like *Madonna and Child* in Padua (reproduced at the upper right of the artist's head); her sponsor Dirk Bouts's *Virgin of the Lamentation* (Paris).

Bizarre indeed are these two figures who starkly confront the viewer in trance-like poses of contemplative absorption. At one level they seem to reciprocate our scrutiny. At another, little is revealed as our gaze is turned back upon itself. Meanings are intimated but are not confirmed. In a further move, a brilliantly disguised reprise of Rogier van der Weyden's famous invention, Dinnerstein enframes himself and his wife with replications of images that, like the voussoirs of a gothic arch, allow (in the formulation of Erwin Panofsky) the combination of "epigrammatic concision with epic prolixity." In emulation of the great Flemish master, Dinnerstein is able to "concentrate upon a few crucial themes yet supplement them with circumstantial narrative." Among these surrounding "enthusiasms" are reproductions of the works of favored artists (Fouquet, Bellini, Ingres, Seurat, Holbein, all influenced by the great Netherlandish "primitives") and children's drawings of monsters (gargoyles), and warfare (apocalypics) as well as self-referential photographs, letters and an anti-logocentric quotation from Wittgenstein, the latter presumably instantiated to privilege the image over the word and the world.²

2. The quote reads: "And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is."

Returning to the central panel we are afforded a divided landscape vista through open windows as famously occurs in Van Eyck's *Madonna with the Chancellor Rolin* (Paris) or Rogier's *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* (Boston). These sources are internalized with such subtlety that it is only after closer analysis that we come to appreciate the placement of the village's church steeple on the side of the modern madonna (together with a *hortus conclusus*) while the view through the window on the artist's side (*sinister* or *dexter*, depending upon a religious or secular orientation) is more suggestively profane. A holy family, inhabiting a "tower of chastity" that is simultaneously the artist's studio: the paradoxes are as multiple as they are intriguing. While Jan and Rogier's tower rooms are sumptuous interiors with marble floors, porphyry columns, and richly carved furnishings, the Dinnerstein studio is adorned with cheap wallpaper and displays wooden floorboards sorely in need of refinishing. Cast-iron radiators rather than cozy fireplaces provide heating for this austere and somewhat alienating space.

Surely it is also no accident that a reproduction of Holbein's money-grubbing Hanseatic merchant *Georg Gisze* (Berlin) is located directly above the workbench, an altar whose only god is art. This image serves not only as an *exemplum* of occupations and behaviors to be avoided but affords an obvious visual precedent for the notes, letters and images appended to the wall of the studio. The presence of Van Eyck's Eve (with the apple of the Tree of Knowledge) from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, located in proximity to Gisze, further thematizes the idea of earthly temptation. Casting a shadow overall is Holbein's *French Ambassadors* (London), a celebrated image in which the singularity of portraiture is also transmuted into a quasi-heraldic artform.

What, finally, are we to make of the most striking paradox of the painting: why is paint used to pay homage to print-making? Why are there no reproductions of engravings on the *Bilderwand*? What are we to make of those nuanced intervals between the printmaking tools and the profound silence that pervades the purported activity of artmaking? Presumably the burin has been set aside for the brush, but the artist's inactive hands pose still further questions for the viewer. Again a Netherlandish source offers suggestive analogies with Dinnerstein's triptych. *The Portrait of a Young Man* in London by Petrus Christus, Van Eyck's best-known pupil, is also a discourse on painting and print-making, high art and popular culture, novelty and tradition. A popular broadside of a poem printed beneath an image of the head of Christ in the Christus portrait clearly resonates with the haiku poem, dream letter and assorted replications in *The Fulbright Triptych*.

Dinnerstein's selective naturalism, like that of his esteemed mentors, aspires to a synthesis of representation (*Vorstellung*) with presentation (*Darstellung*). Representation occurs in the circumstantial

narrative afforded by the multiple replications of paintings, photographs, drawings and texts while the formal treatment of the portraits differentiates them markedly from the surrounding flux of signifiers. Icons of complex modern selfhood, these portrait-figures seem intimately close, yet infinitely remote. Significantly, Dinnerstein's refusal to instantiate the transcendental connotations of a hieratic center, to both solicit and reject the symbolic claims of an altarpiece triptych, complicates the reading of the image. Our attention is deflected from the figuratively voided but ideationally charged central panel to the iconic periphery, where a recusancy of psychological engagement throws the viewer back upon his own resources and responses. In Dinnerstein's hieroglyphic world of memory and longing we can apprehend, but never fully penetrate, the nuanced subtlety of his artistic intention. Is the world within and beyond the frame fallen or, conversely, has it been redeemed by art and love? Is this a painting about creation and procreation, about giving birth to art and babies and the ensuing division of loyalties?

At some deeper level *The Fulbright Triptych* seems to me to be a painting that is very much about separation and exile. There is the separation of husband from wife, art from life, and theory from practice. In addition, this great painting is informed by a palpable aura of exile: exile from home, from nature and, perhaps above all, from the grand traditions of European painting.³ Dinnerstein, like many displaced American artists, invites us to reflect upon these fundamental questions of art, identity and the burden of expatriatism. Out of a similar responsibility to art and history, I hope someday to view the actual (as over and against the virtual) painting. But, then again, this art historian, in sympathetic accord with Simon Dinnerstein, often does much of his best thinking in front of reproductions of great works of art.

3. Curiously enough, *The Fulbright Triptych* resonates strongly for me with Norman Rockwell's *Triple Self-Portrait* (Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts), where the artist in the act of self-representation surrounds his canvas with cheap color reproductions of great European painters ranging from Rembrandt to Picasso. A form of homage to the grand tradition, these reproductions also denote the distance, even exile, of American artists from that tradition and its consolations.

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