

Excerpted Commentaries on The Fulbright Triptych:

“This little-known masterpiece of 1970s realism was begun by the young Simon Dinnerstein during a Fulbright Fellowship in Germany and completed in his hometown, Brooklyn, three years later. Incorporating carefully rendered art postcards, children’s drawings and personal memorabilia; a formidable worktable laid out with printmaking tools and outdoor views; and the artist and his family, it synthesizes portrait, still life, interior and landscape and rummages through visual culture while sampling a dazzling range of textures and representational styles. It should be seen by anyone interested in the history of recent art and its oversights.”

-[Roberta Smith](#), Senior Art Critic, *The New York Times*, August 11, 2011

“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 created. Between emerging and being, and between conception and birth. ”

-[Jhumpa Lahiri](#), author, *Interpreter of Maladies*

“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](#), composer, *Ancient Voices of Children*

"The people at the German consulate believe so fiercely in *The Fulbright Triptych* that, after the Dinnerstein exhibition closes, the painting will remain in place in the consulate's lobby. The Met should try to carve out a slot in its exhibition schedule during this period and persuade all concerned to let it give the triptych a small properly professional show, possibly with some of the large charcoal portrait

drawings that Mr. Dinnerstein made during the same period. The four examples reproduced in the book about the triptych look fabulous. Because ultimately the single most startling fact about Mr. Dinnerstein's "Fulbright Triptych" is that it has never had the honor --- which it richly deserves ---of being exhibited in a major museum, in New York or anywhere elsewhere. If it were, anyone interested in the history of recent art and its oversights would be beyond lucky."

-[Roberta Smith](#), Senior Art Critic, *The New York Times*, August 11, 2011

"Simon Dinnerstein paints with a reverence for life that is rare. The radiance of his light can transform reality into a presence that is essential, mythic and dreamlike.

-George Tooker, artist, *The Subway, The Government Bureau*

"In *The Fulbright Triptych* 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."

-J.M. Coetzee, author, *Disgrace*

"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](#), Senior Art Critic, *The New York Times*, February 5, 1975

"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 -- 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 Babylonia to the right; children's drawings -- renewal -- to the left."

Zukofsky's "A" in paint!"

-[Guy Davenport](#), author, *The Geography of the Imagination*

“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, author, *Fortress of Solitude*

“Two windows, both in the painting’s central panel, offer a bird’s-eye view of the village, revealing a placid street and the rooftops of single-family homes. The “inventory” consists of postcards depicting works of art, mostly Northern Renaissance paintings, which hang on the wall alongside sketches suggesting works in progress. On the right panel is a self-portrait, and on the left panel a portrait of the artist’s wife and daughter, also seated and frontal. The piece signals Dinnerstein’s continuing interests: the figure, his family and friends, and old-master artists. Among the artists who have influenced him, he says, are van Eyck, Durer, and Rembrandt, and the twentieth-century artists who emulate them, such as Andrew Wyeth and, perhaps unexpectedly, Edward Weston. There is always an air of moody insularity to Dinnerstein’s works, as though the studio were a *hortus conclusus*, a sort of prelapsarian space signaling Dinnerstein’s self-sufficiency.”

-[Donald Kuspit](#), Senior Art Critic, *Art Forum*

“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](#), author, *All the Light We Cannot See*

“This work, (*The Fulbright Triptych*) 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](#), Professor, Art History, NYU

“An astonishing book (The Suspension of Time) - the insights into the artist and the artwork by such diverse and thoughtful writers are a wonderfully creative way to prompt the kinds of associations that come from seeing a remarkable painting.”

-Virginia Mecklenburg, Senior Curator, Smithsonian American Art Museum

“One of the first associations I had upon seeing your painting was with Agnes Varda’s film *The Gleaners and I*. This painting seems to me a culmination of a lifetime spent gleaning – be it objects, images, quotes, memories, or thoughts. I get the impression of someone for whom thinking, creating and living one’s life are all intimately intertwined. I presume that when you collected all of these things, you never intended to put them directly into a painting.”

-[Tim Nicholas](#), filmmaker, writer

My father’s Triptych has loomed large in my life. It tells the story of my parents right before I was conceived through my infancy. It’s a story that I find endlessly fascinating. Who were they then?

So the Triptych was born at the same time as I was, and it contains my parents’ DNA just as much as I do. When I look at the Triptych I see where I came from. And if I wanted to tell someone who I really am deep inside, I would just need to show them those three panels.

-[Simone Dinnerstein](#), pianist

"It's all there in Proust---all mankind!" Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer once told an interviewer. Breyer explained, Proust is a universal author: he can touch anyone, for different reasons; each of us can find some piece of himself in Proust, at different ages."

Those comments can to my mind this summer while I was at the Arnot Art Museum in Elmira, New York, standing in front of The Fulbright Triptych, a sprawling, astonishingly detailed painting that the Brooklyn-based artist Simon Dinnerstein worked on increasingly between 1971 and 1974. Like In Search of Lost Time, it is a *sui generis* masterpiece, a world onto itself---one that has earned a devoted following even though it has spent much of its life in storage.

-[Andrew Russeth](#), Co-Executive Editor, Art News, January 4, 2019

What is a world picture? Obviously a picture of the world. But what does "world" mean here? What does "picture" mean? World serves here as a name for what it is in its entirety. The name is not limited to the cosmos, to nature. History also belongs to the world. . . . World picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture . . . the structured image that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before."

-Martin Heidegger

Dinnerstein's extraordinary painting, *Fulbright Triptych*, conceived in 1971 in a small apartment overlooking Hessisch-Lichtenau, a small town outside of Kassel, Germany, during his Fulbright Fellowship and completed in Brooklyn after his return to the US in 1974, represents and sets before us, in the meaning of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, a complete world picture.

Heidegger saw the "conquest of the world as picture" as "the fundamental event of the modern age." In the modern age, which begins for Heidegger with the French seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, man has become "subject." The world is no longer conceived as "ens creatum," observed from the outside by God, such as the Creator- God on the outer panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* looking down at the world hovering inside a crystalline globe on the third day of creation. In the modern age, the world is instead presented from within by the human self-consciousness.

-[Klaus Ottmann](#), Chief Curator, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

"The Fulbright Triptych," which depicts the artist seated in the right panel, his wife and daughter on the left, and a tableful of engraving supplies beneath two open windows in the center, is a dream painting, but not in terms of incongruity or eeriness, as you would find in René Magritte or Paul Delvaux; rather, it employs the Freudian idea of condensation, in which unlikely images are jammed together to spark lines of thought or open portals of memory. The triptych's array of postcards, photos, drawings, texts, and ephemera, painstakingly reproduced by the artist as decorations on a pegboard wall, function as pictorial triggers for the viewer's free associations, as well as attributes (in the iconographic sense of symbolic identifiers) for the personalities of the two adult subjects.

But to see the work in person is to be struck, foremost, by the weight and volume of its forms and the clarity of its space. It radiates the realness of dreams while also maintaining their adamantine unreality. This is evident even before you enter the gallery, when you encounter Dinnerstein's startling gaze through the gallery's glass doors. You feel as if he is physically sitting there, waiting.

The wide-ranging implications of the triptych's pictorial references are what, to my mind, lift it out of the 1970s and plant it firmly in the current day, a perspective that runs counter to the historically focused tenor of much of the commentary around the painting; its power lies not in its adherence to models from the past, but in the openings it provides into the future.

-[Thomas Michelli](#), Senior Art Critic and Co-Editor, Hyperallergic

I am a part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

--Alfred Lord Tennyson "Ulysses" (1842)

Thus, the *Fulbright Triptych* is a product of its moment as well as an outgrowth of much art historical tradition. Its self-consciousness and self-representation is indeed personal and unique, but at the same time deeply immersed in tradition, even while so richly and variously marking its own place in time.

-[Larry Silver](#), Farquhar Professor, University of Pennsylvania, author of *Hieronymous Bosch, Art in History, Pieter Breughel*, for Abbeville Press

The Fulbright Triptych: A Love Story

This past August, my now grown-up daughter, her husband Jeremy, my seven year old grandson Adrian, Simon, and I made a seven-hour pilgrimage to Penn State University (our rental car stopped working along the way, slowing down our progress) to visit with this painting that has been so much a part of our family history. As I stood before it,

I noticed something that I had not thought of before. At the top of the left panel, Simon included some photo's that we took on one of our first dates in 1964. We rode on the Staten Island Ferry and when we arrived at the terminal we found a machine where one could take inexpensive little pictures. Then my eyes skimmed all the way over to the right panel. At the very top, Simon included the same kind of photo's, only this time they were of Simon, myself, and two-year, old Simone. There it was! A story of our life from when we met until the completion of the painting. I imagine that each person will see something very particular or personal in this painting. One could concentrate on the history of art, on the juxtaposition of the printer's studio with the painted image, with the scene of a young American family in a foreign land, but for me this painting is the ever-lasting, monumental story of our love and of our voyage together through life.

-[Renee Dinnerstein](#) is an educator, consultant and lecturer in New York City public and private schools, in schools across the country and in Asia. She is the author of *Choice Time: How to Deepen Learning Through Inquiry and Play* (Heinemann, 2016) and is the recipient of the Bank Street Early Childhood Educator Award.

Much has been said about Dinnerstein's masterpiece, *The Fulbright Triptych*. My suggestion is to look at it as a pictorial Venn diagram, one that mentions a pattern of influences and associations integral to the relationship between the two adult figures. They appear at right and left, but in the stillness of the middle panel we see their unified life. Through the depiction of art historical masterpieces -- one can see Edwin Dickinson, Ingres, an Indian court painting, a Vermeer -- a poetic understanding emerges. As viewers, we hold a privileged perspective and are invited to see the progeny of this painting: a child and a painting.

-[Matt Ballou](#), artist and writer, Professor, Fine Arts, University of Missouri-Columbia

No one could accuse Simon Dinnerstein of being a fashionable artist. Not at this time he began, not now, and not any time in between. Leafing through the catalog of his mature work that now spans four decades, one is struck immediately by his total disregard for prevailing taste, his apparent disinterest in the visual arguments of advanced art circles, and conversely, by his single-minded concentration upon the development of a highly personal, creative pursuit. Well before his thirtieth birthday, the young artist was already in the possession of the technical means and the spiritual motivation that allowed him, in the late sixties, to set out on a very lonely road toward assertion of his role. It was clear to him that it had to be played outside of the enchanted circle within which current art and art criticism were enclosed.

In Dinnerstein's monumental *Fulbright Triptych*, such qualities are carried to a rich and potent synthesis. The work's central image, featuring an interior view with landscape, is placed between a frontal portrait of a seated man to the right and that of a mother and child to its left. This large-scale painting, in addition to dealing with issues of process and perception, has references to visual memory and identity, the workshop of a printmaker, childhood, and ultimately, the curiosity of being a young family living in a foreign land.

-[Thomas M. Messer](#), Director Emeritus, Guggenheim Museum, author of *Edvard Munch* (Abrams), *Egon Schiele* (Institute of Contemporary Art), and *Jean Dubuffet* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation).

The family dynamic of the *Triptych* can be read in countless ways. The dislocation of the scene -- that the *Triptych* isn't about a particular time and place -- lends an oddness to the arrangement and supports a hidden meaning. In one sense, the solitary artist appears cut off from his family by the studio. He's alone on one side, housewife and child are on the other, and his studio equipment separates the two sides. In another sense, the family is not so much a distraction from the artist's work as a conclusion. For in the family arrangement it's possible to see the echo of printmaking, with the printmaker's table representing human reproduction, and the stamp of the parents imprinted on the child.

-[James Panero](#), Art Critic and Executive Editor, The New Criterion

In his celebrated memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the distinguished Austrian psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl meditated upon the quest for meaning -- a process he called logotherapy -- which he believed sustained those who survived their ordeal. According to Frankl, meaning issued from three possible sources: purposeful work, love and courage in the face of challenge. *The Fulbright Triptych* celebrates the artistic process with the finely detailed copper plate at its center and the nascent Dinnerstein family (with not-yet-conceived infant daughter) depicted in the venerable and venerated triptych form, while enlisting the emerging young artist's entire life experience and Western art, historical tradition to pursue a daring new vision and direction while dwelling as strangers in a strange land. This monumental work seems to me a masterpiece of logotherapy as well as of art.

-W. Arthur Mehrhoff, Academic Coordinator, Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, Columbia

When I turn away from the Triptych, I have a sudden flash in my head--that museum of the mind--in which I occasionally see the work of another artist. That other artist is Giuseppe Arcimboldo...

In each panel of the Triptych faces abound, and when I stare at it, I find it--always through a different face--staring back at me....

I want to think about faces.

The word is both noun and verb. We must face faces; faces face us. Etymology here is telling. Latinate in source: "facia corresponding to form, figure, face, and related to facere, make, do, perform."

A face is a form and a function....

Among the many faces catalogued in the Triptych there is another face, an Arcimboldian face, and this face fills the entire middle panel. It stares at us as directly as does Simon Dinnerstein, as does his wife, as does his not-yet-existing daughter.

For eyes this face has windows. Through the windows we see what this face sees--the German village with the shingled roofs--which means this face is two-faced: it stares at us, but we stare through it.

Now we are inside the face we face. Now the painting is that face we wear over our face; I do not mean a mask. Sometimes (and this is where Dinnerstein stuns me) we must put on a face, not to hide our own, but to more fully reveal it. This painting is one such face: our eyes see through its eyes, and what we see is a world. The world--see Wittgenstein--is what we have from which to make art, and in making art, also make ourselves. We have this world; we have no other. Sometimes we cannot see this fact through our own eyes, in our own face, and so 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. This countenance is allegory's face.

The allegory is thick because it is real: when the heat kicks on, the windows must steam, must become opaque. And then, tacked to the walls are those reproductions of works that are themselves a thinking, a thinking that inspires even as it respire, and as thought is itself a certain kind of reproduction of the world as it is perceived, so now these careful reproductions of reproductions take on their thoughtful life. Inside the face is the face's thinking.

And sitting on the table, this mouth of a table, the tools of expression wait, encircling that which they express...

The left panel and the right panel, they stare out at us, they face our face. The middle panel is the face we put on, almost as if the artist on one side, and the artist's family on the other, must become somehow our ears. Life, then, listens. That is, life is a form of listening--of perceiving--to the thoughts listening engenders, and in engendering, creates the art that is of the world and pours back into the world. Whose face isn't, in each season, constructed of the fruits of that season? What a strange and visionary wisdom exists inside the Triptych, that in the middle of our face there is a face, and on it the evidence of many other faces, each in their odd way our own. This isn't the face we speak with, but the face that speaks through us. When we speak through it we do so to hear what is that's being said (we do this as

ourselves when we are more than merely our own, when we are, so to speak, double-faced); when we see we look so as to see what is being shown. Art makes us this audience to ourselves--at least great art does. This is not selfish, but includes the self. We return to such art not simply to be in the face of it, but to reclaim by it, through it, by means of it, our own face. Great art gives us that face, our face. We return to see it so we can see. We return to it because, in doing so, in the miracle of creative attention, that true reciprocity, it returns us to ourselves.

[-Dan Beachy-Quick, "Allegory's Face," The Suspension of Time, is the author of A Whaler's Dictionary \(Milkweed Editions\) and Wonderful Investigations \(Milkweed Editions\).](#)