

The Lasting World: Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych

Excerpted Commentaries on *The Fulbright Triptych*

“It is striking and also fitting, that a novel so distinctly American, a novel about appearance and reality, about Ishmael’s reflective wandering and Ahab’s ruthless quest, informs the creation of the Triptych. For this is a painting, among other things, about what it means to be an artist: a necessary combination of Ishmael’s absorption of the world fused with Ahab’s ruthless passion. It is also an intensely personal painting, just as *Moby Dick*, for all its vastness, is an intensely personal narrative. It is a painting about a young American artist’s absorption of Northern European art, about his study of Durer’s copper engravings, about his response to that discipline in a new medium, and about his journey home. The triptych-in-progress not only crossed the Atlantic physically along with its creator, but embodies dense layers of crossings between one thing and another: between artistic traditions, between places, between past and present, between the real and created. Between emerging and being, and between conception and birth.”

Jhumpa Lahiri, author, *Interpreter of Maladies*

“Simon Dinnerstein’s art evokes, for me, something reminiscent of Marcel Proust in which memories of the past, the actual present, and dreams of the future are curiously interchangeable. I love his sense of “time suspension”, suggesting that all earlier times may co-exist with the present time. I guess I’m trying to do something similar in my composition!

Dinnerstein’s work is very spiritual and haunting. At the same time it reflects the beauty of our physical existence. I do get a strong sense of the fragility of life in his work, very much like Francois Villon’s “Where are the snows of yesteryear?”

George Crumb, composer, *Ancient Voices of Children*

“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.”

George Tooker, artist, *The Subway, The Government Bureau*

“In *The Fulbright Triptych* Dinnerstein continues the life of ‘A.’ Being an artist, yet also recognizing oneself as the protagonist in an artist’s project, must evoke curious and complex feelings – not unlike seeing oneself turn or being turned into a character in a novel.”

J.M. Coetzee, author, *Disgrace*

“Neither scale nor perseverance has anything to do with success in art, and Mr. Dinnerstein’s triptych could be just one more painstaking failure. But it succeeds as an echo chamber, as a scrupulous representation of a suburb in the sticks, as a portrait of young people who are trying to make an honorable go of life and as an inventory of the kinds of things that in 1975 give such people a sense of their own identity. Today is the last day of the show, but the triptych will be available to interested persons until further notice. It deserves to go to a museum.”

John Russell, Senior Art Critic,
The New York Times, February 5, 1975

“I must think and think again about the Triptych. Obviously you have put everything into it. My immediate feeling about it –and practically all your work -- is that it is a perfect register (narrative, if you will, art-as-equivalent-at-the-highest articulateness) of the Jewish soul. Fred Siegel once gave me a poster from a school. It is a lesson in the letter aleph, showing that the upper yod symbolizes Torah and God, the lower one is human life, and the diagonal is the boundary between the two. The illustration is of a family studying Torah at the kitchen (or dining room) table, father, mother, daughter, and son. The triptych says something of the same thing -- and lots more.

It is an iconographer’s heaven! That’s Germany -- out the windows. “Here we are, a family. We have been civilized for five thousand years. We have experienced everything; we have survived. We flourish.” Images of Assyria and Babylonia to the right; children’s drawings -- renewal -- to the left.”

Zukofsky’s “A” in paint!”

-Guy Davenport, author, *The Geography of the Imagination*

“Simon Dinnerstein’s *Fulbright Triptych* is one of those singular and astonishing works of art which seem to imply a description of the whole world merely by insisting on a scrupulous gaze at one perfect instant.”

Jonathan Lethem, author, *Fortress of Solitude*

“Two windows, both in the painting’s central panel, offer a bird’s-eye view of the village, revealing a placid street and the rooftops of single-family homes. The “inventory” consists of postcards depicting works of art, mostly Northern Renaissance paintings, which hang on the wall alongside sketches suggesting works in progress. On the right panel is a self-portrait, and on the left panel a portrait of the artist’s wife and daughter, also seated and frontal. The piece signals Dinnerstein’s continuing interests: the figure, his family and friends, and old-master artists. Among the artists who have influenced him, he says, are van Eyck, Durer, and Rembrandt, and the twentieth-century artists who emulate them, such as Andrew Wyeth and, perhaps unexpectedly, Edward Weston. There is always an air of moody insularity to Dinnerstein’s works, as though the studio were a *hortus conclusus*, a sort of prelapsarian space signaling Dinnerstein’s self-sufficiency.”

Donald Kuspit, Senior Art Critic, *Art Forum*

"The people at the German consulate believe so fiercely in *The Fulbright Triptych* that, after the Dinnerstein exhibition closes, the painting will remain in place in the consulate's lobby. The Met should try to carve out a slot in its exhibition schedule during this period and persuade all concerned to let it give the triptych a small properly professional show, possibly with some of the large charcoal portrait drawings that Mr. Dinnerstein made during the same period. The four examples reproduced in the book about the triptych look fabulous. Because ultimately the single most startling fact about Mr. Dinnerstein's "Fulbright Triptych" is that it has never had the honor --- which it richly deserves ---of being exhibited in a major museum, in New York or anywhere elsewhere. If it were, anyone interested in the history of recent art and its oversights would be beyond lucky.”

Roberta Smith, Senior Art Critic,
The New York Times, August 11, 2011

“This little-known masterpiece of 1970s realism was begun by the young Simon Dinnerstein during a Fulbright Fellowship in Germany and completed in his hometown, Brooklyn, three years later. Incorporating carefully rendered art postcards, children’s drawings and personal memorabilia; a formidable worktable laid out with printmaking tools and outdoor views; and the artist and his family, it synthesizes portrait, still life, interior and landscape and rummages through visual culture while sampling a dazzling range of textures and representational styles. It should be seen by anyone interested in the history of recent art and its oversights.”

Roberta Smith, Senior Art Critic,
The New York Times, August 11, 2011

Left flap, inside

“Look at *The Fulbright Triptych* for a minute and the mind begins to fill in the blanks, sketch lines between data points, assemble a story out of pigment and air. Is this about Judaism and Germany? Is this about family and work? Is this about learning to paint and learning to be a father? Ten million brushstrokes of color touch three huge canvases, and we see a woman’s eyes, a pair of windows, a baby’s cheeks. Two dimensions become three. A table surges into the room, loaded with tools, waiting for you to come and pick one up.

The best paintings are like dreams. They convince you they are real, they fold you into their worlds, and then they hold you there. Only then, when you’re anchored in the moment-by-moment detail of an experience, when your eyes have extended across the room, when the copper plate is shimmering in front of your hands, can you let yourself reach out into the space between brain and image, into the great mystery of what it means to be viewer and printmaker, reader and writer, listener and singer.

That’s where our brains find meaning in the world. That’s where art exists.”

Anthony Doerr, author, *All the Light We Cannot See*

Right flap, inside

“This work, (*The Fulbright Triptych*) more than any other modern American painting, represents a dramatic homage to individual things. It presents to the viewer a veritable ‘language of objects.’ The three figures lead our eye into the center, and from there our gaze radiates outward, taking in the vast quantity of elements that comprise the essence of this scene. There is an almost musical quality to this painting; each object becoming the equivalent of a note in a vast symphonic score.

This painting is also a homage to looking, an encyclopedic concretization of scopic intensity. There is a plethora of individual square and rectangular shapes throughout the composition which we initially perceive as a vast series of punctuations of its space. Yet we soon become aware that most of them are postcards or photographic reproductions of works of art (many of them well known). They are famous paintings and sculptures in museums from Munich to the Metropolitan, each of them holding a special place in the aesthetic hierarchy of the artist. We are reminded of a wall of a museum, or, as André Malraux would have described it, a museum without walls.”

Edward Sullivan, Professor, Art History, NYU

“An astonishing book (The Suspension of Time) - the insights into the artist and the artwork by such diverse and thoughtful writers are a wonderfully creative way to prompt the kinds of associations that come from seeing a remarkable painting.”

Virginia Mecklenburg, Senior Curator, Smithsonian American Art Museum

“One of the first associations I had upon seeing your painting was with Agnes Varda’s film *The Gleaners and I*. This painting seems to me a culmination of a lifetime spent gleaning – be it objects, images, quotes, memories, or thoughts. I get the impression of someone for whom thinking, creating and living one’s life are all intimately intertwined. I presume that when you collected all of these things, you never intended to put them directly into a painting.”

Tim Nicholas, filmmaker, writer

My father’s Triptych has loomed large in my life. It tells the story of my parents right before I was conceived through my infancy. It’s a story that I find endlessly fascinating. Who were they then?

So the Triptych was born at the same time as I was, and it contains my parents’ DNA just as much as I do. When I look at the Triptych I see where I came from. And if I wanted to tell someone who I really am deep inside, I would just need to show them those three panels.

Simone Dinnerstein, pianist

