

# Begun in Good Faith and High Hopes

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What is the story here? On the right-hand side of the *Triptych* sits a man. He is virile, the artist, his body tensed, energized, ready to go, as if he has been restrained only briefly so that his image can be captured in paint. On the left side is a woman with a pure unadorned kind of beauty, sensual hips; fecund. She holds a child whose cylinder of a body conveys solidity, fleshliness. The child's alert face makes you wonder if it is only seconds before she too demands to be freed from her mother's grasp, before her mother must get up from the chair and chase after her. Here you have it—on the one side, maleness, the artist, and on the other, countervailing side, domesticity, the demands of a wife and child. Yet there is tenderness in this portrait, of course, in the purity of the woman's face. She is a loved person, is she not?

The triptych form partly originates in religious iconography. It is significant that in the painting neither the man nor the woman is in the center panel. What is privileged here is the process of making art, the tools of Dinnerstein's then-field of drawing and graphic art. Set out in meticulous, scapular order are his engraving tools, a hammer, a knife, burins, scrapers, burnishers. And at the very center of the painting, shining like the sun itself, is an oval copperplate, depicted in gold leaf. It is art that has primacy for this young man. There is irony here, because Dinnerstein won his Fulbright as a graphic artist, and yet from the Fulbright came this, his first painting since he was an art student at the Brooklyn Museum. *The Fulbright Triptych* is a statement about the explosion of ambition and self-realization, a declaration that the artist is now going to extend the horizons of his work.

The eye goes next to inspect the two windows behind the worktable. For a fleeting second, it seems as if the two landscapes seen within them will be like the terracing in Renaissance and Flemish painting. But a closer look—and it is not so. Here you have in the two windows a depiction of the small German town of Hessisch Lichtenau where the Dinnerstein family lived from 1970 to 1971. Rows and rows of modest twentieth-century houses, neat gardens, picket fences carefully delineating the property

of the owner, a plain, flat landscape beyond, the faint shadows of mountains on the horizon. Here is German bourgeois respectability. It is, in certain parts, a commonplace little town. In the right window, one of the houses has a strange metal fence which is attached incongruously to a picket fence. Next to that is a red brick house which looks as if it is trimmed in black asphalt brick, with windows that are out of scale with the rest of its size. Through the left window, we see a corrugated metal shed, perhaps used for storing gardening tools. The close viewer or reader of the painting can't help but make the associations—whether they were conscious or not on the part of the painter—to the potential beneath the surface for disorder in German history, for violence, for distorted national pride, a longing for order, and a willingness to conform, to subjugate the self to power.

But let us look more closely at the balance in the triptych. This “reader” does not come to the painting innocently. She benefits from a contiguous knowledge of the exact references in it and she cannot help but bring to the painting that knowledge. What fascinates—and daunts—here is the richness and intricacy of these references. There is almost no way that they can be contained in a written narrative, which is why the painting must exist. Because like music, painting is an art form that lives in the realm of association, that can encompass a kind of three-dimensionality that simple prose, certainly an essay, cannot.

In the two outer panels of the triptych are written out the details of the conflicts of the artist's life. Always, they are balanced out and yet in collision. On the right, the lean and intense artist. Above him a cold and unyielding face from van Eyck's *Baudouin de Lannoy*. On the left panel, in direct apposition to that face, is one from a Flemish pietà, her eyes bloodshot with weeping, the tears rolling down her cheeks, hanging over Dinnerstein's wife, Renée, who sits holding her baby in her own version of a pietà. It is as if the wife mourns and weeps, while the husband looks out cruelly, unalterable in his intent and ambition. But there is also a picture of van Eyck's *Annunciation*, from a panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, suggesting the artist's adoration of her. Above the wife, Renée, hang the icons of her own profession as teacher, her students' drawings, a perfect graphic rendering of the letter *y* used to teach children phonics, the laboriously drawn letters of a child in class. There is also in the left panel, Renée's

panel, a rendering of a primitive fertility figure, another reference to pregnancy and motherhood.

Again, on the right, artist's side, a child's drawing of a dinosaur breathing fire—the artist's burning ambition? But he is beholden also to his sexuality. There is a reproduction of a Larry Clark photo of a young couple making love, an acknowledgment of the sex and love that got the artist into this bind anyway. There are joyful pictures of the Dinnersteins, Renée, their daughter, Simone, taken in a subway photo booth. And another rendering of Renée, with long, sensual hair, holding a puppy, a young woman before she is gravid with child.

Crucially, on the artist's side is a painting of a printed page, a passage from *Moby-Dick*. They are the words which lie at the heart of this effort, describing the obsession of the artist, for whom work is a matter of life and death, the quest that dominates him just as the pull of domesticity has grown stronger. The words are from Ahab's rant about his search for the great whale: "He tasks me," Ahab cries. "He heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength."

In the middle panel, close to Dinnerstein's side, is a rendering of Holbein's *Portrait of a Leper*, the artist, perhaps, afflicted in his domesticity. Under it is Dinnerstein's painting of a reproduction of the *Avignon Piéta*, in which the male Christ, significantly, the adult Christ, his sides pierced, lies dead in the arms of his chaste mother. The suffering artist.

At the very center of the triptych in the vertical space between the two windows is a painting of a letter that Renée wrote to Simon in 1971, recounting a dream. He was away in Europe, she was in Brooklyn. "Just woke up from the craziest dream. I was having a baby in our apartment in Germany." In the dream their two mothers are present, arguing with the doctor about how the baby should be delivered. She is terrified. "I thought there was a dead baby in me but when the baby was delivered I faked everyone out cause it was just a big air bubble!!!" Renée's own Annunciation.

But there is a secret to the *Triptych*. Behind the painting, hammered onto the wooden crossbars, a coin has been nailed. It is another reference to *Moby-Dick*, to the doubloon Ahab nailed to the mainmast of the ship and promised to the first man to raise the great white whale, yet another reference to the artist's obsession. The coin, first mentioned in chapter 36, "The Quarter Deck," and later at length in Chapter 99,



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“The Doubloon,” was a gift to Dinnerstein from Renée. Beneath the coin, hidden at the back of the triptych, is a message from her: “Begun in Good Faith and High Hopes on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971 Hess. Lichtenau, Quenteler Weg 31, Germany, with the love of Renée.”

The woman as inspiration, as the purveyor of domesticity which saps the artist’s will and his energy, but who is also his strength. It is their secret.