

Realism and Reality's Wake

Simon Dinnerstein

I was first attracted to the work of Simon Dinnerstein by things that weren't there.

Perhaps I'm drawn to forms of expression that give the promise of understanding reality from the things it leaves in its wake. After all some of the things I'm most interested in as an archaeologist, like time, are never actually found but are instead inferred from other things. In my day job I try to understand a dynamic and fleeting world, full of life and ephemeral meaning, from the lasting world it leaves behind.

The exhibition title "The Lasting World" is from an essay on Simon's work by Rudolf Arnheim, an art theorist who once argued that images don't imitate reality, they hint at it. At first glance the realism of Simon's work seems to imitate reality, but instead it playfully confounds it, offering meaning less in what is seen than what is supposed.

Works like *The Sink* or *The Fulbright Triptych* are deceptive in their exactitude. Because of their painstaking realism they appear almost photographic, a passive representation of how light bounces off the objects in the picture plane. But ponder the works a bit more and their ambiguities—the fault lines along which they can be deconstructed—become more apparent.

In *The Sink*, for example, strongly-defined lines of perspective position the viewer in front of an alcove containing a small sink. A mirror above the sink reflects the room and part of a doorway, but curiously the artist (or the viewer, for that matter) does not appear in the mirror's reflection, even though the linear perspective emphasized by the doorway, walls, flooring and the sink itself all suggest he should. The image frames and points at a figure who is absent; we find the artist not in the image itself

but in the ephemeral byproducts (brushes, roller, rags and cleaning supplies) of his work, by the things he left behind. Consider *The Fulbright Triptych*. It seems straightforward enough—a moment in time during Simon’s tenure as a Fulbright scholar studying printmaking in Germany, a triptych in which the tools of printmaking and the view through two windows occupy the central panel, while the artist, his wife and child occupy the wings. The walls are covered with postcards, mementos and works of inspiration or influence attached to pegboard, to all appearances what Jonathan Lethem called “a scrupulous gaze at one perfect instant.”

But of course it’s nothing of the sort. The square casement windows open onto a world that Simone, Simon’s daughter—pictured on Renée’s lap—could never have seen, as she was born after the couple returned to America. It’s an imaginary time, set in a space that’s equally imaginary for all its apparent verisimilitude. The main image and its flanking volets are parallel to the image plane, and all three images are depicted in rigorous one point perspective. Like *The Sink*, the one point perspective gives the scene a certain timelessness. But Simon, Renée and Simone upset this perspective, the young couple facing the viewer directly while the floorboards under their feet (floorboards based on those in a Brooklyn apartment, not the ostensible German scene depicted) sweep away at oblique angles toward that single point on the hidden horizon. The figures seem slightly out of place, temporary inhabitants of a space dominated by their tangible and timeless residue. Those figures look directly at us, but the layout of the scene focuses our gaze not immediately on them but on the point where all the other lines in the image converge. Like the figures, we know where that point must be but cannot see it, as it lies somewhere behind the ephemera tacked to the wall separating the two windows. Those ephemera define the figures at a moment in time, situating them in terms of family, friends, influences, and as the outcome of a series of constantly unfolding contingent events. They suggest the present as past-until-now, but also occlude the figures’ view of that convergence point.

Throughout Simon's work there's loving attention to surfaces, from the paint splashes on mirrors to worn floorboards, from unflinching portrayals of skin—young and old—to exquisitely rendered gilt backdrops. While on the one hand they're real surfaces, real forms (one can play 'spot the shared details' between many otherwise unrelated works) they're used less as photorealistic backgrounds than to hint at the reality Simon seeks to capture. Those backgrounds, and the ephemera that populate his pictures, seem in some ways more lasting than the figures depicted. Figures seem fragile in their mortality and in their constant states of change, likely to vanish from view as does the unseen artist of *The Sink*. The solidity of figures is greatest when they parallel the picture plane, buttressed and supported by lines of perspective (*Arnold*, for example, or *Marie Bilderl*). In other works the figures seem cramped by the picture plane, trapped in a setting not of their choosing (e.g., *Renée*), passing through the picture plane rather than rooted in it, or overcoming its limitations in dreams.

In Simon's dream paintings we see a loosening of these constraints of space and linear time, as figures move through or over spaces that recede into nothingness. In his other works surroundings are defined--spaces and ephemera exist, so they're depicted in detail. Space and spatial juxtapositions become a way of hinting at time, at the constantly evolving lived experiences that cannot be easily captured in two dimensions.

The images use their ostensible realism not to depict reality but to hint at it, to suggest the transient qualities of a temporal reality long in the past before the work of art it suggested can be completed, and providing a narrative element that situates the figures as part of a story rather than a snapshot. That concern with time becomes clearer still when surveying the range of Simon's works. We see his family develop, watch stages of Renee's pregnancy and the growth of his daughter Simone, and later her own pregnancy and the growth of her family. That personal view of growth and change gives his works a

poignancy that's as hard to describe as it is to evade.

Which brings us back to *The Fulbright Triptych*, to an apartment overlooking a small town in Germany, to a couple who violate the leading lines of the painting to confront the viewer. In the narrative, lasting world of the painting the figures remain forever young, forever looking back at us from a bricolage of ephemera and constructed space.

But in real life the young couple who gaze calmly back from the volets are now gone, replaced by their more mature selves further along a trajectory they could not see at the time, closer to a vanishing point in the distance obscured by their immediate surroundings, by the ephemera that remain.

Alex Barker is President-Elect, American Anthropological Association, Director, Museum of Art and Archaeology and Director, Museum of Anthropology at the University of Missouri.