

# We Are All Haunted Houses

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“And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer.” This tiny painted quotation on the wall of *The Fulbright Triptych* sits literally at the center of a massive composition. The painting represents a world into which Simon Dinnerstein has fitted—spaciously enough, but with the forensic anxiety of the analyzed—himself, his wife and (as yet unborn) daughter, his work tools, an altarlike table, a wall of assorted postcards, photographs, children’s drawings and artworks, and, through the windows, the outside universe unto a green horizon. This is the artist’s world, a tableau of memories, fragments, and images. It refracts a personal, lived cosmos; it is not *the* world, but it is *one*. Monumental in its scale, formal as its religious antecedents, the *Triptych* is yet a grave, intimate essay on the artist placed within—indeed, modestly seated magus of—the habitat of his artistic and personal heritage.

Every element of the painting is discrete and meticulously separated. Each object in this memento mori lies displayed as ceremoniously as a corpse: the engraving tools on the table in no danger of rolling off; the pictures on the painted wall perfectly straight and well spaced; the human figures, quiescent (even the infant) to the point of muteness. And yet the painting is a kaleidoscope, and its very variety speaks of beauty, richness, imagination, and curiosity. We are drawn closer, to appreciate each detail; our gaze moves from the mounted images (“I have that postcard”; “I love that Holbein”; “Look at the child’s drawing”) to the humans, dark-browed and reposeful as icons; from the empty foreground to the mythical horizon, as the ochre tones of “here” open to the light of a living blue and green “elsewhere.” The painting is very still. But it is the stillness of a reflection, as much poised with potential as it is static.

With careful husbandry, Dinnerstein assembles a *lieu de mémoire*: a site of recollection—and collection. (Are the artifacts of the room actual personal mementos, or are they arbitrarily collected for effect? It doesn’t matter: this is the art world of signs and signifiers.) The compulsion to re-create, duplicate in depiction, revisit, and memorialize is a deep mechanism of the psyche: a continuous haunting by our constituent his-

tories: “We are all haunted houses,” said the poet H.D. Haunting comes from the refusal to grieve—or, to perpetually re-inter the dead—but the artist makes this conscientious practice into a formal offering, laid on another altar, the gallery wall. The *Triptych* archives detritus of the artist’s portmanteau; a *Wunderkammer*, it preserves the dead, conserves the present, and freezes the fleeting (the baby, hesitating in its mutability). Unlike the detailed miniature images, his wife, child, and tools, and his own figure stand out from the flat plane of the painted wall, but are no less iconically flattened than the painted faces above, spectrally spectating as they gaze upon *us*. They bring to mind Eleanor Clark, writing of icons: “All Byzantine eyes have that directness . . . as if a cat should be walled up in the building of a house and centuries later come out snarling.” The painting is now thirty-five years old: now it is truly a memento mori of the artist’s life as was, yet it survives in the present moment, a revenant of its own memorializing.

What of Wittgenstein’s question? Any true artist will agree on the impossibility—and dreariness—of deciding on *one* world. The only possible response is imagination, the assent that “every particular form of life could be other than it is,” as the quote concludes; that the artist holds the delicate truth of his own world and worlds in his working hand. Dinnerstein’s self-portrait in *The Fulbright Triptych* clasps one hand in the other: silently, he is answering the question.