



Brushing up

Park Slope painter heads uptown

By Louise Crawford
for The Brooklyn Paper

Most people say hello to their grocer or smile politely at their barista — it's not a relationship that requires much more. Park Sloper Simon Dinnerstein disagrees, going beyond the usual niceties of these daily interactions and developing relationships with the people he meets on Seventh Avenue.

Sometimes, he even sketches them.

Sure, it takes more time than just waving, but it has paid off — a drawing of the man from whom he buys cheese is now hanging in a fancy museum.

When Dinnerstein, who has lived in the neighborhood since the 1960s, was asked to submit a drawing to the National Academy Museum, a 200-year-old institution modeled after the French Academy in Paris and the Royal Academy in London, he selected his portrait of Wajih Salem, an owner of D'Vine Taste, a local gourmet shop.

Born in 1943 and raised in Brownsville, Dinnerstein studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School after graduating from City College. When he first moved to Park Slope, there were more working artists liv-

ing in this area.

"It was easier to live on the cheap when I first came here," he recalled. "Sadly, it's now completely unaffordable for 95 percent of the general population."

After further developing his technique during a Fulbright Scholarship-sponsored year in Germany, news about Dinnerstein traveled far from Brooklyn. A Madison Avenue art dealer, George Staempfli, agreed to come "all the way out" to Din-

Dinnerstein.

Soon after, he received a coveted fellowship to the American Academy in Rome and moved his family there from 1976-1978. While in Italy, Dinnerstein refined his signature style, which can be described as figurative with a touch of magical realism.

A close look at Dinnerstein's work reveals an engagement with Brooklyn, its people and the artist's personal history. His appreciation and involvement with the urban life of the community enables Dinnerstein to look at the internal and external lives of the people around him.

In recent years, he has worked on numerous paintings and drawings of the people he meets on Seventh Avenue. "It's all about who I am struck by. I talk to them. They say something that's even more interesting. We connect," he said.

Sometimes he asks people he finds striking to pose for one of the drawing and painting classes he teaches in his Park Slope brownstone. "You don't search them out, it just happens. I keep my eye out and find something that I am interested in."

Dinnerstein's portrait of Salem, who is pictured with a gigantic pencil cactus that Simon's wife bought at Zuzu's Petals, juxtaposes the complex lines of the plant with Salem's long angularity.

"He has a mystical and in-

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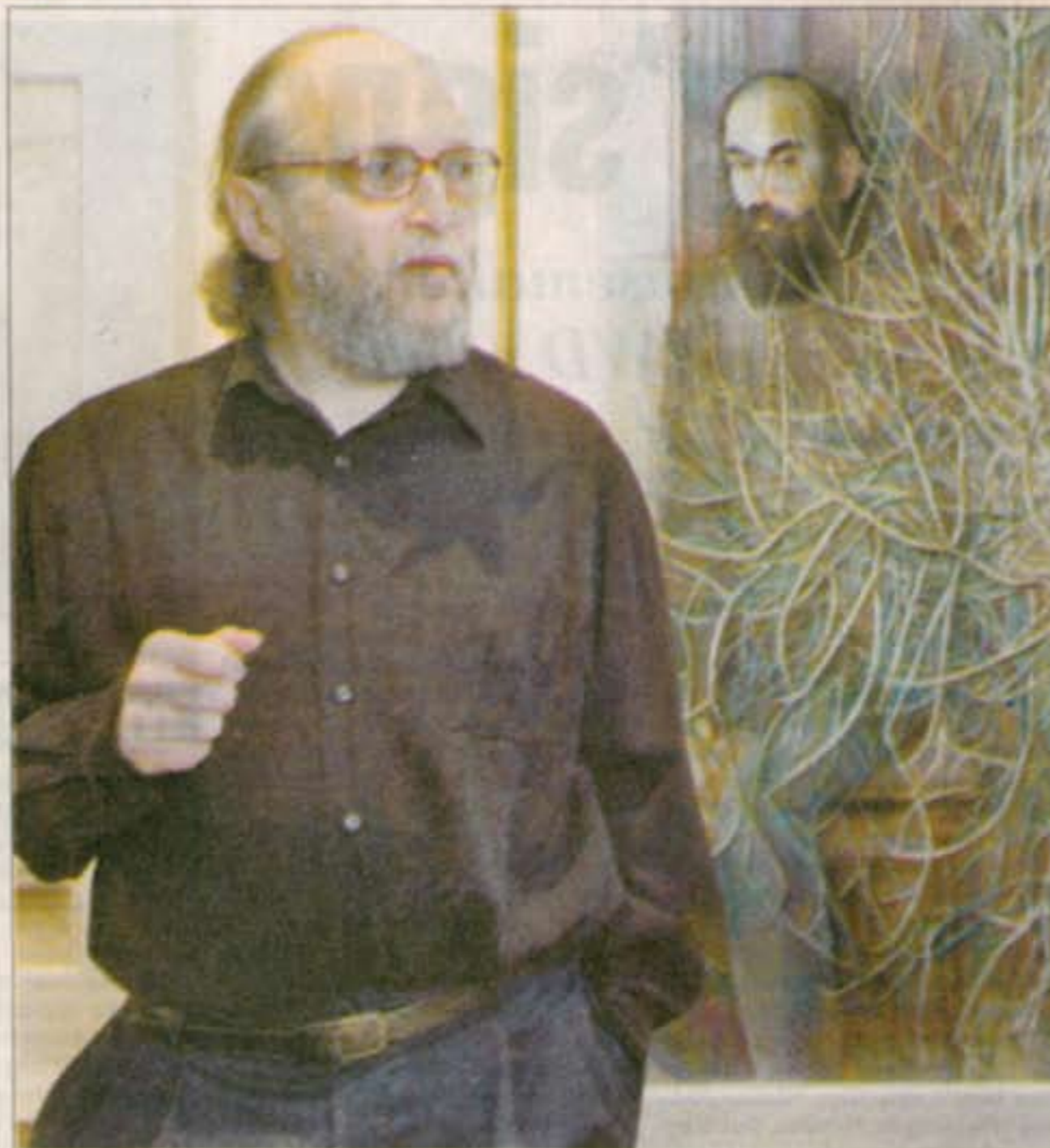
Simon Dinnerstein's portrait of Salem will be at the National Academy Museum (1083 Fifth Ave., at 90th Street in Manhattan) through June 24. For information, call (212) 369-4880 or visit www.nationalacademy.org.

nerstein's Sunset Park studio, which was unusual at the time, to have a look at Dinnerstein's half-finished work.

"I think that's a great picture," he told Dinnerstein, referring to a piece called "Fulbright Triptych." "I'd like to own it."

A week later, the dealer called and offered to pay for the large painting in installments — a gesture that supported Dinnerstein and his family for the two years that the painting took to complete.

"It was a first-class rescue operation and it set everything in motion after that," said



Dinnerstein is served: Park Slope artist Simon Dinnerstein, above, has made a name for himself by sketching the people he meets in the neighborhood. His painting of Wajih Salem, pictured, is hanging at the National Academy Museum in Manhattan.

tense bearing," Dinnerstein said. Working with Salem, he saw "great mystery and drama in his visual presence." A reproduction of the painting is taped to the window at D'Vine. When shopping there, Dinnerstein is often surprised to realize that "beside this tremendous sense of gravitas that [Salem] exudes, he's also very funny."

Salem has attended numerous art shows where the painting has been exhibited. "People look at the painting they look at me. One person touched my beard and said, 'Is that real?'" he said.

He told GO Brooklyn that he looks forward to seeing his likeness on the wall of such a prestigious museum.

Dinnerstein has also sketched Thomas Parker, a barista at Connecticut Muffin on Seventh Avenue. Dinnerstein said that Parker caught his eye with a "regal and dignified" aura. He is a man who doesn't ask too much and seems to have a real acceptance of people, of life. The lines on his face reveal his journey."