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November 1, 1990

Professor Guy Davenport
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Louisville, Kentucky 40506-0027

Dear Professor Davenport:

I am taking the liberty of asking the University of Arkansas Press to send on to you an advance copy of a forthcoming book on my work.

I have been very interested in your writing, which I first came across in an introduction to the art of Paul Cadmus. However, I must say I was very deeply struck by your book, A Balthus Notebook. I think you have caught so much of this very poetic artist with your really poetic book. Your sections which deal with what it is, if anything, that makes an artist "modern" are very pertinent in general, but I actually feel could have been written about my own work (you talk about Stanley Spencer and Balthus and Brancusi). Also, I heard an excerpt of a book of essays of yours read on the radio here in New York, and in it I think you described going out to the country for expeditions with your father and learning to really look at nature and to describe what it is you see. Having myself, a strongly developed visual memory I found these descriptions of great interest.

Somehow, on a kind of educated hunch, I am hoping that you might relate to the work in my book. Since 1973, I have been affiliated with Staempfli Gallery in New York. I have tried, in some way, to combine my interest in the figure, the dignity, humanity, beauty of people, with some 'modernist' (whatever that word means)/abstract point of view. In this regard, I would like to believe that there is some theme or point of view in my work which stands it apart from certain trends in American realism, from 'pop' to 'hyper' to traditional figurative art.

I feel very lucky to have had the participation, through their writing, of Thomas Messer, George Tooker and Albert Boime for this book. I know that you have been through the process of putting a book together, and I must say it is a deeply emotional undertaking. In this case, more than 20 years of painting and drawing are put together in this volume.

I look forward to your thoughts and comments and I would, in addition, find it a great pleasure to meet you, if you happen to be in New York

Sincerely, 
Simon Dinnerstein

21 January 1991

Dear Mr Dinnerstein:

Just this morning I received The Art of SD and your letter dated 1 Nov 90. I can't decide which to praise first, the splendid revelation of your painting, or your generosity in having a copy of the book sent to me. Both at once.

How in the world have I missed your work? The book is a vindication of my complaint over the years that cultural information is hard to come by. You will find me in the current issue of Drawing defending the draftsmanship of Grant Wood, which in a sane world ought to have been wholly unnecessary.

Seeing your work all at once is something of an overload. To the question "What do you think of modern art?" Gertrude Stein replied, "I like to look at it." I can begin with that simplicity. Your pictures are first of all good to look at.

Then one becomes aware of your powerful symmetries: the bilateral one that is a signature, and the inside/outside one of foreground and background. You are right to begin the book with The Kelton Press, which has these symmetries, plus a radial one. This amazing drawing also announces your digestion of surrealism (Max Ernst would have liked this drawing, and called it "The Insect God") and like Ernst you see the wonderful harmonies of the natural, the architectural, the technical. Those trees reproduce; man participates in creation beyond the biological: the etching press reproduces images. The medium, charcoal, comes from the trees.

I must think and think again about the Triptych. Obviously you have put everything into it. My immediate feeling about it -- and practically all your work -- is that it is a perfect register (narrative, if you will, art-as-equivalent-at-the-highest-articulateness) of the Jewish soul. Fred Siegel once gave me a poster from a school. It is a lesson in the letter aleph, showing that the upper yod symbolizes Torah and God, the lower one is human life, and the diagonal is the boundary between the two. The illustration is of a family studying Torah at the kitchen (or diningroom) table, father, mother, daughter, and son. The triptych says something of the same thing -- and lots more.

It is an iconographer's heaven! That's Germany -- Germany! -- out the windows. "Here we are, a family. We have been civilized for five thousand years. We have experienced everything; we have survived. We flourish".) Images of Assyria and Babylon to the right; children's drawings -- renewal -- to the right.

Zukofsky's "A" in paint!

There are a thousand things I want to say, by way of response. I needn't get them all into one letter. Obviously you sent the letter of 1 Nov 1990 to the publishers, to be included with the book, which has just arrived.

I am writing a book about still life (which I derive from the basket of summer fruit in Amos, the most archaic book in the Bible). I have a bee in my bonnet about apples and pears, and your pears enrich my argument. More about that, later.

The little boy looking out of the eye-holes of his paper bag (188/189) is purest magic!

All the flowers are marvellous. Roman Afternoon is a great painting, and The Birthday Dress a deeply meaningful one in its symbolism and psychology.

But let me race through this letter, so that I can get it in today's mail. I am basically a writer of inept fiction and of literary criticism. My writing about the visual arts is a dare on my part. Cadmus asked me to write the introduction to his drawings, as did Balthus (in a Byzantinely indirect way: he had seen an essay I'd done in Antaeus and sent word through his dealer that I was to "be encouraged" to write more).

You say in your letter that you hope I see that your work stands apart. It stands apart, believe me -- it stands apart.

I could spend the rest of the day responding. That 1 Nov date keeps plucking at my elbow as a seeming and hideous delinquency; I want you to have as immediate a reply as I can manage. The book warms my house just by being here.

So, before the postman comes to pick up the mail,

in great measures of gratitude,

Sally Davenport