



Marshall Price, Simon Dinnerstein, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Virginia Bonito at the Palmer Museum of Art, Penn State University, December 2008

# The Space between the Pictures

Jhumpa Lahiri

I first met Simon Dinnerstein in a letter of introduction delivered to me by a mutual friend I'd invited to tea. In the letter, Simon wrote kindly about my writing and, venturing to suggest that I might find his painting *The Fulbright Triptych* "of interest," invited me to contribute an essay for this book. Along with the letter he sent a catalog of his work and a reproduction of the triptych, measuring fourteen-and-a-half by eleven inches. I spent that summer evening looking at the pages of the catalog. There were paintings and drawings of women sleeping and dreaming. Facades of Victorian row houses in Brooklyn, where Simon and I both live, on streets that I'd walked along. I saw a little girl sitting at a piano. A flower market in Rome. One painting, of a nude mother and child lying head to toe in bed against a vivid persimmon wall, reminded me of the portraits of Balthus. A few days later I wrote back to Simon by e-mail, accepting his invitation, and taped the reproduction of *The Fulbright Triptych* to a wall in the room where I write.

The painting depicts an artist's studio, a place where creative work is produced. It is, specifically, a printmaker's workshop. The central panel, about twice the width of the two on either side, contains a black table positioned in front of two radiators set into alcoves in the wall. The table is arrayed with engraving tools, objects vaguely reminiscent of a surgeon's instruments. A copperplate, resembling the solid halos of Giotto's angels, rests ever so slightly off center, on top of a square leather pad. Above the table, a pair of windows reveals a single landscape of homes and hills and sky, the vista divided in equally sized sections by the windows' frames. In the left panel, a bare-foot woman with short, dark hair sits with a naked baby girl in her lap. In the right panel, a man sits alone. The man and woman look directly at the viewer. The child's gaze, lighter than those of her parents, strays to one side. Two houseplants, similar but not identical, hang from nails at the same height above the man's and woman's heads. The man's clothing—striped blue-and-white pants, laced work boots, a wide brown belt, a navy shirt with a wide collar—evoke the early 1970s, when I myself was a

child. The painting is both a self-portrait and a family portrait; the man is Simon, the woman is his wife, Renée, and the baby is their daughter, Simone.

There are only three things the three panels have in common. The first is the floor, made of thickly scabbed wooden planks. The second is the wallpaper, which has muddy peach and tan and green stripes seemingly applied with a paintbrush, and is patterned with tiny dots that lend it a perforated quality. The third is an assembly of small images, mostly visual but some consisting of text, decorating these papered walls. There are postcards of paintings, many of which I recognize: Bellini, Ingres, Hans Holbein, Degas. There are family photographs, some playfully taken in a photo booth, along with quotations, letters, things written on sheets of ruled paper, children's drawings. Each of these items, fifty-six in total, appears to be literally pasted to the surface in the manner of a collage, but is, in fact, a painted replica.

I have collected postcards of paintings since I was a teenager. And from the time I first set up a desk and started writing in my early twenties, I have marked my creative territory with a version of the informal, idiosyncratic two-dimensional gallery displayed on the walls of *The Fulbright Triptych*. These are the things that comfort my eyes when they wander from page or screen, that witness my solitary labor day after day. Currently, against the backdrop of teal-blue walls, there is a large map of Massachusetts, the place where I set many of my stories, and a smaller map, recently xeroxed from the New York Public Library, of the neighborhood in Calcutta where my father was raised, a place I am currently struggling to conjure. There are drawings, copied by my own hand from photographs, of the front and back of my paternal grandparents' house. There are photographs of my parents and husband and children, quotations from Nathaniel Hawthorne and from Corinthians 13. There are postcards of work by Piero della Francesca, Giorgio Morandi, and Phillip Guston. Pictures of Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, and Hilda Doolittle. A blue-and-orange Joan Mitchell painting I ripped out of a magazine, called *Merci*, the brilliant hues faded from exposure to direct sunlight. A letter, propped up so that I can see it behind the screen of my laptop, sent to me from Paris by Mavis Gallant. As my desks and sources of inspiration have changed over the years, so have the things with which I've chosen to surround myself. But when they are on the walls of the place where I write, they become talismanic; to be

forced to take them down and box them up in the course of a move always feels like a sort of death.

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About two months after receiving Simon's letter, I went with my friend Tonusa—the friend who had brought me his letter—to visit him in Park Slope. Located a short distance from the neighborhood I live in now, Park Slope is deeply familiar to me. For five years I lived less than three blocks away from Simon's home, in an apartment where I brought my son, and then my daughter, home from the hospital after they were born. For those years, I probably bought my milk, bagels, and cups of coffee from the same shops along Seventh Avenue, Park Slope's commercial thoroughfare, as Simon.

The man who welcomed us was nearly forty years older than the one sitting in the *Triptych*. His hair and beard were gray, and he wore glasses, black jeans, and a black button-down shirt. Renée was at home that day as well, her hair still short, though no longer the ebony shade Simon had painted it. We stood on the spacious parlor floor which has a large, beautiful kitchen at one end and a gleaming grand piano at the other (Simon and Renée's daughter, the little girl he had drawn at the piano, grew up to be a concert pianist who used to give lessons to Tonusa's daughter).

As we looked at the many paintings and drawings in the room, I was overwhelmed by the personal history of people I barely knew, by the passage of time cycling forward and back. For there was a drawing of Simone, the unclothed infant in the *Triptych*, as a grown woman, eight months pregnant with her son, her shirt unbuttoned to reveal the skin of her swollen belly, her face and body filled with a weary satisfaction. The young couple in the *Triptych*, just setting out on the journey of parenthood, were grandparents now. And just as that brand-new family who had been keeping me company on the wall of my writing room has since spawned another, so the artist in the early years of his creative life now lives in a house chockablock with the work he has produced, hanging up and leaning against just about every wall.

Simon was generous with his time, serious but unassuming. He spoke candidly about his art, his life, his interests, his dreams. He talked about the years he and his fam-

ily had spent in Rome at the American Academy. His love of reading was frequently conveyed. He recommended *Blindness* by José Saramago, and showed me a painting that he feels has a connection with Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. He spoke of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and of *Tonio Kröger*, a novella by Thomas Mann. I'd read the story over twenty years ago, in college, and remembered it dimly. Simon spoke of it with such enthusiasm that I reread it as soon as I got home.

The visit concluded in Simon's studio. Like mine, it is located on the top floor of a row house. Compared to the other rooms I'd seen, the studio was grittier, untouched by renovation, the plaster walls cracked. Lights were clamped to poles, overlapping blue-and-green tape was stuck to the floorboards, and fluorescent panels hung from the flaking ceiling. On dirtied white walls were hooks from which nothing hung. Midday sun shone into three south-facing windows, one of the panes broken. Through them the colors of autumn were visible, just beginning to grace the leaves of the trees. We could hear the voices of children calling out as they played on the grounds of P.S. 321, the school where Renée taught for many years.

Simon showed us his recent work, a series painted literally onto his palettes, along with something much older—two charcoal drawings he had made of Renée, nude, when she was pregnant with Simone, an uncanny reverse echo of the drawing of Simone, similarly pregnant and bearing distinct resemblance to her mother, downstairs. One of the newer paintings, like the *Triptych*, featured a window. Only instead of revealing the world outside, a self-portrait filled much of the frame, and looked in at the viewer.

I am loath to admit people into the room where I work and was struck by Simon's willingness to allow us to gather there and chat. I saw his curled-up tubes of paint, his easels. Brushes arrayed like beheaded flower stems in an Italian coffee can. Chairs where his models have sat. And tucked into an alcove, taped to one wall, a living continuum of the backdrop of the *Triptych*: a collection of reproduced works of art in the form of postcards and newspaper clippings, many of them faded from sun and age.

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In December 2008, two months after meeting Simon in person, I accompanied him to Penn State University, where *The Fulbright Triptych* resides in the Palmer Museum of Art. Along for the ride were Virginia Bonito, an art historian, and a curator at the National Academy, Marshall Price. In the course of the four-hour drive, much of which crosses through the milky, monotonous landscape of northeastern and central Pennsylvania, I asked Simon to talk about the genesis of the painting. He said that he had begun it in 1971, in Germany, when he was twenty-eight years old. He had traveled to Germany the year before, with Renée, thanks to a Fulbright fellowship. He had proposed to study the work of Dürer. After working on the middle panel for six months, drawing forms in black Rapidograph on gessoed wood, he returned to Brooklyn where, after two-and-a-half years, the painting was finished in 1974. He recalled that the apartment in Germany where the painting was conceived came unfurnished. The black table in the central panel was given to him by his landlord and became his subject. It was his first painting. Until then, he had made drawings.

Simon told us that the *Triptych* changed his life before it was even finished. When it was still in progress, when he was struggling to pay a rent of ninety dollars a month and support his wife and child, he walked unbidden into New York's Staempfli Gallery and managed to get the dealer and his co-director, Phillip Bruno, to visit his studio in Brooklyn. After looking at the painting for twenty minutes and not saying a word, the dealer, George Staempfli, told Simon that he wanted to own it. He then proposed an arrangement: he would pay Simon a fixed sum every month until it was finished, and then he would exhibit it. It was an extraordinary stroke of good fortune, a moment that forever altered Simon's life and career. As he recounted the story, it was clear that the memory still overwhelmed him.

I understood his emotion well. Any artist lucky enough to migrate from obscurity to recognition, from poverty to solvency, knows what a miracle it is. Recognition, combined with the ability to support oneself as much as possible on one's creative work, is what aspiring artists dream of. But once achieved, the new reality itself feels like a dream. This is how I have felt for the past dozen years, after a door, against similar odds, opened for me, enabling me to make my living as a writer. Listening to Simon, I realized I would feel this way for the rest of my life. I asked Simon what he'd been

reading when he started the painting. The answer was *Moby-Dick*. He'd read Melville's novel for the entire year he was in Germany, repeatedly renewing it from the library. Still not finished when he was scheduled to sail back to America, he brought the book back with him and finished it, poetically, on the high seas before mailing it back to the library in Europe. He told me another thing: that on the back of the central panel of the *Triptych*, Renée had nailed a five-mark coin to the wood crossbars, corresponding to the gold coin Ahab nails to the mast of the *Pequod*. "Begun in Good Faith and High Hopes on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971 . . . with the love of Renée" is written in her hand beneath the coin. The benediction touched me; I remembered my own shaky beginnings as a writer, and how much my husband's faith in me meant at the time.

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 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 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 Dürer'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 the re-created. Between emerging and being, and between conception and birth.

It had been almost nine years since Simon had seen the *Triptych*. It is not the same for writers, who are able to revisit their work simply by pulling it off a shelf. As we sat in a restaurant in University Park, about to head over to the Palmer, I felt a vicarious sense of nervous anticipation. It was as if we were going to visit a child who had both grown unrecognizably old and stayed exactly the same. The people at the museum were expecting us, and the panels had been brought into a special room for us to view, the fourteen inches I'd gotten to know in reproduction now stretched to fourteen feet. The first thing Simon said when he saw it was that the panels needed to be set farther apart. Once they were arranged to his satisfaction, we stood far and close,

taking notes and photographs. For me the pleasure of seeing a real painting has to do with those textures and details that lie dormant in reproduction. Face-to-face, I became aware of the roughness of the subfloor, the seams of the wallpaper. The veins on Renée's feet, the sheen of her plaid skirt. The bold swirls in Simon's hair, the rich velvet of his shirt, the fiery flecks in his beard. With the lights adjusted a particular way, I saw how brightly the copperplate, painted in gold leaf, shone. Most significant was the detail of the windowsills, splattered with paint, turning the windows into easels and thus turning the view they contained into a paradox: something both beyond and within the room, something that is both reality, passively seen, and art, actively re-created.

Another aspect of the painting I was appreciating for the first time was the extent to which the painting represents a compression of real space and time. The room we see, albeit broken into three sections, is neither an apartment in Germany nor a studio in Brooklyn, but an amalgamated realm that is another place altogether. The view through the windows is of the German countryside, but the floor and the wallpaper, the hanging plants, the sycamore fronds scattered on the worktable, are native to Brooklyn. Now that I knew the full story—that Renée was not yet pregnant when Simon started working on the *Triptych*, but that by the time he finished it, Simone had been born—the painting's narrative became apparent. In this sense it is as much a trilogy as it is a triptych, for the painting shows us a life in stages, in parts. It shows what exists, and what does not, and what existed only previously. It reminded me of instances in my writing when, working from the past, I have had to manipulate actual events in order to serve the purpose of fiction. *The Fulbright Triptych* is the first time I appreciated this deliberate rearrangement of reality on a visual level.

Simon talked about many of the items, depicted in astonishing precision, on the walls of the painting. He read a poem written by a thirteen-year-old girl named Gloria Mintz:

*Grey and sweating/And only one I person/Fighting and fretting.*

He pointed out a ballpoint drawing by one of Renée's students, and reading exercises they had done. He read a quotation about language, and asked us to guess who it was attributed to (I guessed Plato; the answer was Wittgenstein). There was a letter propped



up between the windows, and Simon crouched down, offering to read it, stepping into the world of the painting as if it were a stage set (it is three-quarters life-size). It was a letter to Simon from Renée, who at one point during their years in Germany had gone back to New York to visit her ailing father. She recounted an anxiety dream about being pregnant, a dream she'd had before the painting was conceived.

The things on the wall would be different now, Simon told us, but I saw that his love for them had not waned. Nor had their presence; they were there, an artist's ephemera made permanent, painted into the wood. They were all sacred to him, everything from the work of van Eyck and Seurat to a colorful drawing by two German girls, daughters of a couple the Dinnersteins had befriended in the town, named Simone and Andrea. Simon told us that Simone Dinnerstein (whose name is pronounced Simona) was named after these two girls, and that after she was born, six-year-old Andrea sent them the drawing as a baby gift. As I stood in front of the panel on the right, he pointed, standing directly in front of his painted younger self, to a re-created paragraph torn from the re-created ivory page of a re-created book. "Do you recognize this?" he asked. I shook my head at first, then stopped when I read, "To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond." It was a passage from chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick*.

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A painting of an artist's studio is an inherent contradiction, and a profoundly intimate thing. It is a finished work that represents something impossible to represent—the piecemeal, protracted process of making art. To work as an artist is to revisit something day after day, to look at a subject or an experience not twice or twenty times but what easily feels like twenty thousand times. In the course of those repeated visits, the thing seen—or in a writer's case, contemplated—begins necessarily to evolve, to become something other than itself, to become, at times, unrecognizable. The walls of the studio, the floor, the furniture, the scraps taped to the walls are what remain constant, and they are as revealing, as much of a self-portrait, as the depiction of an artist's figure or face. In that sense, *The Fulbright Triptych* is a self-portrait twice over.

One of the postcards on the walls of the *Triptych*, of a painting by Vermeer, is a self-portrait of the artist seated at his easel, his back to the viewer, working with a model who poses in the background. But the artist in *The Fulbright Triptych* sits still, a figure who is both model and artist, his fingers interlaced, the instruments on his worktable untouched. That he is not actively occupied is, of course, an illusion. The completed painting, the enduring distillation of the effort required to create that composed figure, reminds us of this. After getting to know Simon a little bit, I think that his posture in the painting, at once vigilant and relaxed, is appropriate. He is a man who not only paints the world he sees but deeply thinks about and questions it—thoughts and questions that eventually become manifest in his work. His presence in the painting reminds us that the idle moments in one's studio, when one is not actively painting or writing or making anything, when one is perhaps sitting in a chair staring into space, are precisely the moments inspiration tends to strike.

I love *The Fulbright Triptych* and will continue to keep a reproduction of it taped up in my writing room, because it is about the interplay of the two aspects of my life that are the most sacred to me: art and family. When I was first getting to know the painting, I regarded it as a fugue of threes. The three panels, the three figures. The three formal subjects—portrait, still life, landscape. The three levels of representation—the painting, the reproductions of other paintings, the painted renditions of those reproductions. After looking at the painting and thinking about it for nearly six months, I see that it is as much about dyads as triads, and about the primal alchemy of two becoming three. The painting is about a marriage and about the consequence of that marriage: a child. It is also about an individual who, doubly creative as artist and father, exists both in the realm of art and of life; who is devoted to both things but is also sundered by them, occupying a panel of his own. As a writer who is also the mother of two young children, I experience this sense of division on a daily basis. Though the artist's family exists within the *Triptych*, has even participated in its creation by posing for it, the painting is made by him alone, in the studio, outside ordinary life. In *Tonio Kröger* Mann writes: "The artist must be unhuman, extra-human; he must stand in a queer aloof relationship to our humanity; only so is he in a position, I ought to say only so would he be tempted, to represent it, to present it, to portray it to good effect."

As we were getting ready to leave the museum, there was a moment when Simon and I stood alone with his painting. "I believe the meaning of the painting is contained in the space between the pictures," Simon told me. Whether he was referring to the space between the reproductions he'd painted or the space between the panels themselves was not clear to me at the time. But in the process of writing this essay, I began to understand.