The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych

Excerpts and Quotes

"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. It functions as a time capsule and a mirror for its viewers souls, and so despite personal and historical referential elements has become permanently contemporary and universal. No surprise that it has now served as a point of instigation for a cycle of astonishing written responses; this book is like tuning the painting in like a radio to a station where these responses were always already playing."

Jonathan Lethem

"In *The Fulbright Project*, Dinnerstein continues the life of "A". 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."

John Coetzee

"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. It is also an intensely personal painting, just as Moby Dick, for all its vastness, is an intensely personal narrative. It is a painting about a young American artist's absorption of Northern European art, about his study of Durer's copper engravings, about his response to that discipline in a new medium, and about his journey home. The triptych-in-progress not only crossed the Atlantic physically

along with its creator, but embodies dense layers of crossings between one thing and another: between artistic traditions, between places, between past and present, between the real and the recreated. Between emerging and being, and between conception and birth."

Jhumpa Lahiri

"Furthermore, this work, more than any other modern American painting, represents a dramatic homage to individual things. It presents to the viewer a veritable 'language of objects.' The three figures lead our eye into the center, and from there our gaze radiates outward, taking in the vast quantity of elements that comprise the essence of this scene. There is an almost-musical quality to this painting; each object becoming the equivalent of a note in a vast symphonic score.

This painting is also a homage to looking, an encyclopedic concretization of scopic intensity. There is a plethora of individual square and rectangular shapes throughout the composition which we initially perceive as a vast series of punctuations of its space. Yet we soon become aware that most of them are postcards or photographic reproductions of works of art (many of them well known). They are famous paintings and sculptures in museums from Munich to the Metropolitan, each of them holding a special place in the aesthetic hierarchy of the artist. We are reminded of a wall of a museum, or, as André Malraux would have described it, a museum without walls."

Edward Sullivan

"I must think and think again about the Triptych. Obviously you have put everything into it. My immediate feeling about it -– and practically all your work --

is that it is a perfect register (narrative, if you will, art-as-equivalent-at-the-highest-articulateness) of the Jewish soul. Fred Siegel once gave me a poster from a school. It is a lesson in the letter aleph, showing that the upper yod symbolizes Torah and God, the lower one is human life, and the diagonal is the boundary between the two. The illustration is of a family studying Torah at the kitchen (or dining room) table, father, mother, daughter, and son. The triptych says something of the same thing -– and lots more.

It is an iconographer's heaven! That's Germany -– Germany! -– out the windows. "Here we are, a family. We have been civilized for five thousand years. We have experienced everything; we have survived. We flourish." Images of Assyria and Babylon to the right; children's drawings -– renewal -– to the right.

Zukofsky's "A" in paint!"

Guy Davenport

"In Dinnerstein's Painting, an Echo Chamber

Simon Dinnerstein was born in Brooklyn in 1943, at a time when Germany was a foe to be overthrown at all costs. In 1970 that same Simon Dinnerstein went to Germany on a Fulbright scholarship. Fulbrights for Germany were easier to get than Fulbrights for France, Britain, or Italy, and Mr. Dinnerstein responded in any case to the ancient German tradition of exact plain statement in art.

He went to Kassel, a city not much visited by foreigners except in every fourth summer, when the "Documenta" exhibitions have attracted the international art

world to Kassel for months on end. He lodged in the outskirts of the city, where the steeply pitched roofs of the postwar housing estate peter out one by one, and the seraphic landscape beyond is much as it was in Dürer's day.

It looked a dullish sort of place, by the standards of Manhattan. But dullness can concentrate the mind, and Mr. Dinnerstein began to paint and draw not only what was immediately in front of him but also himself, and his wife, and all the things he had most loved in the way of past art.

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It took him forever. Whether it would be ready for his show at the Staempfli Gallery, 47 East Seventy-Seventh Street, was long in doubt. The view from the paired windows would alone have been a year's work for many artists. Then there was the interior, with its floor-to-ceiling pinboard, its tableful of instruments shown in deep perspective, its seated portraits of the artist and of his wife with their small baby, and its encyclopedia of visual enthusiasms. Those enthusiasms included masterpieces of French and Italian painting in small-scale reproduction, air letters, children's drawings, newspaper clippings, and a big black letter *y*, islanded on white paper. The completed picture measures 6 feet 7 inches by 13 feet.

Neither scale nor perseverance has anything to do with success in art, and Mr. Dinnerstein's triptych could be just one more painstaking failure. But it succeeds as an echo chamber, as a scrupulous representation of a suburb in the sticks, as a portrait of young people who are trying to make an honorable go of life and as an inventory of the kinds of things that in 1975 give such people a sense of their own identity. Today is the last day of the show, but the triptych will be available to interested persons until further notice. It deserves to go to a museum."

John Russell

"The *Fulbright Triptych* can be related to certain aspects of this period, particularly with regard to the representation of the Jewish resident artist in a land that had killed six million Jews. Dinnerstein depicts himself and his family through a series of ambiguities and dualities that point to the historical paradoxes of the relationship of Jews to Germany. On the one hand, the family in the painting alludes to Christ's family and thus stresses the origin of Judaeo-Christian ties. This allusion is undercut by the female gender of the child, which secularizes the family. A similar internal contradiction is achieved through the tension between the secular, contemporary look of the mother and the slightly anachronistic look of the father, whose unconventional pants and full beard invoke vaguely biblical connotations that implicitly point to the role of Judaism as spiritual and cultural sponsor. The altar-like table with utensils and the reshaped and repurposed mini triptych on it identifies the significance of Jewishness in the secularizing role of art (religious signifiers are converted into artistic ones). The painting particularly alludes to the crucial role of Jews as patrons, collectors, and connoisseurs, who, in one way or another, have significantly furthered western art since the Renaissance. The image's polysemy thus serves as a commentary on the complex history of Jewish identity and also on the complicated relation between being Jewish and being German. Situating the family of three within a German-identified environment, the triptych testifies to the fact that it was once again possible for Jews to live in Germany, whether as foreign visitors or as Germans. But it is also possible to regard the family that is depicted as not being Jewish at all. Their looks combine impressions of suburban plainness with elements of folklore in a manner that was not uncommon for educated Germans who were influenced by the semiotic codes and the life style of the counterculture of the late 60s/early 70s.

As a Jew visiting a country whose own Jewish community has been radically reduced, his visit must be seen as a continuation of the diaspora, whose reverse direction lends it demonstrative force and political charge. The implications of his visit—which took place at a time when many non-German

Jews still refused to visit West-Germany—also make him an eye-witness whose stay in the country enables him to “inspect” it first hand and use his art as a form of testimonial.

Needless to say, Dinnerstein’s Jewishness makes his role as eye-witness/ evaluator more charged. Bearing witness has, of course, been a central element in the uncovering and bringing to trial of the crimes of the Holocaust. “

Roy Grundmann

“Time Suspension” and *The Fulbright Triptych*

“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 co-exist with the present time. I guess I’m trying to do something similar in my composition!

Dinnerstein’s work is very spiritual and haunting. At the same time it reflects the beauty of our physical existence. I do get a strong sense of the fragility of life in his work, very much like Francois Villon’s *Where are the snows of yesteryear?*”

George Crumb

“August, 1970….Simon and I standing on the deck of the Bremen, oompah band booming maudlin German music in the background, our families anxiously waving from the shore…we were off, on Simon’s Fulbright Fellowship, to the

land of Dürer, of Bach and of a terrible holocaust that practically annihilated the Jewish population. Excitements, expectation, confusion, guilt….all of these emotions were playing havoc within us.

For Simon, a 27 year old Jewish artist who grew up in the post-World War II years, spending a year in Germany was more than the sum of its parts. We both found it almost impossible to have a conversation with a mature German without thinking." Where were you? What did you do? What would you have done to me and my family?" But living in a small town, making new friends (our not-yet born daughter Simone Andrea was named after the two children of our new friends Gerlinde and Herbert Wenderoth) forced us to confront many of the complexities of human existence,. Our own country was dropping napalm on villages in Vietnam, as was often brought to our attention by young Germans who we met at the art school and in the village.

That year, I saw in person the art that I had only previously seen in books. Simon and I were over-dosing on art and it was wonderful! Van Eyck in Frankfurt. Durer in Nuremberg. Grunewald in Kolmar. Simon even got special permission, with the help of the Fulbright Commission, to enter into the then East German city of Gotha to view one of the only original existing Durer copper plates. I got to go along on that complicated but exhilarating trip."

Renee Dinnerstein

"…my enthusiasm for Dinnerstein 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.

…*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.[1] Dinnerstein, like many displaced

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American artists, invites us to reflect upon these fundamental questions of art, identity, and the burden of expatriatism. “

Robert McGrath

“Look at *The Fulbright Triptych* for a minute and the mind begins to fill in the blanks, sketch lines between data points, assemble a story out of pigment and air. Is this about Judaism and Germany? Is this about family and work? Is this about learning to paint and learning to be a father? Ten million brushstrokes of color touch three huge canvases, and we see a woman’s eyes, a pair of windows, a baby’s cheeks. Two dimensions become three. A table surges into the room, loaded with tools, waiting for you to come and pick one up.

The best paintings are like dreams. They convince you they are real, they fold you into their worlds, and then they hold you there. Only then, when you’re anchored in the moment-by-moment detail of an experience, when your eyes have extended across the room, when the copper plate is shimmering in front of your hands, can you let yourself reach out into the space between brain and image, into the great mystery of what it means to be viewer and printmaker, reader and writer, listener and singer.

That’s where our brains find meaning in the world. That’s where art exists.”

Anthony Doerr