

# From Brownsville to Park Slope

## An Interview with Simon Dinnerstein



ILANA ABRAMOVITCH

If there were such a thing as a typical Brooklyn Jewish visual artist, Simon Dinnerstein would not be it. He has never painted portraits of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he is not known to capture impressions of Hassidim, and there are no references to the Brooklyn Bridge in his work. On the other hand, Dinnerstein is very much an artist, very much of Brooklyn, and he is, in an interesting way, Jewish. A thoughtful speaker, he often slows down in mid-sentence as he ponders the weight of an important conversational detail.

Certain angles of Brooklyn life, its surprisingly radiant light, are captured in Dinnerstein's world. Traveling far away brought Brooklyn closer to his artist's vision, sharpening his interest in what fascinated him about Brooklyn life near at hand. Views from his windows and of his studio, Brooklyn's strong personalities, and his own family have become his subjects. Since childhood he has been gazing out the window with prolonged attention at the dreamily revealing side of life.

Dinnerstein revels in ambivalence: he is suspicious of harmony and wants his work to be the kind that causes viewers to pull close, to then draw back; to see the inside and the outside. His paintings could be called realist, in their closely observed views of identifiable objects. But this realism is one that reveals the inner world of the person or the thing. The inwardness is often depicted in the play of light that radiates from the object and renders it mysterious.

Simon Dinnerstein greeted me in his Park Slope brownstone, where he lives, teaches, and paints. The kitchen, where we sat and spoke for hours, is a whirling play of wood textures. The graininess speaks to Dinnerstein's art, devoted to finely detailed textures and to patient craftsmanship. Striking examples of Dinnerstein's work line the walls, flanked by art postcards from Italy. A Brooklyn resident for most of his life, Dinnerstein won fellowships to study abroad, in Germany and in Italy. There he painted some of his strongest works, much of it pointing back to his family life.

What makes someone into an artist? An essentially mysterious process, it happens perhaps when inborn talent meets the necessary catalysts. For Dinnerstein, growing up as a red-diaper baby in his Brownsville family in the 1940s and 1950s set the reaction in motion. The senior Dinnerstein was a union activist and a card-carrying member of the American Communist party, paid up in full when he died in 1975.





Simon Dinnerstein, *Garfield Place*, 1970, charcoal, 30" × 59". From the collection of Audrey-Stier Adams, Scarsdale, N.Y. Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York.

Simon pauses and looks up quizzically as he reveals this quiet, yet extraordinary, tidbit. Who was still a Communist believer in 1975? His father was a committed Communist down to the end—way beyond the era of mass movements in the 1930s and 1940s, when dreams of a new society blinded so many idealists to the brutality of the Soviet system. To his son, the father's single-minded absorption could seem rhetorical, leading to family scenes of anger and frustration. Simon's art absorbed his father's concern with the hidden treasures in the ordinary and the marginal. Yet young Simon was influenced not so much by his father's large vision as by the incongruity between public ideals and the private person. How do general solutions to social injustices mesh with the struggles on the domestic front?

The Dinnersteins' marriage was not a happy one, the dogmatic idealist father intimidating his tiny fragile wife. She was the one who felt art and music deeply. Something about this ambivalence, the disparity between people's insides and outsides, remained with Simon. It provides a key to his art.

Surprisingly, Dinnerstein sees himself as quintessentially Jewish. But he was brought up in an atheist family

where, like author Vivian Gornick, he knew he was a member of the working class before he knew he was Jewish. He did not have a bar mitzvah, had never been inside a temple. Why quintessentially Jewish? He explains: His Jewishness is in the quest to understand, to live with the riches of learning, rather than with material goods. It provides a double vision. Simon received a secular Jewish sense of social justice from his father. From his mother, he received a creative dreaminess that pervades his paintings, as well as his personal style. Each parent provided Simon with something transcendent, something that goes beyond the here and now. It fortified him to remain unconcerned about fashions in the art world, just as his parents were oblivious to displays of wealth. Simon: "It frees you up to follow something that you feel."

Dinnerstein's childhood is obliquely referenced in his paintings, for example in the image of two boys looking out the window in the family choreography in *A Dream Play*. As they look out from their dark background, we look in at them and with them gaze toward the light. Growing up, Simon spent much time and continues to spend time looking out windows. "In Brownsville you are surrounded by human beings in boxes. Looking out and looking in." A



surprisingly large number of his paintings feature windows, or the light reflected from a nearby offstage window (Simon's favorite film, and the title of a self-portrait, is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*). But *A Dream Play* is about much more than looking at the mysteries of others' lives. It is a wide tableau vivant of Dinnerstein family life, past and present. Simon, the artist with his crayons, is in the left corner, while his wife, Renée, and daughter, Simone, flank the right. Living and dead relatives mingle and nurture each other. The title comes from August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, whose introductory note suggests, "Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. . . . The characters . . . evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of a dreamer. . . ."

The sensitive dreamy boy growing up in Brownsville was exposed to the full racket of New York life, including the el. An aunt's house was only half a block from the elevated train. Every fifteen minutes the house shook. After about forty-five minutes, you did not notice it anymore, but it stayed within your psyche. The train, its roaring appearances and disappearances, its tunnels that swallow up and deliver metal beasts and their human cargo—these fearsome constants in a Brooklyn child's fantasy life make

their way into his adult paintings. *A Dream Play* shows a line of brownstones in the background that is as full of repetition as a string of subway cars. A detail from *Night* shows a child in a paper-bag Halloween costume frightened by the images he and his classmates conjured when they made their masks. Here the child's anxieties are symbolized by the train, the tunnel, the bats, his flying fears.

Dinnerstein and his wife Renée moved to Park Slope in 1965 and have lived there ever since. Park Slope provided a setting for the artist not so different from his native Brownsville. The Slope was run down then, and the brownstones had not been renovated. Yet, here too he could look out the window and be nurtured by views of people's lives. In the meantime, his developing career brought many awards and teaching opportunities in colleges, such as the New School for Social Research and New York City Technical College in downtown Brooklyn.

Dinnerstein's social consciousness, activated by his father and by his own experiences in the 1960s, is currently alert to what has happened to the Slope. When he first moved in, it was a place for artists and young people. All his neighbors were from Brooklyn. "In the last ten years, it's rare to find someone from Brooklyn. In the last three years it's beyond rare. It's now not possible to live here



Simon Dinnerstein, *A Dream Play*, 1986, Conte crayon, colored pencil, pastel. 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  82 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". From the artist's collection. Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York.



cheaply. Artists would not move here now. . . . And it used to be more politically engaged. We noticed the flyers posted recently in the neighborhood, and none of the signs were political. Instead it was all for care of the body, health, that kind of thing.”

Dinnerstein expressed pride in having an exhibit at Gallery 1199 in the Martin Luther King, Jr., Labor Center in 1985. It was the same organization in which his father had struggled for greater African-American representation in leadership positions. Simon dedicated his exhibition to his

father’s memory as a “man who followed his deep convictions.” In recognizing that his complex and troubling father was also a radiant muse, Simon is grappling in personal terms with the Wittgenstein quote he placed in his most famous early painting, *The Fulbright Triptych* (1971–74): “And to the question which of our worlds will then be the world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in a language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is.”