

“Simon’s World”: Simon Dinnerstein’s *Fulbright Triptych*

Klaus Ottmann

What is a world picture? Obviously a picture of the world. But what does "world" mean here? What does "picture" mean? World serves here as a name for what it is in its entirety. The name is not limited to the cosmos, to nature. History also belongs to the world. . . . World picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture . . . the structured image that is the creature of man’s producing which represents and sets before.”  
—Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

Dinnerstein’s extraordinary painting, *Fulbright Triptych*, conceived in 1971 in a small apartment overlooking Hessisch-Lichtenau, a small town outside of Kassel, Germany, during his Fulbright Fellowship and completed in Brooklyn after his return to the US in 1974, represents and sets before us, in the meaning of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, a complete world picture.

Heidegger saw the “conquest of the world as picture” as “the fundamental event of the modern age.”<sup>2</sup> In the modern age, which begins for Heidegger with the French seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, man has become “subject.” The world is no longer conceived as “ens creatum,” observed from the outside by God, such as the Creator-God on the outer panels of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* looking down at the world hovering inside a crystalline globe on the third day of creation. In the modern age, the world is instead presented from within by the human self-consciousness.

The impossibility of a complete description of the world ever being attained by a single intelligence is at the root of the modern “world picture” and the complete break with the idea that art is “representational” that occurred in the 1950s. One might say in fact that the modern crisis of representation is the essence of the world picture. Ironically, the possibility of a “world picture” brings with it the impossibility of representing the world as picture.

Painted on three wood panels, Dinnerstein’s triptych recalls Flemish and German altarpieces of the early northern Renaissance. The center panel is dominated by two windows showing an idyllic view of the town of Hessisch-Lichtenau. A small worktable in front of the windows laid out with printmaking tools identify the room as a makeshift studio for Dinnerstein. The work table seems to be a reference to the painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer, regarded as the greatest German Renaissance artist. Dinnerstein applied for a fellowship in Germany primarily with the intent to study Dürer’s work and Dinnerstein’s triptych seems to be ensouled by the spirit of Dürer.

The center panel is flanked by two outer panels depicting the artist on the right, and his wife Renée holding their young daughter Simone on her lap, on the left.

There are many deliberate references to religion (Adam and Eve, Mary and child) and to art history—from the pastiche of painted postcards of art by a variety of artists, among them Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), Hans Holbein the Younger’s *Portrait of the Merchant Georg Giese* (1532), and a *Mater Dolorosa* (1470-75) from Dirk Bouts’s workshop, to the modernist

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Age of the World Picture,” in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 129–34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

motif of the open window (that became a trademark for Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, and Richard Diebenkorn). Matisse once said about the open window motif: “For me the space is one unity from the horizon, right to the interior of my workroom...; and the wall of the window does not create two different worlds.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Dinnerstein’s painting unites two levels of reality, two worlds, transcending space and time. One of the more catching references is that of a bearded Sumerian male votive figure (c. 2900-2600 B.C.E), in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with a wide-eyed gaze and clasped hand, which is mirrored in Dinnerstein’s own posture on the right outer panel. Meant to be praying eternally on behalf of the person it represented, the Sumerian worshipper lends the outer panel with Dinnerstein fazing the viewer straight on with clasped hands an equally devotional aspect.

Similarly, the depiction of Eve (who is deeply embedded in the Western psyche as the archetype of sin) from van Eyck’s Ghent altarpiece is echoed by Dinnerstein’s wife (holding a young child no less) on the left outer panel. While the center panel in van Eyck’s altarpiece depicts the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb—representing the redemption of Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden (as written in John 1:29: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”), Dinnerstein’s view of an idyllic German town that had been the site of both a concentration camp and a munitions factory during World War II, flanked by a Jewish family from Brooklyn, could equally be read as a representation of salvation and forgiveness.

The child drawings, and personal memorabilia interspersed with the postcards on the wall expand the studio view into a biographical portrait of the artist and his family. Thus Dinnerstein’s *Fulbright Triptych* closely resembles the definition of autobiography as established by the French critic Philippe Lejeune in 1989 who describes it as “a retrospective narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on the development of his personality,”<sup>4</sup> except his would be a visual narrative, a *biographia visu*, as it were. At the same time, it expands this biographical narrative into a “relational” portrait of an artist’s life, in the manner of Henry James, which brings the personal into the “whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”<sup>5</sup>—thus becoming a picture of “the world as such, what it is, in its entirety,” as Heidegger defined it.<sup>6</sup>

The richness of references of the *Fulbright Triptych* invite a multiplicity of readings. While the room depicted is not a realist representation, but rather a composite of Hessisch-Lichtenau and Brooklyn—both spatially and temporally—it is nevertheless, to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s words, “a totality of true thoughts” and thus “a picture of the World.”<sup>7</sup> And because every world is limited by the limits of language, the microcosm depicted in the *Fulbright Triptych*, which extends spatially and temporally from Germany to Brooklyn, and from 1970 to 1974, is Simon’s world where “world and life are one.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” p.129.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), 3.01.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 5.621.

Klaus Ottmann

Deputy Director for Curatorial and Academic Affairs at the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC., former Curator at large and Director for the study of Modern Art at the Phillips Collection, has curated more than 50 international exhibitions, and is the publisher and editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Art*.