

# Coming to Know Simon Dinnerstein

## The Art and the Artist

Miller Williams

My favorite place to be is what my wife and I still call a sitting room, a retreat in the back of the house with wicker chairs, settee and serving table, a wood-burning stove, and two framed reproductions of Simon Dinnerstein paintings announcing shows in New York in 1979 and in Rome two years earlier. These hangings, and the memories they stir, are a part of what makes the sitting room so special a place.

Thanks to identical awards in our two fields from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, we were at the American Academy in Rome together in 1976 and 1977 along with our wives, Jordan and Renée, and the Dinnersteins' young daughter, Simone. As I wrote and he painted and we showed each other our work at various stages, I was increasingly aware that what he put on canvas, an almost photographically accurate portrayal of the world around us, was at the same time nonspecific, universal, meaning something beyond what the eye sees.

I had long since found such a duality in the best poetry—a clarity of dramatic situation not quite concealing deeper suggestions of the unsayable, the kind of work that David Baker would later characterize as something clear to children and mysterious to adults. It was the first time I had found this so starkly manifest in the visual arts.

I still don't know of a painter more true to the physical fact of the subject. Simon's art is at least as much about presentation as representation. He offers us what he sees. He deliberates, and because he deliberates intensely he pays a profound homage to his subject; he scrutinizes, hones, and burnishes the subject of each object and figure. A shaft of light on the floor or a shadow cast on the wall is treated with the same respect he gives to tangible objects and figures. Everything within the parameters of the painting is savored and enshrined by the artist.

Because everything is in focus, all is curiously equal. In one sense this puts everything in suspension, because our minds expect some sort of scale of being to be portrayed, saying that one thing matters more than another, which matters more than another. In a different sense, there is no suspension at all,

because there is none of the uncertainty of implied movement; there are almost no verbs here. This is a world of nouns. In the sort of ironic turn that good art inevitably makes, the coexistence of suspension and lack of suspension gives the work a fine tension.

I find myself smiling as I write this, knowing how nearly I'm describing not only the art but the artist that I came to know so well during those long evenings in the Dinnersteins' apartment near the Academy, talking at one time or another about everything but coming back always to poetry and painting. Simon on the surface is straightforward, without ambivalence or uncertainty; under the surface are the irreconcilable contradictions without which there is no art and which form the richly textured character of a man I'm pleased to call my friend.

However similar Simon and his paintings may be, though, it's important to realize with what care he stays out of them except in those shared qualities of straightforwardness and the unseen.

The first of these, of course, is what first and most strikingly asserts itself. In most of his work, the space he depicts is stage-like, horizontal, and parallel to the plane of the painting. He avoids diagonal thrusts into surrounding space. The insistence on this frontality, this stability and certainty, is intense. There is a balance in the distribution of his subjects and nearly always a symmetry of weight from one side of the painting to the other.

Even the touches of pastel and pencil leave a steady web of tiny marks rather than the flourish of a signature. He simply does not call attention to the painter; he wants the figure or object to speak for itself and not for him.

In the light of all this, as contradiction continues and its tension grows, I discover with particular interest and no small excitement that the figure in the most recent work is beginning to generate rhythms beyond itself. One sees these first as the displaced folds of cloth on which she lies, realizing slowly that they continue up into the air, almost as waves emanate from a rock thrown into a pond. There is a deliberately dream-like quality in these pieces.

And now, that said, a short note to the artist. Come see us, Simon, you and Renée. There's a sitting room we'd like to show you, with a wood-burning stove and warm memories. It's a good place to talk.

December 1998

Fayetteville, Arkansas