

Simon Dinnerstein's Conceptual Painting: *The Fulbright Triptych*

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Inasmuch as Simon Dinnerstein's work is grounded in the human figure and line, it looks to the classical genre. But in its attention to detail, his work relates more to the northern Netherlandish aesthetic as seen in his *Fulbright Triptych*. The figure, combined with abundant detail, poses an antithetical contrast that differs greatly in its stylistic orientation, aligning Dinnerstein's art to the so-called *tableaux vivants* of the international Gothic style. Dinnerstein's use of gold leaf, the triptych idiom, and his mannerist style are also part of this late-medieval style.

Although this tripartite work is autobiographical, it is entitled *The Fulbright Triptych* after the grant that made its creation possible. At its center, a large square painting portrays a wall in the artist's house decorated with various-size pictures, and containing a horizontal worktable upon which rest a series of printing-trade tools. On the table surface, exactly in the middle, is an image of an oval-shaped copperplate engraving entitled *Angela's Garden*, depicting bushes, plants, fences, and walking paths. The left vertical panel shows the artist's wife Renée holding in her lap the couple's yet-to-be-born daughter Simone as a young toddler. The right panel contains the artist sitting in a chair with linked hands on his lap, spider plant hanging above him, surrounded by images from various periods of art history. It would not be stretching the point to read the spider plant's appendages as arteries linking the artist to the history of art and its best-known protagonists. For to be sure, Dinnerstein has engaged with the working methods and styles of these all-time greats.

The images embellishing the wood-paneled wall of the artwork can be identified as the traditional art-reference system popular among artists. Yet in this work, because of their specificity, they signify the artist's own history, both morphological and philosophical. A good example is the spider plant hanging above Dinnerstein's self-portrait, which would go on to become a leitmotif in the artist's work. As used here, the device prophesies the future use of this natural motif combined with self-portrait, in which the complex network of branches represents the artist's mental and complex state of

reflection. Dinnerstein uses this motif repeatedly in future works such as *Counterpoint* (1993), *Rear Window* (1994), and *Reflection* (1999).

Images such as the Eve from the Ghent Altarpiece by Jan van Eyck, shown with children's drawings or African art nearby, combine to offer us a multilayered dialogue between historic and modern art. History has served artistic vocabulary for eons, but Dinnerstein offers us an incomparable feast that, like Jules Verne's *Time Machine*, allows us as viewers to simultaneously visit places and partake of images from the present and distant past.

As for his chosen format, the triptych, it has a long and rich history. Before paper reached Europe, the Romans used styli on wax tablets to write. In Byzantium, diptychs and triptychs existed as carved ivories and iconostases. Dinnerstein's work has already been read in terms of religious symbolism, specifically Christian. It was Robert L. McGrath who associated Renée and Simone as the Madonna enthroned with Child and the artist as Christ, the Man of Sorrows in late-medieval paintings. McGrath also drew an association between the tools of the artist's trade portrayed in the middle part of the triptych and the instruments of Christ's passion.

In fact, artists very often have seen themselves as martyrs. In the nineteenth-century Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* is seen as a self-portrait. In the early twentieth century, modern artists, especially the German Expressionists, felt misunderstood by their viewers. It was Picasso who portrayed the artist figure as a Harlequin. However, because of Dinnerstein's ongoing interest in the thought process and pensiveness, as well as the conceptual nature of this work, we may compare his alter ego to the famous Dürer print *Melancholia* (1514). This work best expresses the tortured nature of the artist, who, alone with his thoughts, tries to reconcile the pragmatism of existence with the creative impulse. Surprisingly, this engraving does not make a physical appearance in Dinnerstein's triptych, yet it is ever-present as inference. Dürer created his print after returning from a second trip to Italy, where he absorbed the popular idea of the artist as divine creator, in other words, as more than just craftsman. Thus *Melancholia* represents the artist's frustrated attempts at rivaling divine beauty. James Snyder, the northern Renaissance specialist, sees *Melancholia* as the summing-up of Dürer's "anxieties and vanities . . . in an unusual and provocative self-portrait."¹ *Melancholia* can be analo-

gized to Dinnerstein's *Triptych* in that, as representatives of the artists' psyche, these works are artistic meditations on technique, observation, creativity, planning, proportion, and so on. In fact, Dürer was known to warn his students about the dangers of over-thinking their work because it could cause melancholy, one of the bad humors or bodily fluids that was believed to cause illness. The creative genius's greatest nightmare is the lack of accomplishment. So as the day comes to a close, the artist becomes ever more anxious about what he has made and if it doesn't measure up to his expectations he becomes melancholy. This is obvious in *Melancholia*, where the figure sits like Rodin's *Thinker*, with her head resting on her hand, thinking. Indeed Dinnerstein has stated that "in a way *The Fulbright Triptych* is a meditation on process and perception, the artist's wonder and quest toward understanding."

The legacy of the northern Renaissance masters Lucas Cranach the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Jan van Eyck, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder are prominent everywhere in the *Triptych*. Furthermore, Dinnerstein is conversant with southern Renaissance artists too that appear in his triptych to a lesser extent, as well as later neoclassical figures like Ingres, whom he admires for his use of chiaroscuro and line. When asked who his favorite master of all time was, Dinnerstein answered without a moment's hesitation: Ingres.² One need only glance at the *Odalisque* in grisaille to see that this artist's aesthetic sums up much of Dinnerstein's methodology. Like Ingres's, Dinnerstein's art is grounded in line rather than color, and his means of choice is graphic, involving engraving or drawing. Indeed, line was used in Paleolithic wall paintings, in Mesopotamian tablets, and on Greek vases. Pointed tools like burins used in making copperplate engravings can be associated with the spearheads used for sgraffito drawings on damp clay on Mycenaean pottery. In Dinnerstein's art, because of his extremely detailed style, line is a methodology of work intensity and concentration, as well as virtuosity and historical knowledge. The importance of line is evident throughout Dinnerstein's work as well as his admiration for Ingres. Ingres's portrait of *Louise de Broglie, Comtesse d'Haussonville* (1845), appears in the left portion of the *Triptych's* central panel. Although he claimed to be a conservator of the academic enterprise, Ingres worked outside of it; he is known for his expressive anticlassical distortions of form that endeared him to modern artists. As one of these, Dinnerstein

creates with expert line, while imbuing his forms with a gently executed subtleness in shading, at times even using distortion to accentuate certain areas like Simone's stomach in *Anticipation* (2002-03), and in the elongated face of the sitter in *Portrait of Thomas Parker* (2004).

Dinnerstein's work cannot be called academic in the strict sense of the word because it contains enough expressiveness to relate it to the symbolist or the northern Renaissance traditions. His style is eccentric, originating in his concepts, and executed in a personal manner that includes using subjective deformation resulting in a linear rendition of objects and people the way they are in his imagination. For even when people are real as are Renée and Simone, Dinnerstein places them in imaginary psychological situations. Dinnerstein is not merely copying the real world around him. His art engages with the subcutaneous layers of meaning that lie within its exterior facade. Dinnerstein's art is deep, significant, and conceptual, not only in its symbolism but also in its conceptual rendering of form.

Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is a symphony of meaning whose layers resonate with the artist's life experience, but is so much more. Like Holbein, whose stunning portraits captured a wealth of detail (as seen in *The Ambassadors*), Dinnerstein offers us a true showpiece in his triptych. The appearance of Holbein's portrait of Georg Gisze, a German businessman working in London, demonstrates Dinnerstein's admiration of this master. Holbein depicted a great deal of detail in this Hanseatic portrait. A table is covered with a rich oriental carpet, on top of which appear scissors, pens, a seal, a glass vase with three carnations, a box of coins, numerous documents, keys, bells, scales, and inscriptions of various kinds. For both Holbein and Dinnerstein, the written script as sign is significant. It is seen as prominent signatures or dates or lettering within Holbein's painting; in Dinnerstein's triptych, text is found on letters, children's drawings, copies of passport pages, and so on. Like Holbein, Dinnerstein uses oil on wood panel to produce his work. Painting on panels results in a more linear and exactly rendered style that is quite difficult, if not impossible, to correct in the case of a mistake.

Dinnerstein's relationship to the sixteenth-century northern master Pieter Bruegel is evinced by the miniaturish quality of the landscapes in the central panel, landscapes that are akin to Bruegel's *Return of the Hunters*, one of his *Four Seasons* series. Both in

the personal stylization of their figures and in the amount of detail they produce, these two painters are unrivaled (except perhaps by Hieronymus Bosch).

Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is full of imagery signaling his engagement with art history, seen in his inclusion not only of this portrait by Holbein, but also in his inclusion of the tools of a printmaker. In this respect Dinnerstein's goal is not to reproduce these objects as trompe l'oeils the way Holbein did, which endeared him to American realists such as Harnett, Peto, or even their immediate predecessors the brothers Peale, but rather to depict these elements in a way that challenges our vision. One may compare Harnett's *Still Life Writing Table* (1877) to Dinnerstein's central panel to see the similarities and differences. Harnett's favorite subjects were still lifes of books combined with other objects on a table, or his "smoker" groupings of mugs with a cigar box or pipe. He depicts them realistically to the point of fooling the eye into seeing them three-dimensionally. Dinnerstein, although capable of such effects, as seen in the landscapes on the wall, does more than play with our perception. Dinnerstein is more like Cézanne, whose work is about sensation and visual perception and who was interested in new concepts of spatial construction. The psychological realism with which Cézanne has been characterized in his pure manner of observing nature can also be found in Dinnerstein, who while maintaining a complex dialogue with historic models of technique and subject, is nevertheless direct in his observation. In contrast to this directness, in certain other areas of this work Dinnerstein uses a type of perspective that is emotive rather than true to the motif, as seen in the table's angle within the central panel. The volumetric proportions of his objects, like Cézanne's, are at times Euclidian and at times insubstantial, as seen when comparing the reproductions of the miniatures in his central panel and the figures of himself and Renée with Simone. It is certain that this master is familiar with Eastern examples of art which are flat and iconic in their style, which is probably another reason he uses them. But the way that the central motif, the table, is slanted toward the viewer instead of receding in scientific perspective, is a dead giveaway of Dinnerstein's engagement with Asian art and the use of multiple perspectives. Manet, who collected Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints, did this in his *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, while also taking inspiration from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and the older master's use of the paradox to create interest.

Manet used two different perspectives in this masterpiece, as we see the barmaid from a typical western view and simultaneously her reflection in the mirror behind her from an oblique perspectival view. Because the barmaid's reflection is so far away from her person and because there is no evidence in the foreground of the man engaging her in conversation, the only way to make sense of this work is to read it from the bottom left corner looking up.

Dinnerstein's style can also be related to that of the American Magic Realist George Tooker in that it does not strictly adhere to reproducing reality. In both of their works there is an element of fantasy, seen in Tooker's *Voice* (1977), wherein two people appear to be listening to each other from either side of a partition. A similar type of existentialist drama seems to be taking place in Dinnerstein's *A Dream Play* (1986) and *Night* (1985), in which the characters appear to be taking part in a fantastic play. Most of them are separate, alone, individual, a fact that relates them to Tooker's tendency to visually depict modern-day isolation and alienation. Both Dinnerstein's and Tooker's works result in essays of a mysterious nature in atmospheres wrought with imaginary possibilities. In most of Tooker's paintings, the idea of isolation and withdrawal are prominent, whereas in the *Triptych*, there is a warmth that reaches over even the expanse of the main panel from Dinnerstein to embrace his loved ones on the other side. Although the artist appears alone and in a pensive state, the objects in his painting, as if his wishes and dreams, the Madonna and child near Renée, speak volumes of love.

The Fulbright Triptych may be read as an exercise in the ordering of his universe like that of the later fifteenth-century philosopher Sebastian Franck, who, when treating the subject of mankind in general, wrote, "All men one man. Who sees one natural man, sees them all." Natural man to Franck meant one who is unsophisticated therefore uncontaminated. To Dinnerstein also, it means someone unspoiled by the desires of so-called consumerist technological society; rather someone in synchrony with the order of natural life.