



TODAY'S  
MASTERS

BY MICHAEL J. PEARCE

# THE GRAVITY OF PLAY

## SIMON DINNERSTEIN'S VOYAGE

In his Brooklyn studio, the artist Simon Dinnerstein (b. 1943) is working on *Voyage*, an important new painting that ties together youth and age with self-reflective grace. He speaks of it clearly and deliberately, with thoughtful and measured language. Dinnerstein is a serious person who makes serious paintings, and this is a serious picture of a serious boy looking at his audience with a forthright and pragmatic gaze. In its serious becoming, however, *Voyage* has all the lightness of a child at play.

A simple box is a place for play, where, safe from danger, a child's imagination can test the pragmatic constraints of dull, ordinary cardboard. A boy in a box can be a spaceman, a speed-racer, or a superman. Dinnerstein has centered his 4-year-old grandson, Adrian, at the diagonal crossing of the pastel-blue composition, surrounding him with a vermillion downward-swirling vortex that carries toys around the thoughtful child like an erratic whirlpool spinning down the bathtub drain. The boy is at sea in an imaginary boat.

A studio visitor who saw the painting in progress immediately recited the first verse of *The Voyage*, a poem by the exemplary French bohemian Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867). It translates as:

*For the child, lover of cards and prints,  
The universe is equal to his vast appetite.  
Ah! How great the world is in the clarity of lamplight!  
How small the world is in the eyes of memory!*



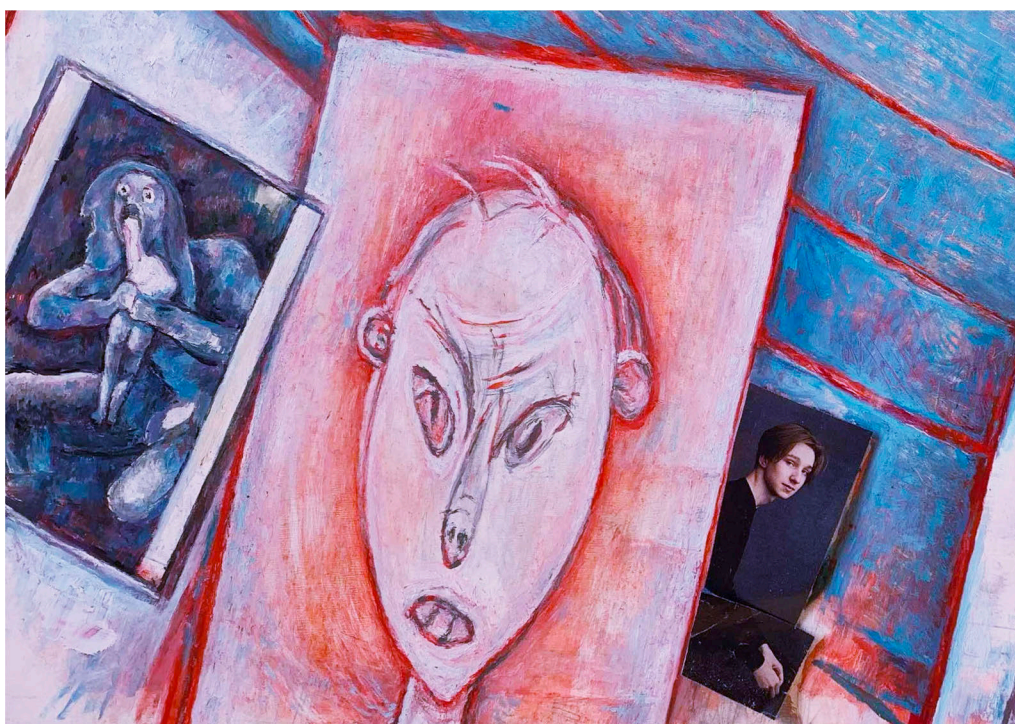
Simon Dinnerstein sitting in front of *Voyage*; photo: Richard Termine

In fact Dinnerstein named the painting for this poem, which seems to resonate closely with his longtime exploration of the meaning and mystery of mimesis and with the transformative journey a boy must make to become a man. “It’s about a child and the child’s voyage,” Dinnerstein says. “If the painting is successful, it will not just be about the boy, about who the boy is, but about childhood. *Voyage*



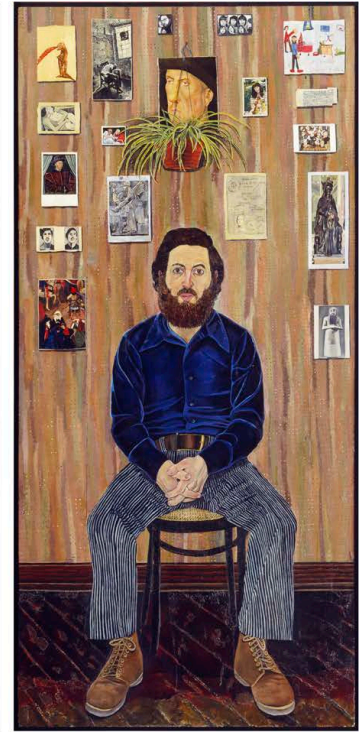


*Voyage (in progress)*, 2020–present, oil on wood panel, 80 x 83 in.



A detail from *Voyage*, bottom left, including Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*





(ABOVE) *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, oil on wood panels, 79 1/2 in. x 14 feet in width, Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University; on view from June 1 in the inaugural display of the museum's new building ■  
(RIGHT) *Gregory's Party*, 1979, oil on wood panel, 42 x 64 in., collection of Susan and Chuck Breen

is tied architecturally with the swooping circles and ellipses to this young boy." This is a painting of time and growth from innocence to knowledge.

#### A LONG TIME COMING

Born in Brooklyn, where he still lives, Dinnerstein studied history at City College, then drawing and painting at the art school once operated by the Brooklyn Museum. His art often reaches for the unseen world beyond human senses, the gravitational pull tugging meaning from painted things. He found it first in his famed *The Fulbright Triptych* (1971–74), asking what a painted object is and what it seems to be.

He notes, "The idea is not that it looks so close to what is next to it, but what does it mean, what is it referencing, what is the deep meaning here, what is the subject that is trying to pierce through and vibrate to the viewer? In the world of kabbalah, the idea is to bring forth that spirit which is inside a rock, a pear, an apple, a human being, a landscape. What is the spirit there that an artist can find, and bring forward?"

Placed high on *Voyage's* labyrinthine spiral are model horses and an archer, more boats and turtles at left, and dinosaurs and dragons in procession to the right. These are a few of Dinnerstein's favorite things plucked from memories of childhoods past — both his own and his grandson's — and scattered along the spiral paths. Colored plastic gems form a tidy threaded line above a toy train, and an elephant leads a pair of space shuttles. A Sicilian puppet



lounges in gilded armor, and a sculpted Chinese dragon waits, ready to bring destruction like a diminutive Leviathan. A classic Edward Bear, a panda, and elegant Babar converse as a less anthropomorphic elephant eavesdrops. Spinning tops, a gyroscope, giant-sized marbles, Hot Wheels cars, and dice line the descent. (The letter-blocks on the left form an anagram.) Dinnerstein is eloquent about his hieroglyphic use of objects: "The alter ego is a visual array of things which echo this young boy," he observes. "These images define who we are." These aren't ordinary toys, then; the painting is an exploration of the construction of the childhood self.

*Voyage* is a concentration of ideas Dinnerstein has explored before; he painted the potential of children's toys, fantasy, and reality in *Gregory's Party* (1979), with a staging of objects as prelude to play. There, the girl (Adrian's mother, Simone Dinnerstein, now a renowned concert pianist) and her toys gaze at us with the confrontation of a portrait sitter, daring us to disregard their personalities.





*Sonatina*, 1981, conté crayon on paper, 26 1/2 x 40 1/2 in., collection of Lucia and Brad Ginesin

In *Sonatina* (1981), she watches us watching her with the same frank stare as the boy in *Voyage*. She plays Mozart surrounded by a dollhouse and pictures promising her an idealized feminine future and an idyllic child's present — Botticelli's *Primavera*, a Degas ballerina, a painted panda. Dinnerstein's objects demand close examination and thought. He observes, "What I would like is for all of the objects to emit a weight and a force within them, so all would look like the smallest elements in the triptych, all asking for your attention."

A series of prints and pictures breaks the bottom of *Voyage*'s frame. Dinnerstein explains, "The left, right, and bottom push out. Many items on the left and right are cut off by the edge of the painting, and that formal idea makes you aware of the periphery. If you get past that, closer and closer, you're inside the space." Consequently, when viewers enter the vortex, they intrude with a hint of horror to taint the swirl of guiltless toys. These dark images threaten the boy's innocence.

At left, Francisco Goya's sinister *Saturn Devouring His Son* is the first in a line cleverly positioned to tug viewers into the image, delivering a message that danger will inevitably come to the life of every child. Adults may be a threat. There are monsters in this world. A child's red-eyed drawing of a long and distorted demon's face appears alongside *Saturn*, then a loving photograph of Dinnerstein's grandson at 19. It's his second appearance in the painting — a youth in one moment, a child in the other.

For Dinnerstein, "Childhood is a world that mixes a somewhat upbeat and sweet idea with another idea which is dangerous and challenging. So it is a battle, a kind of conversation between these two poles." Violence and death are often part of boys' instinctive play, but monster-making extends to the adult world, too. Illustrating this, further to the right, is Goya's terrifying *Witches' Sabbath: The Great He-Goat*, with its horrid hags worshipping the black silhouette of their absurd dark lord. It is followed by a string of scrawled children's drawings: a Chinese woman with arms upraised and mouth singing; three musicians strutting in performance; a simple goateed head with scribbled hair; a child facing a cat in a knife fight on a crag set in a sea of fire; a boy and girl flying together in a starry sky; a rhinoceros side-eyed by a comical cigar-chewing cartoon character; and a washed-out watercolor set, worked to perfection.

In the bottom right corner, Dinnerstein has placed another terrifying Goya print, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, a self-portrait of the Spanish master dreaming, hinting at the wobble and blur between reality and the pleasures and horrors found in dreams and play. When viewers enter *Voyage*, they set sail into another world, swept into the currents of self-creation. Either they build a ship, steer around the whirlpool, and use its deep well as a resource for creativity, or they are sucked into the void.

Sleep and dreams are serious matters worth exploring, and Dinnerstein is intent upon satisfying his long interest in the maturing imagination. He has visited this realm before with *In Sleep* (1983), which intimately records the movements and dreams of a beautiful slumbering woman, and in *Night* (1985), which shows a group of children with their heads covered in bags cut with enormous eyeholes. Freshly innocent, they advance together through the fearful night, haunted by frightening shadow figures and bats. A pale rider on a pale horse follows a cut-out





(ABOVE) *Night*, 1985, conté crayon, colored pencil, pastel, wax crayon, and oil pastel on paper, 36 1/2 x 76 3/8 in., Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, New York ■ (RIGHT) *In Sleep*, 1983, conté crayon, colored pencil, and pastel on paper, 33 1/2 x 59 1/8 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of the Sara Roby Foundation

witch, and hooded and masked figures bear threatening baskets. Dinnerstein continues, “Really good art pushes you to ask questions, brings you to another place, takes you round a corner. There are many different ideas of what art is or what literature is. I throw my cards in that direction.”

At *Voyage*’s top right, the artist has quoted Hieronymus Bosch’s brilliant *The Blind Leading the Blind*, and at top left there’s a detail from his *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which makes visual puns of popular Dutch aphorisms and biblical commentary, stressing the interpretive nature of imagery, which is like imaginative play.

Boats are an important theme, too. The boy’s box could have been anything he wanted — a space shuttle, a helicopter, an airplane — but this one is a ship preserving its captain from being drowned in the whirlpool. Mansions like floating memory palaces are built upon the keels of the two central boats, reflected across the fold that splits the painting and separates it like a giant child’s storybook. If they are moored, the soft panorama beyond is a vague dream of landfall. Ending the line of metamorphosing ships on the left, a pretty sailboat sets course beyond the frame of representation into the ethereal, while at top right a modest self-portrait of Dinnerstein sits oarless and adrift in a dinghy, alone far out at sea. These sailors bookend life’s experiences. The playing boy becomes a man, and the man becomes old and drifts into memory.

#### PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

*Voyage*, then, is a memory palace for Dinnerstein. Shown as a boy in this painting, but now an adult of 22, his grandson Adrian visited the studio many times as his grandfather worked *Voyage*’s mysterious path. Dinnerstein recalled one such visit: “I said to Adrian, ‘You know, he is you, but he is also me. ... I have a dual feeling about the image of myself. It’s going back, back, and the image of the boy is coming forward, and it’s making me feel a bit sad, because I’m going out onto the horizon, and the boy is coming forward, and I feel a bit melancholy.’ And I was laughing, and he was laughing, but the joke’s on me.”

When he saw his grandfather’s self-portrait in the boat, Adrian thought of the River Styx, crossed by the dead with coins on their eyes



to pay the ferryman Charon. But neither Baudelaire nor Dinnerstein end their *Voyage* in melancholy, or set their feet too heavily into the underworld’s austere earth. Baudelaire finished his poem in reflective tone, seeing the end of life as the beginning of an adventure into a world of new experiences, writing with cheerful optimism in the face of finality:

*O Death, old captain, it is time! Raise the anchor!  
This land bores us, oh Death! Let us cast off!  
If the sky and the sea are black as ink,  
You know our hearts are filled with light!*

*Pour us your poison, for it will comfort us!  
This fire burns our brains so much we want  
to plunge to the bottom of the abyss, careless of heaven or hell,  
Into the depths of the unknown to find something new.*

The curse of age is to turn to nostalgia — to relive lost loves, fight forgotten wars, and forget to unfold the future. With *Voyage*, Dinnerstein has handed the wheel guiding the serious ship of play and dreams to the rising generation. ●

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