

Friday

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Corin Nemec stars in 'Parker Lewis Can't Lose,' on the Fox Network.



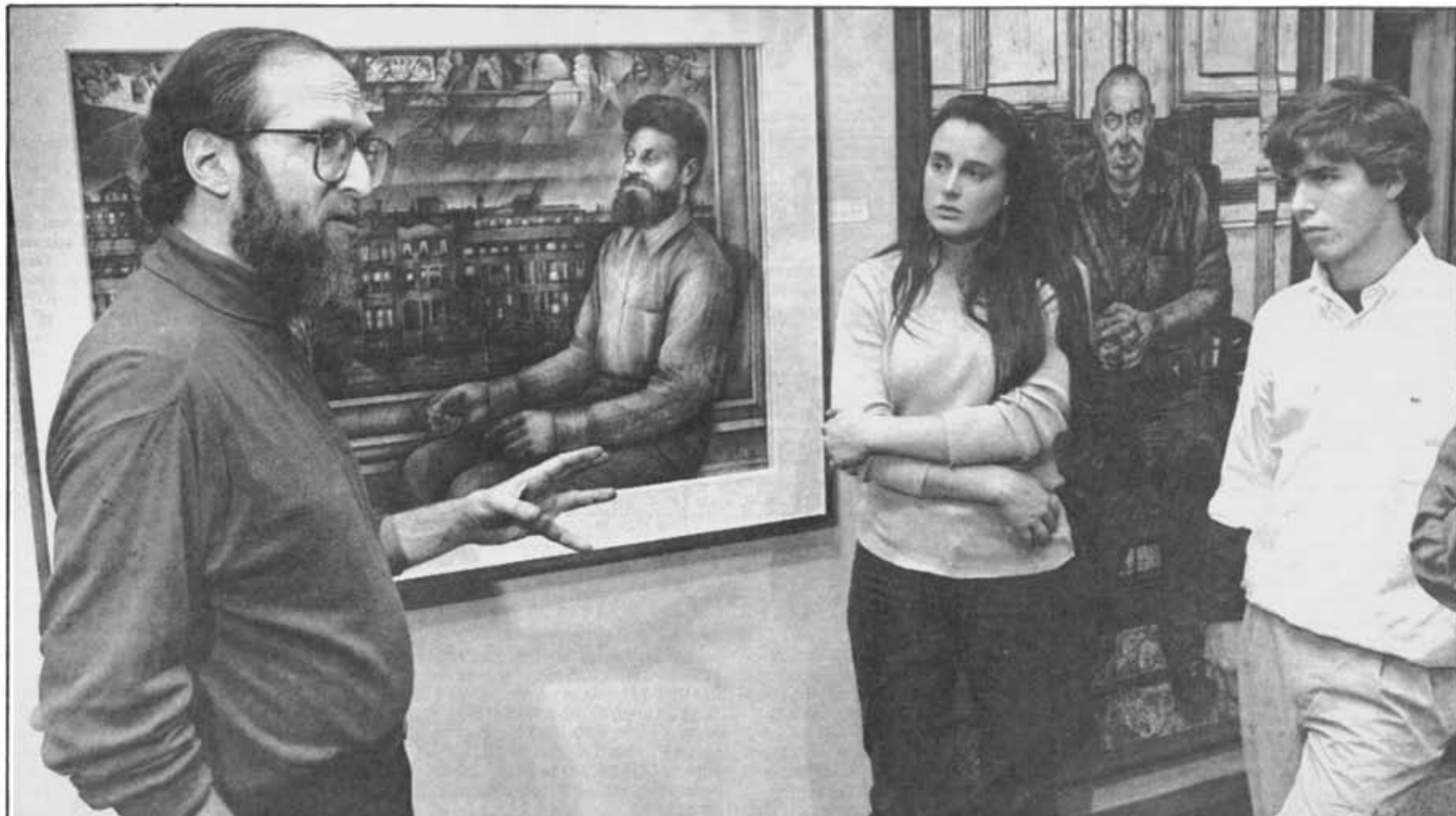
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DAN HABIB / Monitor staff

Simon Dinnerstein talks with St. Paul's School students beside his works 'Nocturne' (1982) and 'Arnold' (1972).

Essential realities

Simon Dinnerstein draws the essence of art from the commonplace

By RICHARD MERTENS
Monitor staff

Ordinary things blossom unexpectedly in the work of Brooklyn artist Simon Dinnerstein. Whether his subject is an old Polish immigrant, a flower stand in Rome or a collection of his daughter's toys, Dinnerstein brings meaning and mystery to the commonplace. A fellow artist has written that "Simon Dinnerstein paints with a reverence for life that is rare. The radiance of his light can transform reality into a presence that is essential, mythic, and dreamlike."

A retrospective of Dinnerstein's works is on exhibit this month and next in the Hargate Art Center at St. Paul's School. The school has gathered 31 paintings and drawings that show the development of Dinnerstein's art from 1969 to 1989. They will remain on exhibit until Nov. 23.

Dinnerstein was born in Brooklyn in 1943, the son of a union organizer. In his work, he has self-consciously avoided the political world of his father. Instead, he has concentrated on the personal and the domestic. His subject is not society, but the individual and the family and the ordinary objects that surround and define them. In his early paintings, especially, his meticulous rendering of detail recalls the precision of the early

Flemish and German masters.

The pictures reveal a man alert to the richness of the world. Such items as a sink, a group of vegetables, an old motor get his attention. One of his earliest works, "Angela's Garden," depicts a group of trees and plants so meticulously that it almost overwhelms the eye. A work from 10 years later, "Gregory's Party," shows a young girl — Dinnerstein's daughter — next to a group of toys painted so vividly that they seem as alive as the girl herself. In "Flower Market, Rome," Dinnerstein uses thick paint and bright colors to create an image of unusual beauty and abundance.

"There is a mystery behind inanimate objects," Dinnerstein explained. "If you can get at it, I think art is deeper, more poetic." He said his ambition was "to get into the life of things, to show something one doesn't ordinarily see. Or to show something that is intensely private and human."

Later works show Dinnerstein striving to show more and more, to enlarge the seen image with more and more of the unseen. People appear not just in their material surroundings, but in the larger surroundings of dream and history. In a picture called "Night," Dinnerstein draws a group of children playing with masks and behind them the shadowy world of their nightmares. In "Nocturne," the portrait of a Polish

immigrant, the background is a row of tenement buildings across the street and, above them, small images from the man's life in Poland.

"I guess I am interested in an art that attempts to get at the full measure of a person," he wrote in 1986 in *American Artist* magazine. Elsewhere he calls his art "the visual counterpart of the novel."

Dinnerstein's devotion to things of the world is no sentimental attachment. His concern with detail makes some of his portraits seem stark, almost severe. His work reflects harshness and pain as well as beauty and richness. What counts, he says, is a kind of involvement.

"There is a certain kind of art, visual or literary, that makes things into objects," he said. "It lacks the caring." Dinnerstein paints and draws in a figurative style that he says is out of fashion among New York artists. He said he tries to work along traditional lines, not to copy the past but to remake it for the present. He said each work balances tradition with innovation, the old with the new. He despairs of what often passes for art nowadays.

"Sometimes," he said, "when walking through a museum, I see things that are so unreflective that one wonders in a couple hundred years what anyone will think of this record of our life."

Dinnerstein's work has earned him many honors, including a Rome Prize

Fellowship, a Fulbright grant and a MacDowell Colony fellowship. His works are displayed in several museums, including the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute.

Dinnerstein works slowly, completing just six or eight pictures a year. Part of the reason is that he uses a large canvas. One of the largest works in the show, *The Flower Market*, measures six by ten feet.

"I just feel that there's something exciting about it," he said. "It's not terribly practical. But if I was practical I wouldn't do this."

He said he tries not to let the marketplace govern his art.

"A lot of artists stake out a territory and do still lifes only — pears or apples," he said. "I think art really represents a person's curiosity . . . I have a lot of different things that concern me. I don't want to be slotted in just one way."

On the cover

Simon Dinnerstein, in front of his large 'Flower Market, Rome' (1977-78). Staff photo by Dan Habib.