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THE SUSPENSION OF TIME: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and *The Fulbright Triptych*

In a new book, novelists, poets, composers, musicians, actors, art critics and art historians engage with a masterpiece of American art

Simon Dinnerstein's remarkable painting *The Fulbright Triptych* is a richly detailed, collage-like composite of family portrait, still life and landscape, as well as a meditation on the creation of art. Complex and boundary-crossing, figurative and modernist, it deals with issues of process and perception, incorporates high and low art, and has multiple allusions to visual memory and identity. Its imagery (all executed in oil on wood panel) encompasses works by Ingres, Holbein, van Eyck, Bellini and Seurat, as well as children's art and photographs; its other references range from quotes from *Moby Dick* and Wittgenstein to personal letters.

"Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is one of those singular and astonishing works of art which seem to imply a description of the whole world merely by insisting on a scrupulous gaze at one perfect instant."

--Jonathan Lethem

"It is striking, and also fitting, that a novel so distinctly American, a novel about appearance and reality, about Ishmael's reflective wandering and Ahab's ruthless quest, informs the creation of the *Triptych*. For this is a painting, among other things, about what it means to be an artist: a necessary combination of Ishmael's absorption of the world, fused with Ahab's ruthless passion.

--Jhumpa Lahiri

This monumental painting, which measures 14 feet by almost 7 feet, was begun in 1971, when the artist was living in Germany on a Fulbright Grant. It took him three years to complete and has long been considered by many to be a masterpiece of American art. Now, four decades later, it is the subject of a new book, **THE SUSPENSION OF TIME: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and *The Fulbright Triptych***, edited and with an Introduction by Daniel Slager (Milkweed Editions; June 16, 2011; 360 pages; \$35.00; 70 illustrations, 59 in color). By all accounts, this is the only book-length treatment devoted solely to one painting by a living

American artist. Commenting on the phenomenon of *The Fulbright Triptych* being reconsidered 40 years after he began working on it, Dinnerstein says, "In the same way that you can say all art is old, whether it was done five minutes ago or twenty years ago, you can conversely say all art is new. It doesn't matter that it was done so many years ago. What matters is, does it *feel* new."

A major painting that has uniquely inspired other artists and evoked an extraordinary range of responses.

The impetus for THE SUSPENSION OF TIME came from the wide array of responses that the *Triptych* has evoked over time from novelists, poets, composers, musicians, art historians, actors, and others. The painting has variously been described as hypnotic, a complex poem, a painting about what it means to be an artist, a work with the breadth of a vast symphonic musical score, an artist's attempt to slow down reality and freeze a moment in space and time, and a deeply personal visual memoir. Serving as a prism of sorts for those who've viewed it, this multi-dimensional, epic painting invites reflection and exploration of its many interpretive possibilities. The *Triptych* is a painting that demands to be "read," notes one contributor to the book. Another calls it Dinnerstein's *Bildungsroman*. J.M. Coetzee has observed about Simon Dinnerstein and *The Fulbright Triptych*: "Being an artist, yet also recognizing oneself as the protagonist in an artist's project, must evoke curious and complex feelings--not unlike seeing oneself turn or being turned into a character in a novel."

The book comprises forty-four essays by a diverse range of contributors who offer their unique perspectives on the painting, and at the same time, reveal things about themselves. Thirty-seven of the essays are original to this book; the remaining seven are reprinted from elsewhere. Among the contributors are: the novelists and short story writers Jhumpa Lahiri and Anthony Doerr; poets Dan Beachy-Quick and Miller Williams; literary critic Guy Davenport; art historians Colin Eisler, Albert Boime, Edward Sullivan and Thomas M. Messer; art critic John Russell; composer George Crumb; actor/director John Turturro; and classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein, the artist's daughter, who appears in the left panel of the triptych as an infant.

In his essay, Anthony Doerr writes about the ways in which our minds fill in the blanks to find meaning in the world, reaching out into the space between reader and writer, listener and singer, and viewer and image to assemble a story out of pigment and air. "The best paintings," he says, "are like dreams. They convince you they are real, they fold you into their worlds, and then they hold you there." Dan Beachy-Quick also comments on the idea of art opening up a world to us: "Art lends us its eyes, lends us its face, not to protect or mask our own, but to remove the mask our own face has unknowingly become, to remove from our eyes the embroidered veil we have mistaken for our vision." From George Crumb, comes this observation: "Simon Dinnerstein's art evokes, for me, something reminiscent of Marcel Proust in which memories of the past, the actual present, and dreams of the future are curiously interchangeable. I love his sense of 'time suspension,' suggesting that all earlier times may coexist with the present time."

EXHIBITION INFORMATION

The Fulbright Triptych, which has been in the permanent collection of the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University for many years, will be exhibited in New York at the German Consulate General (along with other selected works) June 16 - September 15. The Consulate is located at 871 United Nations Plaza at 49th Street.

About the Artist:

Simon Dinnerstein was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1943. He graduated from City College of New York with a B.A. in history, and studied painting and drawing at the Brooklyn Museum Art School with Louis Grebenak, David Levine and Richard Mayhew. He has had twenty-two solo exhibitions. He has also been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to Germany, the Rome Prize for living and working in Italy at the American Academy in Rome, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant, the Ingram Merrill Award for Painting, a New York State Foundation for the Arts Grant, and three Childe Hassam Purchase Awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1999 and 2000, a retrospective of his work toured the country, sponsored in part by a grant from the Robert Lehman Foundation. Two monographs, *The Art of Simon Dinnerstein* (University of Arkansas Press, 1990) and *Simon Dinnerstein: Paintings and Drawings* (Hudson Hills Press, 2000), have been published on his work. His large-scale painting *The Fulbright Triptych*, is the subject of *THE SUSPENSION OF TIME: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych* (Millkweed Editions, 2011). Mr. Dinnerstein, a member of the National Academy of Design, has been represented in past years by Staempfli Gallery and ACA Galleries in New York. He resides in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

About the Editor:

Daniel Slager is the publisher and CEO of Milkweed Editions. Prior to joining Milkweed as editor-in-chief in 2005, he was an editor at Harcourt Trade Publishers in New York where he worked with writers such as Günter Grass, José Saramago, Wislawa Szymborska, and Umberto Eco. Prior to joining Harcourt, he was the associate editor of *Grand Street*, a leading quarterly magazine of literature and fine arts. His translations of texts by Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, and Heiner Müller have been widely acclaimed, and his renderings of Durs Grünbein, Marcel Beyer, Felicitas Hoppe, and Terezia Mora have marked these authors' first publications in the U.S.

About the Book:

THE SUSPENSION OF TIME:

Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and *The Fulbright Triptych*

Edited by Daniel Slager

Milkweed Editions

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8 x 9 ½, 360 pages

70 illustrations, 59 in color

For author photo, cover art, and jpegs of the Triptych and detail images, contact either Victoria Meyer vmeyer@nyc.rr.com or Ethan Rutherford ethan_rutherford@milkweed.org

For more information, please visit www.simondinnerstein.com and <http://www.milkweed.org/>

Coming from Milkweed Editions on June 16, 2011,
**THE SUSPENSION OF TIME: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein
and *The Fulbright Triptych***
BACKSTORY

**THE STORY BEHIND THE FULBRIGHT TRIPTYCH—HOW THE PAINTING CHANGED THE
ARTIST’S LIFE BEFORE IT WAS EVEN FINISHED.**

Simon Dinnerstein says the imagery for the triptych came to him in its totality when he began working on it in 1971 as a young artist living in Germany on a Fulbright Grant. At that time, its many themes were not completely apparent. Many of them were operating on a subconscious level, he says. “I think the best art is not totally rational, it’s mysterious and mystical, and can’t be put into words. It exists in the murky shadows of the night.” For example, he was an American Jew living in post-WWII Germany, and although there is nothing explicit about this in the painting other than the German landscape seen through two windows, Dinnerstein says the work is informed by the past and memory, the quest for identity, and the ambivalent emotional weight of being an American Jew living in Germany.

When Dinnerstein’s work on the triptych was still in progress and he was struggling to pay the rent and support his wife and their new baby girl, he took the chance of walking in off the street to the Staempfli Gallery on Upper Madison Avenue in New York with some photographs of his incomplete triptych, and managed to get the dealer and his co-director to visit his studio in Brooklyn. After looking at the painting for twenty minutes and not saying a word, the dealer, George Staempfli, told Simon, “I think this is a great painting and I’d like to own it.” After that pronouncement, they rushed off to hail a taxi back to Manhattan and told Dinnerstein, “Don’t contact us, we’ll call you.” In the end, they proposed to buy the painting unfinished, and pay Dinnerstein a fixed sum every month until it was completed. “The check was never late,” says the artist’s wife, Renée Dinnerstein. “It came every month on time, and we lived on it.” When *The Fulbright Triptych* was done, Dinnerstein had his first one-man show at the Staempfli Gallery, and his life and career were altered forever.

THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK—THE SUSPENSION OF TIME

The idea for *The Suspension of Time* originated with the artist’s love of art books, especially those devoted to one painting, which have always struck him as “the painted equivalent of a novel.” He observed that most such books were on works by Old Masters such as Bosch, Van Eyck, Courbet, Picasso, but very few on contemporary artists, and none at all of book length devoted solely to one painting by a living American artist. Dinnerstein had the idea for just such a book about his monumental triptych, but didn’t quite know where to go with it.

It was a stroke of luck that at a wedding in New York’s Chinatown he sat down next to a man named Daniel Slager, a book editor who shared his taste in literature. They struck up a friendship. When Dinnerstein learned that his new editor friend was leaving the New York publishing world and going to Minneapolis where he would head up the small, independent publishing house Milkweed Editions and have great freedom to publish books of his choosing, Dinnerstein shared his book idea with him. Slager told him he needed to get his feet on the ground at his new job and repeatedly told him to try him again in another few months. Finally, more than a year later, Slager announced he was making a trip to New York and could meet with Dinnerstein so that they could discuss his book idea. This was a rare opportunity, but how was he going to be able to really sell him on the idea? By another stroke of luck, just a few

days before the meeting took place, he learned from one of the students in his drawing class that her husband, David Rosenthal, was the publisher of Simon & Schuster. Dinnerstein relayed all this to his wife, Renée, who said, “You’ve got to call this man about your book idea and get advice before the meeting.” Dinnerstein called him and in less than five minutes, got two pieces of critical advice. Rosenthal told him, first, make it a book about writing, not just about art that focuses on this one painting; and second, compile a wish list of 60-70 potential contributors. “If you’re lucky, you’ll get 7 who say yes,” said Rosenthal. As it turned out, 37 agreed to contribute. Dinnerstein arrived at his meeting the next day, presented the idea and the list of names, and the response from Slager was: “We’ve really got to do this--let’s just go ahead.” The painting is being brought back to life after 40 years, says Dinnerstein, who sees the book as another example of the fairy tale-like history this painting has had.

TWO ARTISTS IN ONE FAMILY—SIMON (THE PAINTER) AND HIS DAUGHTER SIMONE (THE CLASSICAL PIANIST) -- HOW THE WORK OF EACH HAS INFORMED THAT OF THE OTHER

“From my angle, says Simon Dinnerstein, “all the arts are the same in terms of what you look for. Whether it’s painting, drawing, music, dance, theater, film, literature, or architecture, you want to be able to recognize the rich tradition of the form, but at the same time make it new and give it an inflection that is of our time--both modern and different.” In her music, Simone has been influenced by this idea, says Dinnerstein. “Rather than playing Bach the way it’s been done in the past, she’s trying to bring to it something that’s modern and very personal.”

When Simone was growing up, Dinnerstein says, he engaged her in thinking about art—what it is and why it’s important. “Art weighs as much as a car,” is how he put it to young Simone, to convey its importance in the world. Simone observed her father’s maniacal commitment to drawing and painting, and emulated it. “As a little kid, she’d be practicing on one floor, and I’d be on top floor painting. She wanted me to see that she was as focused as I was and that her commitment to her art was just as strong as mine was.”

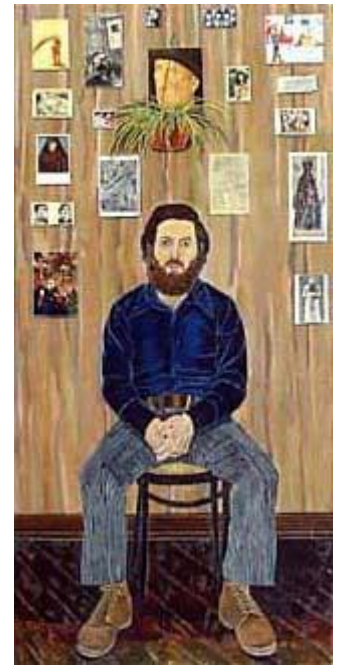
Although he can’t read music, Dinnerstein would talk to his daughter about her music in terms of color and line. For example, he might comment that a line in the music she was playing wasn’t long enough. “I learned so much about music from her,” he says.

The Fulbright Triptych was a large presence in his daughter’s life from the time she was a young child, says Dinnerstein. “The Triptych was born at the same time as I was,” says Simone, “and it contains my parents’ DNA just as much as I do.”

Remarking on their similarities as artists, Dinnerstein says, “I feel there’s some kinship between what Simone has done in her music and what I’ve done in my work. It all comes down to not necessarily following rules but rather listening very hard and following what the art is calling for.”

Before his daughter was born, Dinnerstein anticipated that he might have a child who would go into the fine arts or literature. It never occurred to him it would be music. For his part, Dinnerstein always wanted to write, and says that pursuing his painting and drawing “feels like writing.” Certain writing, he explains, seems enhanced by a visually descriptive texture. In the same vein, painting and drawing can have an underpinning in the world of language, verbal interplay and literary imagination.

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©1971-1974 Simon Dinnerstein
THE FULBRIGHT TRIPTYCH
Oil on wood panel, 14 feet in width

Palmer Museum of Art
Penn State University



Detail of *The Fulbright Triptych*