

The Urban View in the Art of Simon Dinnerstein

Edward J. Sullivan

The numerous references to the iconography of the classical Renaissance tradition as well as the precisely drawn renderings of his forms have tended to place the work of Simon Dinnerstein outside the realm of the banal realities of everyday urban life in the late twentieth century. Nonetheless, when examined closely, many of his paintings and drawings seem to have at their heart a commitment to, and an intense engagement with, the city. Urban energy and a close understanding of the fabric of urban life intertwine themselves in and around many of the images created by this contemporary realist. Understanding this interaction with the modern metropolis may serve to put a somewhat more subtly nuanced light onto certain examples of his work.

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The 1991 crayon and pastel drawing entitled *Purple Haze* represents an excellent example of the artist's blending of a variety of concerns in his art. At first glance this exquisite drawing looks to be an updating of an intensely classical form. The viewer conceives of the beautiful young woman who floats above a cityscape, as a modern updating of an ancient allegory. She is, perhaps, a goddess, or a protectress of a certain place. She may represent an allegory of beauty, bounty, wealth or pleasure. Yet what is indeed even more compelling than this academically rendered figure is the fact that a strikingly portrayed outline of a city is present below her. The intense detail of the buildings, streets, lights, lines of traffic that whiz by in the evening's waning light, creates the true poetry of the piece. The figure and the city are foils against which each other's beauty is evoked in a loving manner. Nothing may be so lovely as contemplating a large city (such as New York, where Dinnerstein works) in the purplish haze of an early summer evening. By the same token, the beauty of the youthful female is another joyous expression of the type of vigor and animation that the city itself may represent. Dinnerstein has created a composition that embodies the poetry of the city, producing a panegyric to the substance of urban existence and the potency that emanates from the life lived there.

In a fashion similar to his manipulation of the broad view of urban existence in *Purple Haze*, Dinnerstein has also created panoramic scenes that concentrate their entire attention on views of the metropolis, without the intervention of the human figure. The 1969 pencil drawing entitled *1:30 at Dave and Nancy's* records, in the way reminiscent of the stereoscopic views of early panoramic cameras, the roofs, water towers, spires and chimneys of Brooklyn. In this work and in others such as *From Naoko's Window* (1968) or *Garfield Place, Brooklyn* (1970), the city (and specifically the city of Brooklyn) is the principal subject of the piece. The artist lovingly examines, caresses and, in an almost magical sense, conjures up not only the physical appearance but also the smells, the light, the effects of the winter air on the face of the viewer as he or she contemplates the scene.

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It is not only his panoramic views and sweeping stretches of city life that enliven and, indeed, electrify some of the compositions of Dinnerstein. We see in many of his smaller, more intimate and contemplative works that he fixes upon a specific facade, examines with loving care individual details of a precise street within the city. In *Windows #3* of 1967, Dinnerstein focuses on individual architectural details of the roof and window treatments of the highly ornate *beaux-arts* style buildings so commonly found in Brooklyn. The urban archaeology of the city comes alive in Dinnerstein's art in which he imbues this sort of detail with a pulsating life of its own.

More humble parts of the city also serve as the subjects for some of the artist's most interesting and successful compositions. He has painted and drawn a number of views from his studio window. In such an example as *Windows #2* we observe (in an almost voyeuristic way, reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window") the view across an alley, into the backyards and back windows of a number of families in Brooklyn. The bare trees, denuded of their leaves in the cold winter air, lend an even more intense feeling to the scene which, in the spareness of the architectural outlines of the buildings and the dryness of the elements of nature, calls to mind some of Albrecht Dürer's bleakest and coldest evocations of winter. Reminiscent, too, of the art of Dürer and other northern Renaissance artists, is the 1982 composition entitled *Nocturne*, in which a heavily bearded man sits before a large panoramic window. Through the window we see, once again, a view of a city block. We suspect that this is the same Brooklyn block that the artist has repeated again and again in many of his works. It is an urban space that represents the site of creativity and illumination. In this work as in others by Dinnerstein, we receive the distinct impression that the fabric of urban life serves as one of the essential components of the creative force at work in the artist's imagination.

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plate. 30

One of the greatest achievements in this observation of the interaction of the human element with the backdrop of the city is the 1986 *A Dream Play*. This large and ambitious piece may be

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understood as an allegory of life itself. Depicting people of all ages interacting with one another—friends, parents, children, cousins—this painting reminds us of certain precedents within the history of art, specifically, the nineteenth-century representations of the ages of mankind. Each figure in this crayon and pastel drawing comes together within the framework of the city. It is the city view that literally frames and gives visual structure to the picture. In this, as in so many of Simon Dinnerstein's works, he shows himself to be innately sensitive to aspects of human interaction as it takes place within the city. We further intuit from these works that the city is, in Dinnerstein's imagination, not only a place for living and working, but a site of energy and spiritual sustenance.

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Edward J. Sullivan is professor of art history and chairman, Department of Fine Arts, New York University.