

“That’s where art exists.”

*“Look at **The Fulbright Triptych** for a minute and the mind begins to fill in the blanks, sketch lines between data points, assemble a story out of pigment and air. Is this about Judaism and Germany? Is this about family and work? Is this about learning to paint and learning to be a father? Ten million brushstrokes of color touch three huge canvases, and we see a woman’s eyes, a pair of windows, a baby’s cheeks. Two dimensions become three. A table surges into the room, loaded with tools, waiting for you to come and pick one up.*

The best paintings are like dreams. They convince you they are real, they fold you into their worlds, and then they hold you there. Only then, when you’re anchored in the moment-by-moment detail of an experience, when your eyes have extended across the room, when the copper plate is shimmering in front of your hands, can you let yourself reach out into the space between brain and image, into the great mystery of what it means to be viewer and printmaker, reader and writer, listener and singer. That’s where our brains find meaning in the world. That’s where art exists.”

ANTHONY DOERR, author, *All the Light We Cannot See*

*“My father’s **Triptych** has loomed large in my life. It tells the story of my parents right before I was conceived, through my infancy. It’s a story that I find endlessly fascinating. Who were they then?*

*So the **Triptych** was born at the same time as I was, and it contains my parents’ DNA just as much as I do. When I look at the **Triptych** I see where I come from. And if I wanted to tell someone who I really am deep inside, I would just need to show them those three panels.”*

SIMONE DINNERSTEIN, pianist

*“Simon Dinnerstein’s **Fulbright Triptych** is one of those singular and astonishing works of art which seem to imply a description of the whole world merely by insisting on a scrupulous gaze at one perfect instant.”*

JONATHAN LETHEM, author, *The Fortress of Solitude*

The Fulbright Triptych, 1971–1974

oil on wood panels

collection of Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park

gift of the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University

Much has been said about Dinnerstein's masterpiece, *The Fulbright Triptych*. My suggestion is to look at it as a pictorial Venn diagram, one that manifests a pattern of influences and associations integral to the relationship between the two adult figures. They appear at right and left, but in the stillness of the middle panel we see their unified life. Through the depictions of art historical masterworks—one can see Edwin Dickenson, Ingres, an Indian court painting, a Vermeer—a poetic understanding emerges. As viewers, we hold a privileged perspective and are invited to see the progeny of this pair: a child and a painting.

MATTHEW BALLOU

A triptych is, perhaps obviously, typically a format associated with Christian devotional art produced in medieval and early modern Europe. It is a moveable art-object that is designed to be manipulated to tell different stories according to season, liturgy, or current theology. Thus the "wings" of a triptych are also doors with hinges, made to open and close, and the meaning of the whole may change according to the position of the three connected parts. Often the doors would include scenes of contemporary life or portraits of living people. Here, this is underscored by Dinnerstein's position of a modern family portrait into positions typically reserved for medieval saints and his incorporation of fragments of famous Renaissance triptychs into his own composition. As a modern and seemingly secular collage, Dinnerstein's triptych seems to argue that only immortal art, not the holy dead, could be worthy of veneration. Absent from this painting is any explicit reference to the Holocaust, yet a careful viewer will note the presence of a church and the explicit absence of any synagogues or other evidence of Jewish culture in the verdant village scene at the center of the painting. A similar tale of absence could be discerned through a careful reading of the Renaissance paintings fragmented into this triptych, most of which were composed in a period when Jews were being forced from their homes across Europe. The narrative of Dinnerstein as a Jewish artist in post-war Germany is an important aspect of understanding Dinnerstein's artistic formation and *The Fulbright Triptych*.

RABIA GREGORY

What to think? Where to focus? What to feel? The multiple feelings/thoughts initially evoked may represent the beauty of *The Fulbright Triptych*. There is so much to take in, to feel. What's in each panel? How do they relate? Do they relate? After the initial perception of disconnected activity, increased focus allows us to see and feel so much. A family, a husband, a wife, a child. An ordinary city with ordinary folks. Art. Old art, new art, historic art, abstract art. Routine, abstraction, comfort, discomfort. Viewing *The Fulbright Triptych* is almost like eating an ice cream sundae with fifteen flavors, tasting many to find the flavors that appeal most to one's sensibilities.

BRICK JOHNSTONE

In his celebrated memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*, the distinguished Austrian psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl meditated upon the quest for meaning—a process he called logotherapy—which he believed sustained those who survived their ordeal. According to Frankl, meaning issued from three possible sources: purposeful work, love, and courage in the face of challenge. *The Fulbright Triptych* celebrates the artistic process with the finely detailed copper plate at its center and the nascent Dinnerstein family (with not-yet-conceived infant daughter) depicted in the venerable and venerated triptych form, while enlisting the emerging young artist's entire life experience and Western art historical tradition to pursue a daring new vision and direction while dwelling as strangers in a strange land. This monumental work seems to me a masterpiece of logotherapy as well as of art.

W. ARTHUR MEHRHOFF

This work reads as a portrait of three subjects/groups: Renée and Simone, the work table and its tools, and Simon. Standing well back, consider its large-scale symmetries, from the inherent symmetry of the triptych format to the composition of each panel. But also note how the artist rejects symmetry in some way within each panel—for example, by placing the black-and-white print of the Mesopotamian sculpture at the far right slightly lower than the color detail from a Netherlandish painting on the other side of the figure, or setting the copper plate for *Angela's Garden* just off center. Stepping closer, examine the way that the images on the wall behind the three subjects interact with them through their compositions or iconography. Like the Renaissance triptychs that are part of its art-historical background, *The Fulbright Triptych* demands immersive and slow looking.

ANNE RUDLOFF STANTON