

The Art of Simon Dinnerstein

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Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is so symmetrically a harmony and so richly a composite of genres (family portrait, still life, landscape, and a collage that amounts to a complex poem) that its anomalies aren't immediately apparent. He himself has pointed out that it's a painting by a graphic artist (and his Fulbright project is there on the table, dead center, a copperplate engraving called *Angela's Garden*), the baby on his wife's lap had not yet been born (his daughter, Simone, now a concert pianist), and what we're looking at is a serene Jewish family in a country that slaughtered six million Jews from 1933 to 1945. And among the fifty-seven images thumbtacked to the wall is an exit visa from Russia, dated 1918. The Dinnersteins, like the Chagalls and Kandinskys, the Einsteins and Panofskys, move about in the turbulences of history.

plates. 4, 7, 11-16

When I first saw *The Fulbright Triptych* I was immediately reminded of Louis Zukofsky's great poem *A*, which is also about a family in Brooklyn with a child who became a concert violinist. Zukofsky, like Simon Dinnerstein, took the family to be the irreducible unit of civilization. Ezra Pound took that unit to be whole cultures and attempted to show in his *Cantos* that we are a continuation of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. William Carlos Williams saw the unit of civilization as the city and shaped that idea in his *Paterson*.

Another Brooklyn poet, Walt Whitman, had already synthesized migrating and diffusing cultures, the city, and the family as components of civilization in his *Leaves of Grass*. American culture habitually forgets its past and moves in cycles of rediscovery, forgetting and remembering, stunned into amnesia by the new, repeating forgotten pasts.

Art is always an invention inside a tradition. Beginning from scratch happened some 40,000 years ago—and with every child who takes up its crayon and draws a dinosaur driving a construction crane. There are many children's drawings in *The Fulbright Triptych* collage, alerting us to the subject of the painting: education of many sorts, most obviously that of a young artist learning his skills, of a young father starting a family, of survival in a hostile society, of creative renewal. The Germany we

can see through the windows is landscape that bred Hitler's inhuman barbarians; but it had once bred Dürer, Memling, Bach, and Thomas Mann.

Simon Dinnerstein's habitual left-right symmetry, his truthful rendering of materials, his eloquent distribution of light announce his distinction. They also include his painting in the art of our time, for beneath (or inside) most Dinnersteins there is a splendidly abstract design. Our guide to seeing this can be found in the most primitive art to survive into our time, that of the Dogon of sub-Saharan West Africa. The Dogon use four ways of making an image: a pattern of dots (as stars in a constellation, or the location of posts in the plan of a house), the connecting of the dots with lines (giving a legible abstraction), a filling in of detail to achieve what we would call a drawing, and the filling out into three dimensions to make a sculpture, a mask, a granary, a pot, or a house.

plate. 23 *The Kelton Press*, a charcoal drawing (1969), has an almost absolute left-right symmetry; remove what a Dogon would understand as "the fill" and you have a strong abstract painting. (Isolate the verticals and horizontals in a Vermeer of houses and you have something like a Mondrian.) I see this love of symmetry in early Dinnersteins as an emotional geometry imposing order not only on the visual but on the moral as well. This severe symmetry gradually gave way to explorations of asymmetry as Dinnerstein's meditations became richly sensual and intimate.

plate. 54 There is a steady shift of Dinnerstein's eye from Northern Europe to Mexico. *January Light* (1983) is a Mexican Whistler. The asymmetry is Whistler's; the color is Rivera and Frida Kahlo. And there is a radical change from the domesticity of the early paintings to a Balthusian vision of the female nude sleeping or daydreaming, or simply being there. For Simon Dinnerstein is, to date, an essentially existential artist. His paintings say *this is*. His transition has been from *this is how things are* to *this exists: look*. This transition involved subtle changes in rendering; cloth became stylized, for instance, not *seen* cloth but Dinnerstein's imaginary cloth, with its own way of lying in folds, its own diaphanous difference, its own poetry of the eye.

plate. 34 Scholars will eventually want to trace Dinnerstein's still lifes (never quite like anybody else's), his social commentary (the stark *Arnold*, the views through Brooklyn windows, his Italian flower markets, his paintings of people in rooms and playing children, his self-portraits and portraits of his wife and daughter), but it is his female nudes that command study. If symmetry was the beguiling order in his early work, a strangely chaste sensuality has replaced it. Our interest in any artist is deepened by the way a style treats a subject. We will never know how Picasso would have painted a woman talking on the telephone or a garage mechanic changing a tire. What's going on in the affinity of an

artist for a subject? Monet and his water lilies? Gauguin and his biblical themes hiding inside Polynesians and Breton peasants?

In these current nudes we see an age-old problem being solved, the conjunction of the real and the imaginary, the factual and the ideal. Gold leaf cooperates with graphite in one canvas, color with grisaille, a literally drawn body with an ideal of beauty. It's as if Dinnerstein, having so often made a plant in a jar look like a miracle, or Brooklyn sunlight on an ordinary floor seem supernatural, has reversed the process, working outward from a mystical presence to a realistic surface of flesh. His technique and media have become more painstaking, his working hours longer, the canvases staying on the easel for years rather than months.

Practically all of Dinnerstein's faces wear the question "Why are you drawing me?"—the children in *Night*, the nude in *Dream Palace*, even his *Self-Portrait, Summer*. To the answer "Because you exist" we need to add that art exists, too, an intelligible world inside a largely unintelligible one.

plates. 64, 65, 68

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