

Time Travel: Revisiting *The Fulbright Triptych*

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I was introduced to Simon Dinnerstein's work almost immediately upon arriving at the Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Council (TRAHC) as the director of community programs in May of 1999. Our Regional Arts Center is the only secure gallery for fine art between Dallas, Texas, and Little Rock, Arkansas. We cover a one-hundred-mile service radius that includes Louisiana and Oklahoma, as well as Texas and Arkansas. We are the largest cultural organization in our region and our mission is "To Grow People and Community Through the Arts." With that in mind, TRAHC seeks to expose our populations to cultural experiences and opportunities that normally do not exist in our region, while actively supporting and nurturing our local and regional performing and visual artists. As with most nonprofits, we are underfunded and understaffed, with an extremely limited endowment, which means every staff member wears multiple hats, sometimes simultaneously.

The principal exhibition for 2000 had been arranged by TRAHC's previous executive director, an anonymous local donor whose college roommate was one of Simon Dinnerstein's neighbors in New York City, and my predecessor. All our new executive director and I really knew was that this exhibition was arriving in less than a year; it consisted of multiple paintings by the artist Simon Dinnerstein, who had received critical acclaim nationally and internationally numerous times, and virtually no preparation had taken place for this exhibition at our facility. The works were almost all from private collections in the United States, and the most significant piece was *The Fulbright Triptych*, worth tens of thousands of dollars. This pivotal piece was to be on loan from the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University, and it became obvious very quickly that our standard insurance policy would not cover an exhibition of this prominence. We would need to immediately find funding for the additional insurance. Our installation was to be one of only three in the United States before the works were returned to their owners. Oh yes, and there was also a beautiful four-color catalog that was being printed in support of this most noted artist's work. I was given a phone number where Mr. Dinnerstein could be reached.

I don't remember who made the first call, but just as if I were standing and looking at one of Simon's paintings for the first time, once that conversation began, I suddenly became part of an entity that was far larger than the normal scope of our own lives in Texas. As an institution, we became totally enveloped in a very significant body of work and with an artist who is able to capture his environment in great visual and emotional detail. Our new executive director and I viewed this exhibition as an opportunity to make a positive statement about a change we were initiating at TRAHC and in our area: "The recognition of the importance of art and its utilization within our region's culture."

Twelve months later, following numerous conversations with Simon, we received the works and the catalog several weeks prior to Simon's arrival for the opening reception. Being the curator I had been taught to be, thirty years and several careers earlier, I notified him that the quality of the shipping cartons was of great concern to me. Though none of the works had arrived damaged at our facility, knowing how often art shipments are mishandled in shipping, I had serious doubts about several of the cartons making it intact to the next venue, let alone back to their owners. My concerns were met with similar thoughts as I sent Simon elaborate descriptions of the shipping cartons, ranging from just single-layered cardboard sleeves and boxes to plywood cases with nails quite literally falling out of them. I had, for a short period of time in my undergraduate years, dreamed of being an artist, and the sensitivity of the handling of my work at that time created a common voice through which Simon and I began to communicate. And thus a friendship with Simon began, not by discussing the significance of art in the twenty-first century, but rather the structural integrity of cardboard, single and multilayered.

In discussions about placement and the selection of works, Simon was always very generous because of the Regional Arts Center's limited space. His preference was that *The Fulbright Triptych* should be the central focus and the anchor for the exhibition; the balance of the works would radiate around and support the *Triptych*. He said that he trusted me implicitly and knew that he would be very happy with whatever layout I created for the exhibition.

And so it evolved; as each lid was lifted from its case and every carton meticulously opened, the beauty and depth of each work was revealed. Each new unveiling presented a work that was more powerful than its predecessor. The ability that Simon has to capture a moment in time is remarkable, whether it is a still life, a portrait, or a fantasy world combining multiple elements. It is more than photo-realism that emerges on paper, canvas, or board. The images have a presence, an energy and soul, in which paint, charcoal, Prismacolor, and graphite are simply the media, the messenger.

It took four of us to lower *The Fulbright Triptych's* shipping crate to the floor for opening; we could only imagine what treasures lay inside. We had seen the image of the work that is shown most often, but what was revealed as we opened the lid was so much more. The sheer size of the center panel, the depth and richness of color, the creation of the wall paneling, the “slices of life” images were nonstop, they began flying at us as we discovered more and more intimate snapshots of Simon's world in the early seventies. We broke for dinner and I stayed to rearrange the other works, now that I'd begun to really experience the magnitude of these three panels.

Drew Ellison was my one remaining helper after dinner. He and I lifted the two side panels out of the crate and leaned them up against the wall, leaving space for the center panel. As we raised the largest of the three into place, something almost miraculous began to happen—we were suddenly being transported into Simon's studio where the *Triptych* was created. We were quite literally standing in the room where Simon had lived and painted for over three years. Drew remarked that he had seen photo-realism before in galleries across Europe and the United States, but never a painting such as what he was experiencing here with “Simon's triptych.”

We took copious measurements, because I only wanted to hang these panels once. The three panels were reinforced wood and they were quite heavy. Each one makes a very powerful visual statement in its own right, but the three together need to “become one” once they are hung. Level and plumb is the mantra, and they are not all the same height. There was virtually no margin of error without them looking uneven and unrelated to each other. As we were repairing one of the brackets on the center panel that had pulled away from its brace, my wife Patti arrived with our two-

and-a-half-year-old daughter and our nine-month-old son. She had been hearing about Simon's work and this specific painting for the last twelve months and had to see what progress we were making. At the time, it was not uncommon for me to be hanging works alone until two or three a.m., because I was the sole person responsible for the installations. This was indeed a rare treat for me to have help in hanging an exhibition. Drew and I took our final measurements, marked the wall, drove in the extra large anchors and hung Renée with Simone sitting in her lap on her plaid skirt. Simon's panel came next, with his postcards, miniature paintings, photos, self-portrait, children's artwork, photos of artwork, and the spider plant. As soon as we hung the center panel, we were immediately looking out of his studio windows, then down at the table he used for printing. The table stood in front of two radiators underneath the two matching windows and rested on multicolored floorboards, his etching tools and printing materials, the copper disk, the window latches, the rooftops and blue sky outside his studio windows all surrounded us. This intense realism was all painted by just one man, not collaged, printed, or silk-screened. We walked away and then came back for even closer examinations multiple times. Drew left shortly thereafter; he was ready to call it a night. This wasn't photo-realism; this was seeing an intimate room through the eyes of its creator. My young family was suddenly sharing time with Simon's young family in his studio, and almost thirty years of time were bridged instantly. The significance of this experience remains with Patti and me to this day.

I remember quite vividly Simon entering our gallery the following week and standing and staring at his studio, after not having seen it for some twenty-plus years. Neither of us said a word for probably half an hour as he "experienced" seeing his young wife Renée with their baby daughter Simone sitting on her plaid skirt, he with a full beard and head of hair, the smells and memories of that studio washing over him as memories were reawakened. He would walk away and look at other paintings, describing to me the technique he had used or the background story of the work. Then he would be drawn back again and again, sometimes just to gaze at what he had created and lived almost thirty years earlier. I felt extremely privileged to be able just to be a "fly on my galleries' walls" that afternoon.

Some might imagine themselves as actors in a scene, staring at *The Fulbright Triptych*, focusing on an individual element of the work itself and studying the incredible technique exhibited in its images. On the other hand, others might stand back to admire the grand scope and true spirit of this work. In either case, the *Triptych* captures a moment in time and draws us in to be part of it. For me this is what truly great art is. You are physically pulled in and become part of the actual work itself and you are changed forever by this experience. Whether it is a moving piece of music, a poignant movie, a dance transforming time and emotions on a theater stage, or a piece of poetry, art in its greatest and purest form dramatically includes us in the experience. This exposure to art shifts our lives in an ethereal way. It affects the way we feel about ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the world in which we all live.