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From visceral portraits to romanticized nymphs, Simon Dinnerstein's retrospective at the Marsh Gallery shows a stylistic niche through every turn of the artist's evolution.

Bodies of Work

Deborah McLeod

I don't believe that there is a form of exhibition more beneficial both to artist and viewer than a retrospective on an artist's life of work to date. Taking in a significant extended body of art that bears witness to many experimental shifts in temperament, focus, style and media helps to give to each spectator a perspective on all of life, including their own. Simon Dinnerstein's current retrospective show at the Marsh Gallery confides all of the concerns of investigating frontiers and documenting the findings. It is dauntless work as it ranges through its memories and appetites.

Earlier dated works in the exhibit show Dinnerstein jarringly imposing some coarse, expressive portraiture onto his subjects, particularly his pregnant wife, provoking the very limits of ugliness. Following an inclination to emphasize the veins in his figures' skin, the work unfolds to contemplate the intricate excessive layers and patterns of nature in studies on the isolation of leaves from foliage or branches laced together. He then transforms the work into an illustrative style, sentimental and unselfconsciously magical in a brief pastel-hued series of child and family scenes. Finally, while retaining the surreal mysticism and technique developed in that series, Dinnerstein dangerously nudges the erotic tissue of outright voyeurism in the sweet, soft, languid and rather available-looking nymphs of his nude studies. None of the above acts of what elsewhere might become aesthetic fragrance are actually problematic to the work; rather they serve to cut out a curious stylistic niche at every turn and evolution of Dinnerstein's career as he explores his materials and themes.

Various art historical precedents are imported into Dinnerstein's various phases of exploration. The early work offers a vaguely Mexican sensibility in which Diego Rivera's etheric being can be felt as heat. Dinnerstein's primitive, solid, doll-like portraits of his little daughter reveal it most specifically, but it is also visiting in the interior of his memorial painting "Fulbright Triptych," along with a host of German and Flemish artists. Initially motivated by the Late Gothic tradition of making narrative altarpieces as much as by the physical layout and view of his rented room outside of Kassel, Germany, Dinnerstein's own taste for symmetry, complexity and reference make this grand undertaking an epic piece. It is rife with the kind of complex detail that busies most of his early drawings and engravings, and is an Advent calendar of the days the artist spent in solitude creating the copper plate for an engraving entitled "Angela's Garden" made as part of his Fulbright Fellowship.

Simon Dinnerstein is a reverent person (as George Tooker is quoted as saying in the introductory panel). His self-portraits reveal an earnest, serene countenance. When one walks the path of the exhibition, one senses the presence of each of his influences, like perennials in the garden returning for another season. Led perhaps by a sense of skin, thin and sea-colored over veins, or his intimate series of graphite drawings on garden and urban scapes, Dinnerstein settles on a technique of intermingling conte crayon

and colored pencil with diaphanous and verdant results. His lightly manipulated surface somewhat replicates the soft fibrous underside of a leaf. It appears to direct him in every subsequent rendering of living flesh and ether, giving everything he chooses to depict a cast of chlorophyll as though flesh and atmosphere, and the vast infrastructure of cities all functioned by utilizing photosynthesis. Incandescent white areas slipping into folds define the satiny fabric of a still life or flow through the bedding of the nudes (which, in essence, suggests a relinquished bridal-veil ambience). The whites contrast with glowing regions of crimson and the ever-present leaf green. Nubile and asleep, or just awakening, Dinnerstein's child-women levitate in an environment of desire, representing for eternity what the poet ultimately longs to have or to be. In their limpid, romanticized perfection, these figures would seem to be veils themselves. A greater deception concealed in their cellular program, they await their incubus. They are an interesting contrast to the artist's visceral, root-goddess portraits of his pregnant wife, which I have come to admire more as I consider these elegant wish-filled sylphs.



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