

LOOKING AT ONE'S OWN ARTWORK



Above:
About Strange Lands and People,
1984, Conté crayon, colored pencil,
and pastel, 52⁷/₁₆ x 38¹/₂.
Courtesy Staempfli Gallery,
New York, New York.
Collection the artist.

Right:
The Fulbright Triptych,
1971-74, oil, 79¹/₂ x 156.
Collection the Museum of Art,
Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, Pennsylvania.
Gift of the Friends of the
Museum of Art, Pennsylvania
State University.

BY SIMON DINNERSTEIN

IN APRIL AND MAY of 1985, I was occupied with a large solo exhibit of my work at Gallery 1199 in the Martin Luther King Jr. Labor Center in New York City. The gallery is adjacent to the lobby of Local 1199, the Hospital and Health Care Employees Union. My father, Louis Dinnerstein, had been an active member of this union. I usually exhibit at Staempfli Gallery in New York City, but when this opportunity presented itself, especially with the large space available, I eagerly jumped at it.

Gallery 1199 is a non-profit space, so almost all of the preparations for the show were done by myself and an enthusiastic cadre of my students. Works arrived from various locations—private collectors; Pennsylvania State University; the law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison; and the Sara Roby Foundation—on April 2, the day the show was to be hung. There were 35 pieces representing a 14-year span from 1971 through 1985. As one can imagine, the scene at the gallery when the works arrived was chaotic and most intense. Although I had produced the works, I had never really seen them all together.

In designing the show, I wanted to somehow sepa-



rate the older work, mainly paintings, from the more recent series of drawings that had occupied me for the past four years. I was concerned with how the exhibit would hold together, since my work had changed during the 14 years. Yet, even though my hand and eye had grown more sophisticated, there seemed to be a connective thread run-

Solo exhibitions, particularly those that offer a retrospective look at an accumulation of artwork, offer artists a chance to summarize the ideas they have been trying to express. Simon Dinnerstein recently had that opportunity, and he describes both the formation of the exhibition and the progressive development of his work in this article.



ning through much of the work. A theme kept emerging: the interest in people—in the individual and in the dreams and mysteries, the visual information and enthusiasms that define human beings. I guess I am interested in art that attempts to get at the full measure of a person. Something about D. H. Lawrence's statement that "the novel as a tremula-

tion can make the whole man alive tremble" has always appealed to me.

The earliest painting in the show, *The Fulbright Triptych*, was begun in 1971 in Hessisch Lichtenau, near Kassel, Germany, where I had been living on a Fulbright Fellowship. At the time, I was quite interested in northern European art, and the influence of such artists as Hol-

bein, Van Eyck, and Bellini is certainly there. Before going to Germany, I was mainly drawing and the *Triptych* actually depicts the studio of a graphic artist. In the center panel, a copperplate is shown on a table surrounded by tools for engraving—burins, scrapers, burnishers, etc. It is an enormous painting—about 14' wide, counting the spacing be-

tween the panels—that shows the workshop of an artist involved in printing and drawing.

As with other images, I usually try to bring together some combination of abstract and design elements and the figure in an expressionistic context. Also, I like working with naturalistic images as a starting point. Elements of the *Triptych* did exist—



Above:
Nocturne for a Polish Worker,
1982. Conté crayon and
colored pencil, 29½ x 44.
Collection the artist.
Courtesy Staempfli Gallery,
New York, New York.

Right:
January Light,
1983. Conté crayon and
colored pencil, 44 x 29½.
Collection the Martin Luther
King Jr. Labor Center,
New York, New York.

the table, the views from the windows, and some of the pictures and instruments. These incidental and real elements became stepping off points for a more abstracted conception.

Many times artists work by instinct and 'feel,' and there are lines, elements, and themes that weave their way through a work of art in some secret and inexplicable way. The *Triptych* has a number of themes, some that I was not fully aware of until much later. On its most primary level, the painting deals with the artist and his world and family. The studio is shown and underlying it are ideas of how perception and visual stimuli define us and give us our "axis," or understanding of the world. Images abound in this diverse, mysterious, playful, and irrational universe—reproductions of Holbein's *Portrait of Georg Gisze*; Seurat's drawing of his mother; Ludwig Wittgenstein's "forms of life"; a

letter from my wife concerning an anxiety dream. The left panel shows my wife and daughter and various references to my wife's work as a teacher: children's drawings; a first day's writing assignment; a page of o's repeated many times; a fifth-grader's rendition of the effects of pollution on our environment; a big black letter y islanded on white paper. The right panel deals with my own associations—from a detail of Van Eyck's *Last Judgment* to a Soviet exit visa to a fire-spewing dinosaur. How amazing that so many associations having seemingly nothing to do with one another become part of one's consciousness.

As I looked around at my exhibit, I realized how strange and varied inspiration can be to an artist or, for that matter, how widely it may differ between artists. For example, the imagery for *The Fulbright Triptych* came to me in its totality. There was only one study—in

gold leaf for the copperplate on the table, since I was unfamiliar with the process of gilding. Many times, though, numerous studies preceded a large work of art, and in this show, I was able to display some of these studies, especially for the recent series of drawings.

Before discussing these latter works, it might be interesting to say something about the origins of the group. After completing the *Triptych* in 1974, I had my first solo exhibit (in 1975, at the Staempfli Gallery in New York City). During the following year, I was very fortunate to have received the Rome Prize Fellowship. I lived in Rome at the American Academy with my family from 1976 until early 1979. Returning to Brooklyn, I began teaching at both The New School for Social Research/Parsons School of Design and New York City Technical College. One of the classes that was especially interesting was "Life

Continued on page 98



DINNERSTEIN

Continued from page 71

Drawing—the Figure and the Portrait.” I had particular ideas for the class—about how it should be run and about the relationship between tradition and innovation. My drawings up to this point had been almost entirely in black-and-white mediums. But as I taught the class, I became fascinated with the students’ use of Conté crayon in the warm brown colors, colored pencils, and pastels. It was really strange—one usually thinks of the teacher being in charge, but in this case, I watched the students work with mediums I had never worked with and learned from them.

For the recent group of drawings, I mainly worked with Rives BFK paper.