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An Exchange of Letters

Guy Davenport & Simon Dinnerstein

Simon Dinnerstein
415 First Street
Brooklyn, New York 11215

November 1, 1990

Professor Guy Davenport
Alumni Distinguished Professor of English
Room 1365, Patterson Office Tower
University of Kentucky
Louisville, Kentucky 40506-0027

Dear Professor Davenport:

I am taking the liberty of asking the University of Arkansas Press to send on to you an advance copy of a forthcoming book on my work.

I have been very interested in your writing, which I first came across in an introduction to the art of Paul Cadmus. However, I must say I was very deeply struck by your book, *A Balthus Notebook*. I think you have caught so much of this very poetic artist with your really poetic book. Your sections which deal with what it is, if anything, that makes an artist “modern” are very pertinent in general, but I actually feel could have been written about my own work (you talk about Stanley Spencer and Balthus and Brâncuși). Also, I heard an excerpt of a book of essays of yours read on the radio here in New York, and in it I think you described going out to the country for expeditions with your father and learning to really look at nature and to describe what it is you see. Having myself a strongly developed visual memory, I found these descriptions of great interest.

Somehow, on a kind of educated hunch, I am hoping that you might relate to the work in my book. Since 1973, I have been affiliated with Staempfli Gallery in New York. I have tried, in some way, to combine my interest in the figure, the dignity, humanity, beauty of people, with some “modernist” (whatever that word means)/abstract point of view. In this regard, I would like to believe that there is some theme or point of view in my work which stands it apart from certain trends in American realism, from “pop” to “hyper” to traditional figurative art.

I feel very lucky to have had the participation, through their writing, of Thomas Messer, George Tooker, and Albert Boime for this book. I know that you have been through the process of putting a book together, and I must say it is a deeply emotional undertaking. In this case, more than twenty years of painting and drawing are put together in this volume.

I look forward to your thoughts and comments and I would, in addition, find it a great pleasure to meet you, if you happen to be in New York.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Simon Dinnerstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Simon Dinnerstein

21 January 1991

Dear Mr. Dinnerstein:

Just this morning I received *The Art of SD* and your letter dated 1 Nov. 90. I can't decide which to praise first, the splendid revelation of your painting, or your generosity in having a copy of the book sent to me. Both at once.

How in the world have I missed your work? The book is a vindication of my complaint over the years that cultural information is hard to come by. You will find me in the current issue of *Drawing* defending the draftsmanship of Grant Wood, which in a sane world ought to have been wholly unnecessary.

Seeing your work all at once is something of an overload. To the question "What do you think of modern art?" Gertrude Stein replied, "I like to look at it." I can begin with that simplicity. Your pictures are first of all good to look at.

Then one becomes aware of your powerful symmetries: the bilateral one that is a signature, and the inside/outside one of foreground and background. You are right to begin the book with *The Kelton Press*, which has these symmetries, plus a radial one. This amazing drawing also announces your digestion of surrealism (Max Ernst would have liked this drawing, and called it *The Insect God*), and like Ernst you see the wonderful harmonies of the natural, the architectural, the technical. Those trees reproduce; man participates in creation beyond the biological: the etching press reproduces images. The medium, charcoal, comes from the trees.

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—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 Babylon to the right; children's drawings—renewal—to the right.

Zukofsky's “A” in paint!

There are a thousand things I want to say, by way of response. I needn't get them all into one letter. Obviously you sent the letter of 1 Nov. 1990 to the publishers, to be included with the book, which has just arrived.

I am writing a book about still life (which I derive from the basket of summer fruit in Amos, the most archaic book in the Bible). I have a bee in my bonnet about apples and pears, and your pears enrich my argument. More about that, later.

The little boy looking out of the eyeholes of his paper bag (188/189) is purest magic! All the flowers are marvelous. *Roman Afternoon* is a great painting, and *The Birthday Dress* a deeply meaningful one in its symbolism and psychology.

But let me race through this letter, so that I can get it in today's mail. I am basically a writer of inept fiction and of literary criticism. My writing about the visual arts is a dare on my part. Cadmus asked me to write the introduction to his drawings, as did Balthus (in a Byzantinely indirect way: he had seen an essay I'd done in *Antaeus* and sent word through his dealer that I was to “be encouraged” to write more).

You say in your letter that you hope I see that your work stands apart. It stands apart, believe me—it stands apart.

I could spend the rest of the day responding. That 1 Nov. date keeps plucking at my elbow as a seeming and hideous delinquency; I want you to have as immediate a reply as I can manage. The book warms my house just by being there.

So, before the postman comes to pick up the mail,

In great measure of gratitude,

Guy Davenport



Simon Dinnerstein, on completion of *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1974

The Art of Simon Dinnerstein

Guy Davenport

Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is so symmetrically a harmony and so richly a composite of genres (family portrait, still life, landscape, and a collage that amounts to a complex poem) that its anomalies aren't immediately apparent. He himself has pointed out that it's a painting by a graphic artist (and his Fulbright project is there on the table, dead center, a copperplate engraving called *Angela's Garden*), the baby on his wife's lap had not yet been born (his daughter, Simone, now a concert pianist), and what we're looking at is a serene Jewish family in a country that slaughtered six million Jews from 1933 to 1945. And among the fifty-seven images thumbtacked to the wall is an exit visa from Russia, dated 1918. The Dinnersteins, like the Chagalls and Kandinskys, the Einsteins and Panofskys, move about in the turbulences of history.

When I first saw *The Fulbright Triptych*, I was immediately reminded of Louis Zukofsky's great poem "A," which is also about a family in Brooklyn with a child who became a concert violinist. Zukofsky, like Simon Dinnerstein, took the family to be the irreducible unit of civilization. Ezra Pound took that unit to be whole cultures and attempted to show in his *Cantos* that we are a continuation of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. William Carlos Williams saw the unit of civilization as the city and shaped that idea in his *Paterson*.

Another Brooklyn poet, Walt Whitman, had already synthesized migrating and diffusing cultures, the city, and the family as components of civilization in his *Leaves of Grass*. American culture habitually forgets its past and moves in cycles of rediscovery, forgetting and remembering, stunned into amnesia by the new, repeating forgotten pasts.

Art is always an invention inside a tradition. Beginning from scratch happened some 40,000 years ago—and with every child who takes up its crayon and draws a dinosaur driving a construction crane. There are many children's drawings in *The Fulbright Triptych* collage, alerting us to the subject of the painting: education of many sorts, most obviously that of a young artist learning his skills, of a young father starting

a family, of survival in a hostile society, of creative renewal. The Germany we can see through the windows is landscape that bred Hitler's inhuman barbarians; but it had once bred Dürer, Memling, Bach, and Thomas Mann.

Simon Dinnerstein's habitual left-right symmetry, his truthful rendering of materials, his eloquent distribution of light announce his distinction. They also include his painting in the art of our time, for beneath (or inside) most Dinnersteins there is a splendidly abstract design. Our guide to seeing this can be found in the most primitive art to survive into our time, that of the Dogon of sub-Saharan West Africa. The Dogon use four ways of making an image: a pattern of dots (as stars in a constellation, or the location of posts in the plan of a house), the connecting of the dots with lines (giving a legible abstraction), a filling in of detail to achieve what we would call a drawing, and the filling out into three dimensions to make a sculpture, a mask, a granary, a pot, or a house.

The Kelton Press (1969), a charcoal drawing, has an almost absolute left-right symmetry; remove what a Dogon would understand as "the fill" and you have a strong abstract painting. (Isolate the verticals and horizontals in a Vermeer of houses and you have something like a Mondrian.) I see this love of symmetry in early Dinnersteins as an emotional geometry imposing order not only on the visual but on the moral as well. This severe symmetry gradually gave way to explorations of asymmetry as Dinnerstein's meditations became richly sensual and intimate.

There is a steady shift of Dinnerstein's eye from northern Europe to Mexico. *January Light* (1983) is a Mexican Whistler. The asymmetry is Whistler's; the color is Rivera and Frida Kahlo. And there is a radical change from the domesticity of the early paintings to a Balthusian vision of the female nude sleeping or daydreaming, or simply being there. For Simon Dinnerstein is, to date, an essentially existential artist. His paintings say *this is*. His transition has been from *this is how things are* to *this exists: look*. This transition involved subtle changes in rendering; cloth became stylized, for instance, not seen cloth but Dinnerstein's imaginary cloth, with its own way of lying in folds, its own diaphanous difference, its own poetry of the eye.

Scholars will eventually want to trace Dinnerstein's still lifes (never quite like anybody else's), his social commentary (the stark *Arnold*, the views through Brooklyn

windows, his Italian flower markets, his paintings of people in rooms and playing children, his self-portraits and portraits of his wife and daughter), but it is his female nudes that command study. If symmetry was the beguiling order in his early work, a strangely chaste sensuality has replaced it. Our interest in any artist is deepened by the way a style treats a subject. We will never know how Picasso would have painted a woman talking on the telephone or a garage mechanic changing a tire. What's going on in the affinity of an artist for a subject? Monet and his water lilies? Gauguin and his biblical themes hiding inside Polynesian and Breton peasants?

In these current nudes we see an age-old problem being solved, the conjunction of the real and the imaginary, the factual and the ideal. Gold leaf cooperates with graphite in one canvas, color with grisaille, a literally drawn body with an ideal of beauty. It's as if Dinnerstein, having so often made a plant in a jar look like a miracle, or Brooklyn sunlight on an ordinary floor seem supernatural, has reversed the process, working outward from a mystical presence to a realistic surface of flesh. His technique and media have become more painstaking, his working hours longer, the canvases staying on the easel for years rather than months.

Practically all of Dinnerstein's faces wear the question "Why are you drawing me?"—the children in *Night*, the nude in *Dream Palace*, even his *Self-Portrait: Summer*. To the answer "Because you exist" we need to add that art exists, too, an intelligible world inside a largely unintelligible one.