

Simon Dinnerstein Says: Lethem, Lahiri, Turturro and Others Write a Painter's Gospel

By Jonathan Liu 5/31 11:37pm



Can a work of art be described as a religious experience at a time when, if not dead, God has at the very least ceded sole proprietorship over that sprawling diocese of human language that for centuries was used to necessarily invoke him?

Painted between 1971 and 1974, the three panels of Simon Dinnerstein's *The Fulbright Triptych* are a combined 14

feet long and seven feet high. They demand from even casual viewers a proportionately big reaction. Under the painting's spell, certain words spring inexorably to mind: rapturous and beatific, a monist revelation assembled from dozens of small-scale epiphanies; a summer shrine and relic offering the spiritually parched parishioners of New York art a site of pilgrimage and object of veneration. Such language has long since been drained of theological content—novels can be rapturous, dinners revelatory and pilgrims drawn to athletic halls of fame without tugging on long chains of signification that leave them cuffed to the hands of an angry god. With its overt symbology—a bearded man, a modest woman and a knowing infant stare back at us with the otherworldly gazes of Byzantine icons—this holy family, Jewish like the original, is dressed in the diaphanous plaid skirt, striped bell-bottoms and work boots of late hippiedom; the child is a girl; the pastoral landscape outside isn't Nazareth but post-Holocaust Germany—*The Fulbright Triptych* doesn't let its secular admirers off the hook so easily.

“I think it would take a certain kind of painting to warrant this,” Mr. Dinnerstein said. “For instance, the painting by van Eyck called *The Adoration of the Lamb*, the Ghent Altarpiece. It's massive. It's all about parts of the Bible, about Adam and Eve and the Last Judgment. It has a big story—and what's the big story [in contemporary art]?”

Mr. Dinnerstein was sitting about 15 feet away from *The Fulbright Triptych* at the Tenri Gallery, where it will be on display until June 9, when it moves uptown for a three-month show at the German Consulate that opens June 16. (Its permanent home is the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University.)

“Here, there is a big story,” Mr. Dinnerstein said. “It's about art. About the making of art. It can't be a religious story. A lot of that has been shattered. People don't have the same unanimity of belief. But *art* is a religion—that's something. So I had a feeling this would work.”

“This” is *The Suspension of Time* (Milkweed Editions, 360 pages, \$35.00), also out June 16, an anthology that, by its publisher’s reckoning, is the only full-length art book entirely devoted to a single work by a single living artist. In the artist’s telling, how *The Fulbright Triptych*—so boldly figurative, with its family trinity surrounded by postcard prints of old masters—became the first recipient of such a treatment in an era dominated by abstraction resembled, in itself, a series of Old Testament coincidences.

In 2005, Mr. Dinnerstein found himself seated at a Chinatown wedding banquet next to Daniel Slager, then an editor at Harcourt; their wives were a consultant and the principal, respectively, at P.S. 150 in Tribeca, but the men had never met. In the midst of acrobats and fire-eaters—it was a Chinese-French wedding—and in a cab shared back to Brooklyn, Messrs. Dinnerstein and Slager discussed European literature (the latter’s authors included Umberto Eco and Jose Saramago) and became fast friends.

Mr. Slager eventually moved to Minneapolis to become the publisher of Milkweed. Familiar with that independent house’s art output—and its new boss’s admiration for his work—Mr. Dinnerstein proposed a volume on *The Fulbright Triptych*. Needing to get his bearings at Milkweed, Mr. Slager put him off for a few months, then a few more.

“A strange thing happened right around then,” Mr. Dinnerstein told *The Observer*. “I teach a class in drawing and painting in my studio in Brooklyn. And in that class, just around when Daniel Slager was coming [to New York on a visit], I was talking about someone I know who is very well-educated but had never gone to college. I said that I thought that that was very interesting, very appealing, that someone self-educates.” The autodidact, a former art student of his, became a professional mathematician after being admitted into Columbia’s Ph.D. program without an undergraduate degree.

“And so this woman in my class said, ‘My husband never went to college. You’ll never guess what he does.’” The long-time student was married to David Rosenthal, then-publisher of Simon & Schuster.

“So I called him up and he said present the book as an anthology of writing. Don’t present it as an art book because it’s really a book about writing and that will focus the whole thing. He said, ‘Make up a wish list of writers you think would find this intriguing. Put together a list of 70 names and maybe seven or eight will respond. I’ll help you.’”

Repackaged as Mr. Rosenthal’s anthology, Mr. Slager and Milkweed immediately agreed to the project. The contributors list eventually ran to nearly 50, from film theorists and museum directors to Brooklyn literati (Jhumpa Lahiri, Jonathan Lethem), an actor (John Turturro) and the former head of the German Fulbright Commission, giving the finished product the feel of a set of gospels, that is, a bunch of people telling the same story, embellished by hearsay, exegesis, hindsight. In brief, Mr. Dinnerstein—a somewhat provincial American Jew, from the time when Brooklyn was still the provinces—moves with his young wife to a small town in Germany on a Fulbright grant to learn printmaking. Three years, an immersion in the northern Renaissance tradition and the birth of a daughter later, the *Triptych* is back in New York, and completed.

Though the beard is gray and the thick brown hair largely gone, Mr. Dinnerstein, at 68, is instantly recognizable as the male figure in *The Fulbright Triptych*. He occupies the right panel. His wife and infant daughter—teacher Renée and Simone, now a noted concert pianist—occupy the left. The center portion features twin windows, looking out on a deep-perspective view of a nondescript German village. It's the table below, shown in even more extreme perspective, with a glowing flat disk at its center, that summons and flummoxes.

Like a Hogswartsian real-estate agent, Mr. Dinnerstein began an impromptu tour of his painting. “If you're right here, you can take in your right, take in your left, but when you go closer than this, you're almost in the space.” We moved toward the table, into the artist's studio, and Mr. Dinnerstein pointed out the tools of the printmaker's trade: burins, scraper, burnisher. Back “out” in the Tenri Gallery, *Angela's Garden*, the copper plate “made” on this table, hangs on a wall—more tangible than its painted counterpart, but not by much.

“And you get even closer”—we move closer—“you can literally read a lot of the stuff, like letter-by-letter, word-by-word, and so forth. It's kind of like an obsessive's obsessive.”

The postcard van Eycks, Vermeers and Seurats make visual and narrative sense from the middle distance—a young painter pasting up inspirations. Only with a nose to the paint does the rest of the paper ephemera, arrayed around the figures like halos, give up their secrets: Handwritten aerograms. Typed quotations from Wittgenstein and *Moby Dick*. Drawings by Renée's students—crayon, watercolor and ballpoint pen, all uncannily transposed to oil paint.

Most remarkable of all, two tiny photo-booth strips of the mugging couple, one with Simone as a toddler and one before she was born. They evoke the early church's notion of *acheiropoieta* (“icons not made by hand”)—a run-around of the graven-images commandment that proclaimed true icons, like the Shroud of Turin and many even less plausible examples, weren't paintings but rather mechanical and spiritual reproductions of the subject.

A cell phone rang to the tune of Tracy Chapman's “Fast Car.” Renée was on the line, and wondering when Simon would be back in Park Slope. Either *The Fulbright Triptych* had come to life, or life had come, again, to the *Triptych*. Either way, the effect was celestial.

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