

Eliot's 'Historical Sense' and 'The Fulbright Triptych'

Julyan Davis

Simon Dinnerstein's 'The Fulbright Triptych' offers us an unusual experience in art today. It is a thoughtful and complete work, taking us entirely into the life and reflections of the artist, and doing so in a way that seems both old and new at the same time.

Dinnerstein is examining a great deal in this painting, but a quiet dedication to every element across the scene gives an equality to all. We are not being given a lecture in art history. Instead, we are invited to join the artist as he contemplates. Like a fine conversation, the triptych provides a unity of digressions. If Matisse suggested a painting should be like an armchair, Dinnerstein suggests a painting can be like an armchair drawn up across from his own. It is an intriguing, endless painting, and one we don't want to leave.

As I recall it, here is the content of my own happy interaction with the Fulbright triptych.

Why paint on wood? This choice by Dinnerstein is very important. A great deal of how we read painting today is determined by art that was made on canvas and linen. For Dinnerstein to opt for a wood support on this scale is crucial to the work. It's worth understanding where that decision came from, and what he rejected by not working on canvas.

The 16th c. transition from wood to canvas met the needs of great and expanding wealth. There were palaces to fill, and paintings needed to get much bigger. Canvas and bristle brushes were the solution, and Venice, with its access to sail-cloth, would lead this transition.

In switching to this new technology, artists developed a short-hand for communicating information and for leading the viewer's eye into the painting. Look at a Tintoretto, an El Greco or Reynolds and you will see these tricks very clearly. Our eye is taken straight to a point of focus. From there it follows an intentional design that leads the eye from event to event around the canvas, avoiding the extremities and returning us once again to the focal point. What is peripheral is truly peripheral. There is a remarkable sketchiness in say, the leg and foot of the cupid in Velasquez' 'Rokeby Venus'. It is entirely unfinished. Velasquez can do this because he knows the public will never see this part of the painting. Their eye will only make the journey he has mapped for them.

But compare this to earlier painting, painting made on wood- a Van Eyck, say, or a Bosch. At a distance, these paintings act very differently. A universal attention has been paid to every element. Full of detail, they are meant to be read more closely. A Van Eyck,

with its ornate symmetry, or a Bosch, busy with myriad activities, intrigues and draws us in. Dinnerstein has drawn both these qualities- symmetry and complexity- from this earlier art. In looking at his choice to paint a large-scale triptych on wood, it's also worth remembering how fully this older way of painting fell out of fashion. Today, the public experience of our museums still reflects this. The rooms of medieval and early renaissance work are hurried through. We catch a glimpse of alien perspectives, of gold leaf and colors that seem they will never fade, in our rush towards the vast halls of endless, brown, familiar canvases.

But in fact, the way we read a Van der Weyden and a Titian are both natural to us. We can decipher a network of detail as easily as we can read the strong designs of classical painting. Yet we have come to see the history of painting as a natural evolution towards a better understanding of the world- of anatomy, of perspective, of light. This bias is built into the way we read art history. According to its rules, Art, like science, gets better.

Centuries of painting, from the Dutch art bubble to the Salon and Royal Academy, created not just an established hierarchy of genres, but an accepted understanding of how each genre should appear. The landscape should be weighted by a tree to left or right, the portrait generally centered, the still life viewed at a certain height, and so on. Ask the average person what an old painting looks like, and their memory will draw from this vast ocean of brown and varnished images. They are far less likely to recall a fresco, an icon, or an altarpiece.

If canvas then, was the first technological innovation that changed how we read paintings, the second revolution arrived with the 19th c. technologies of photography and paint in tubes. As we headed into Modernism, the message from above remained the same- art is always improving. Old art is, well, out of date.

So why, in 1971, did Simon Dinnerstein quietly set about a depiction of his life with clear deference to such an archaic, unfashionable system of painting? He was a painter practicing in a time not one, but two giant steps removed from the sort of work he was about to undertake.

A good rule for an artist is that subject matter should determine approach. Dinnerstein is a master draughtsman, and in the triptych he needed detail, and a great deal of it. The hard surface provided by wood is ideal for such an artist. It does not give. It allows for remarkable precision. Drawing then, explains his choice of wood for the support, but why a triptych, and on such a scale? Surely such a domestic scene should be portrayed on a smaller panel? Here is where Dinnerstein ambitiously expands upon his already outmoded choice.

It seems, even now, to have been a great risk for a young artist, but Dinnerstein realized that if the risk was worth taking, the resulting work should be bold, not half-hearted.

The format and the appearance of an altarpiece for this modest subject matter takes the present and connects it to the distant past. It's clear he understood the power of tradition, and how it could make the new timeless. His choice reminds me of T.S. Eliot's advice to any artist, whatever their discipline.

Eliot warned against a 'blind or timid adherence' to the successes of the past, but advises that "tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who wants to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence (...) This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity".

The Fulbright Triptych possesses this quality. When this 'historical sense' is achieved, the resulting art exists outside the vagaries of fashion.

Formally, why does 'The Fulbright Triptych' succeed? Like a medieval altarpiece, it cannot really be seen all at once. Its plain symmetry stops the eye. Where are we supposed to look first?

This symmetry is a trick that reminds me of the great American photographer William Christenberry. He used it in his many photographs of churches and stores from his native Hale County, Alabama. His arrangements were so bold and plain that they confront, demanding the viewer to explore each part of the photograph equally. Kubrick uses the same effect in many of his films, and it is a mesmerizing quality one often finds in antique folk art.

Stopped from a swift entry and departure into and out of the painting, we are offered a more thorough tour of its many parts. Do the figures dominate? Not really. Dinnerstein has chosen to make the family flank the centerpiece. The windows are thus given at least equal weight. As they take their turn in our attention, so does the table below them, and as that becomes key to the painting so does each tool upon it, then each image pinned on the wall. Dinnerstein has insisted upon this democracy between figure and furniture as a gateway into detail. His intent is to make us look at everything and he achieves it. By taking the format of the triptych to depict the everyday, he makes the secular sacred.

When it comes to representational painters working from observation, most paint today is still applied in a fluid, directional way, following the bias of the artist's hand. This is heavily influenced by a now almost rule of thumb that one works from the largest to smallest brush, leaving evidence of each success in this refining process. This has its

roots in canvas and Venetian painting, and was reinvigorated with Impressionist alla prima painting and its absolute obeisance to an understood capturing of strong directional light.

But there is another, less bravura, way to apply paint, and this is often tied to the pursuit of a different kind of light. For a realist painter like Dinnerstein, to choose to follow this less common way of painting puts an artist in very different company.

That lineage goes back to fresco painting and medieval religious iconography. You enter the world of an ambient, defining light, as much an internal light from each object as that surrounding it. It is a lineage that runs from Giotto and the Limbourg Brothers through the history of art. It favors the light of northern Europe, of Brueghel and Bosch, of Durer and Hammerschoi, but it belongs to Southern Europe too, from Da Messina to De Chavannes, from Cezanne to Balthus to Lopez Garcia.

This world, that makes directional light secondary, and a universal light primary, is ideal for the artist wishing to speak through detail. Paint is applied differently in this world.

There is less ego. In fact, there is no ego. The subject matter absolutely defines the approach, and what matters is every last little thing. For the accomplished artist, the miracle is that this never becomes a slog, or mere copying, but instead a kind of disappearing into the abstract wonder of paint at very close range- each subject successfully sculpted in the world depicted, yet simultaneously only paint.

Symbolist painting flourished at the same time as Impressionism, but the Symbolists wanted this much older light in their paintings- a diffuse light that leant full weight to each object across the canvas . They embraced the drawn line, and the clarity that a more neutral illumination would bring to it. To me, the Fulbright Triptych is a symbolist painting of sorts, and continues this tradition. Like Symbolism, it seeks the spiritual. It finds religion in family, in work, in art.

The view from the triptych's two windows set this universal radiance for the whole painting. The landscape is suffused in a very old, northern light. It is not going to fling itself into the room and confuse anything. The light within is the same as that outside.

The outside world and the inside world are equal. Everything is illuminated.

Dinnerstein has taken pains not to let the family dominate the room. In this egalitarian space everything starts to take on relevance. We are ready to explore every detail he has supplied. Each postcard, each piece of art becomes an equal passage of reflection, an equal portal to match the window. This has the very interesting effect of making the wall a single, unifying frame. We notice the complexity of the negative space it creates around so many things and, as we see how much attention has been paid to the wall itself, this creates a sense of palimpsest throughout. Which came first? Was the wall laid over and around each postcard or piece of paper? It appears backdrop and decoration had equal billing. The absence of system in such a process keeps the painting playful, never laborious.

What is interesting is that in giving such relevance to a cheap wall, to snapshots and children's drawings, Dinnerstein is being both modern and archaic. We are seeing the discoveries of Cubism, of Matisse, of collage and Pop Art as much as we are connecting to the studious attention of a Van der Weyden. Aside from an immensely honest depiction of the artist's experience, Dinnerstein has set up a comfortable discourse about observational painting, about a way of seeing that relates the very distant to the very recent.

The result is a painter's painting. Dinnerstein has created a library of his experiences, his inspirations, his consolations. It is a quiet work. It reminds me of a wall of books, chosen by a reader over many years. The Fulbright Triptych offers, particularly to a fellow artist, the kind of comfort one finds in the literary reflections of Montaigne's essays or Robert Burton's rambling 'Anatomy of Melancholy'. Those works are full of generous references to predecessors, and a child-like curiosity in everything, from metaphysics to the mundane. It is in their nature to digress, but nothing seems out of place. They were artists who were grounded in the details of their daily lives, but simultaneously, and always, in vibrant conversation with the past. Dinnerstein gives us a visual equivalent.

Julyan Davis is a British-born artist who has painted the American South for nearly thirty years. He received his degree in painting and printmaking from the Byam Shaw School of Art in London. His paintings hang in many museum and public collections, while his varied narrative series continue to tour the Southeast. He lives and works in Asheville, North Carolina.