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Simon Dinnerstein Takes On the Nude

A Visit to the Artist At Home in Park Slope

By Carl Blumenthal

It isn't every day that an arts reporter gets an unsolicited call from a well-known artist. Simon Dinnerstein informs me that his large nude, "Purple Haze," will be on display this summer at ACA Galleries, 529 West 20th Street in Chelsea. It's part of a group exhibit entitled "Summer in the City." Wouldn't I like to see the painting in his Park Slope home before he ships it off?

Dinnerstein and his wife Renee (Sadler), a kindergarten teacher, live on First Street across from PS 321. I fantasize that Dinnerstein has a studio full of undiscovered masterpieces to show me. But I am pleased to see a dozen of his best works on the walls of their brownstone. Among them is "Purple Haze," completed in 1991.

The 2x5-foot painting is audacious. Lying on her back, a giant, naked woman floats over Manhattan at dusk, the antithesis of a Goodyear blimp. The purple haze of pollution pervades the city. The detail with which the nude is rendered shows the artist's mastery of the classical tradition. In contrast, the city below is an expressionistic maze of streets, houses and offices. It could be the work of a schoolboy. Simon Dinnerstein uses an unusual combination of conte crayon, colored pencil, wax crayon, pastel and oil pastel to create this collage of clashing forms and sensibilities.

Dinnerstein explains, "It's part of a series using similar nudes against different backgrounds. In 'Purple Haze,' I'm looking through a window at twilight on a city landscape and I see some old lover or idealized image of some woman. The city and the woman are juxtaposed."

The artist recalls his wife's reaction: "Renee started laughing. 'That's not what I see at all.' She said, 'I'm in the midst of some tremendously sexual experience, and my mind and body start to float away.'"

Dinnerstein continues, "So I showed the painting to a female student, who said 'I don't think either one of these is true. It's about New York City, about living in the city,

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'Rear Window' (detail) is a 1997 self-portrait in pencil and powdered graphite.

Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York



Simon Dinnerstein's 1998 'Passage of the Moon' (oil and gold leaf on wood, 47½ x 67½ in.) is a luxurious meeting of East and West.

Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

No Lack of 'Courage' For Heights TV Creator

David Steven Cohen Has Varied Résumé

By Don Evans

"Courage: the Cowardly Dog" bit me when I discovered the cocky canine playing bingo with his flighty foster parents who apparently fell forward in space to April 15, 3001, and landed somewhere that might be a farm in Kansas. I believe after a first viewing of the idealized image on the Cartoon Network.

David Steven Cohen sicced Courage on me after an unintended eavesdropping led to my questioning him about a screen writing project he had told a friend about at Cosi's sidewalk café on Montague Street. Cohen is the head writer on the popular and frequently quixotic not-for-kids cartoon at 9 o'clock weekday evenings on Time-Warner channel 22. The animated series now in its third season is created and directed by John R. Dilworth for Stretch Films.

A resident of Brooklyn Heights, Cohen has always lived in the borough except for several years in Hollywood and the West Coast television industry. His next major project is to complete songs for *Radiant Baby* a musical about the late cult artist Keith Haring, scheduled for the Public Theater next season with George C. Wolfe directing. Through a chance online meeting he will have Debra Barsha of Park Slope as a collaborator.

"Here I am a Jewish guy writing a story about Christmas," Cohen explained jokingly, going on to note that it's about the secular Santa Claus celebration of the holiday. The story was pitched to a television executive who rejected the idea, so Cohen is writing it as an intended feature film that envious colleagues assure him is a great concept. No novice to the art, his resume dates back to the late '80s as a writer/producer in TV and lyricist/composer for musical shows. For opera he wrote both story and libretto for *Lilith*, who in Jewish folklore was Adam's first wife before Eve was created. It was given a world premiere performance at Lincoln Center by New York City Opera in November 2001 and

in concert form by Glimmerglass Opera in August 1998.

His 1975 class was the third to graduate from South Shore High School, and he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Brooklyn College in 1980. His mother celebrated her 50th year as a Brooklyn alumnus in June and at the same time as he was given the college's distinguished graduate award.

Cohen's imprint as writer, producer, creator or story editor are found on some 30 television series, features, pilots and specials dating back to the "George Burns

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David Steven Cohen at an outdoor table on Montague Street.

Photos by Don Evans



Cohen's 'Cowardly Dog' credit on a television screen.

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Dinnerstein

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your vulnerability and sensitivity. I don't even see the woman.' The son of the student gave me a more youthful interpretation. 'Multiple orgasms across New York City,' he said."

What Is It About?

So is "Purple Haze" about sex or the city? Or is it a billboard promoting the nude as a representational art form? The answer may be on the walls of Dinnerstein's studio, where he has attached copies of the models painted by such masters as Titian, Michelangelo, Degas, Bonnard, and Modigliani.

According to Dinnerstein, mastering the nude as a form is a kind of artistic rite of passage. (He admits it is a peculiarly male challenge.) His goal is to add to the tradition not break with it, a tall order with so many august artists looking over his shoulder. Perhaps this is why he waited until his 50s to tackle this subject.

He admits his nudes are a "hot button issue" and says, "They are not wallpaper you just walk by. People absolutely love or hate them." He describes the censorship he has suffered. Exhibitors sometimes yank his works at the last minute, using their size and cost as an excuse. Nor do the nudes sell as well as his other paintings and drawings. Apparently some private collectors find them too provocative.

Dinnerstein continues, "One friend insisted I should 'do more fruit in bowls.' In a curious way, my still lifes are very sensual and rounded up like the nudes. I teach a class in drawing the human figure and we start with three pears. Each one resembles the abdomen of a beautiful woman."

Another beautiful woman is found in the collage "Passage of the Moon" (1998). A nude stretches and crosses her limbs like the trunks of a tree. She lies on a bed of sheets that look like they are carved in stone. This is a pose (and an artistic tradition) that will endure no matter how difficult to maintain (against the reigning culture of abstract art).

It is a pose that grows on you as does the background of "Passage of the Moon". Japanese art is not everyone's cup of tea. It is delicate and enduring. The backdrop of trees and hills surrounding a moon-lit sea or plain is based on the design of room screens Dinnerstein saw at an exhibit of Japanese art in Rome, Italy. The artist taught himself the gold leaf technique to properly honor the Japanese tradition and to bring new light to an old subject (the nude).

Nude's Roots at Home

Dinnerstein has done many nudes over the years. The more unusual the pose of the model or the more elaborate the background, the better the paintings are, as if the physical tension or contrast sparked the artist's creativity. His drawings of his wife, Renee, in her 8th and 9th months of pregnancy, are the prototype for this "stretching" of artistic conventions.

Although "Passage of the Moon" is an exceptional oil and gold leaf on wood panel, Dinnerstein's other recent nudes are either conte crayon, colored pencil, and pastel or pencil and powdered



A 1970 charcoal, 'Garfield Place,' is an example of the earlier Dinnerstein. This 30 x 59 in. drawing belongs to Audrey Stier-Adams of Scarsdale, NY.

Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

graphite. With these media he creates a dreamy atmosphere in which the subjects appear self-possessed.

In fact, I believe Dinnerstein's objective with all his work is to induce in us a self-reflective or contemplative state, so that the fragments of our experience become wholes. He dissipates any tension in his subject matter through composition and drawing technique. In the early years of his career, he achieved that balance by being graphic. Lately, he has added atmosphere with his collages and a subdued palette of colors.

Since his first drawings in the mid-1960s, he has favored still lifes, landscapes, and portraits. No matter how big or small the subject, the picture is filled with abundant life, whether a neighbor's garden, a rooftop view of Brooklyn, a row of houses, a flower market, an elderly friend's bedroom, or his pregnant wife. Apparently in his Park Slope home of 35 years, Dinnerstein has found and created that warmth not available in the Manhattan of "Purple Haze." His Brooklyn-born family consists of his wife Renee and their daughter Simone, a pianist who lives nearby with her husband and newborn.

All his subjects seem to (over) flow from this domestic life. No nook or cranny is exempt from his appreciative eye, whether the clutter underneath a kitchen sink, German vegetables, the folds of a tablecloth, window panes, a coleus plant, tubes of paint, loaves of bread, or a chicken from hunger. Whether or not Dinnerstein was a house husband while his wife taught school, his artistic eye transforms domestic space into imaginative, dream space, the illustrator becomes a painter.

Artist's Background

Simon Dinnerstein was born February 16, 1943 in the heart of Brownsville and spent the first 21 years of his life in an apartment building near Grafton and Dumont Streets. His father Louis was a pharmacist active in the 1199 union and his mother Sarah was "a dreamer and a humanist." Dinnerstein graduated from Tilden High School and City College. He

studied painting and drawing at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School between 1964 and 67.

You can see Simon Dinnerstein's "Purple Haze" at ACA Galleries, 529 West 20th Street, 5th floor; 10:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday until the end of July, Tuesday through Friday until the end of August. Call 212-206-8080 for more information.

You can also find "The Art of Simon

Dinnerstein" and "Simon Dinnerstein: Paintings and Drawings" at the Community Book Store, 7th Avenue Books, and Barnes and Noble. The artist has exhibited and sold his paintings throughout the world and received many prizes for his work. He has taught at several local art schools. At present he teaches painting and drawing in his Park Slope Studio. For more information, call 788-4387

David Steven Cohen

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Comedy Week" on CBS in 1985. His music, lyrics and verse include songs for "Courage" and the theme song for Nickelodeon's "Livewire" show.

Working with Jim Henson, Cohen was executive producer on "The Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss," winning the Writers Guild Award for outstanding children's script in 1997 and

Emmy Award nominations for outstanding prime time children's series in 1997 and '98. Through the years he has worked with Chris Rock, Paul Reubens as Pee-Wee, Ellen Burstyn, Bill Cosby, Alan King and Steve Martin.

The animated feature "Balto" about a half-wolf sled dog leading rescue missions in the wilds of Alaska was rerun in June on the Disney satellite channel. Cohen was a co-creator of the animated "Alf" and "ALFTales" on NBC 1988-89.



'Courage: The Cowardly Dog' is seen weekday evenings on Time Warner's channel 22.

Photo by Don Evans