

BOMBLOG

Luck of the Paint

by Kaitlin Pomerantz Aug 30, 2012

Simon Dinnerstein on the power of synchronicity, the idea of the "masterpiece," and art that defies strategy, taxonomy, and possibly even the artist.



Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, Oil on wood panels, 14 feet in width, 1971-74. All images courtesy of the artist.

I learned about Simon Dinnerstein through a bizarre series of synchronicities. First, I encountered an image of Dinnerstein's epic *Fulbright Triptych* on the cover of a book of essays at Strand Book Store. Hailing from the eerily poetic world of Alice Neel, Alfred Leslie, Kerry James Marshall, or David Hockney, the image stopped me dead in my tracks. I was startled that I had not seen the painting before. I thumbed through the book to find that the collection of essays, written by a motley array of prominent writers, poets, psychologists, and actors, were all devoted precisely to the mystery and heft of this singular painting. I learned that the painting was housed in Penn State's Palmer Collection and I vowed to go see it as soon as I could.

Before doing so, however, my second encounter with the work took place: a sighting of the painting on a poster at the home of a family friend, who, it turns out, had been a student of Simon Dinnerstein's at the New School/Parsons in the '70s. She had just gotten back in touch with Dinnerstein after learning from an article in the *New York Times* by Roberta Smith that the *Triptych* had made its way to the German Consulate, where it is—and will be—on view for the next two years.

My third encounter with the *Triptych* took place much sooner and more locally than I expected. It was just a few days later that I stood before its fourteen-foot glory, beside Dinnerstein, who had agreed to come walk me through his work. We looked together for hours at this paean to the tools, forms, and genres of art-making—a haunting homage to those objects, people, and ideas that inspire artists to make art.

As he lead me through the marks and methods of the *Triptych* that day, Dinnerstein spoke with a peculiar detachment, as if the work was so great, so interwoven and dense, that it existed entirely on its own, beyond him. This first encounter with Dinnerstein left me wanting to know more about this man whose creation seemed almost to eclipse his entire being—*where does an artist go from here?* At his Park Slope studio and home of over 40 years, I met the world of a curious and engaged mind, whose walls boasted sustained and varied lines of inquiry both stemming and diverging from those in the *Triptych*. As we spoke about the piece, I saw that Dinnerstein lacks nostalgia or complacency and has avoided succumbing to an art market-driven aesthetic in his work. I left with the sensation that I had just been in the presence of a bygone—or perhaps just rare—breed of artist, for whom the greatest accomplishment and potential of work is its ability not only to astound viewers, but to beguile and awe its own maker.



The Fulbright Triptych, detail.

KAITLIN POMERANTZ I'm interested in this idea that you have a masterpiece—that there's this singular painting that defines your career, and *isn't* your whole career, because I'm sitting here in your home and studio, looking at walls filled with other major works. So do you agree with this perception, that the *Triptych* is the place to start, the work to focus on—that it is indeed your masterpiece?

SIMON DINNERSTEIN What you're asking is a very difficult question, because it means that I'm going to be patting myself on the back, and it's not my personality to do that. I'm not sure what a masterpiece is, but if a masterpiece is something that is extremely singular, and something that is *sui generis*, then I do think it's pretty close to one. The threads in that painting are cemented in an extremely beautiful, generous, abstract, and mysterious way. And I couldn't be luckier.

KP Hm, *luck*. Is that to say that the *Triptych* was beyond your control—that you somehow stumbled into making it?

SD "Luck" could have a lot of different meanings, and in this case, it means

feeling vibrations that exist in the world and that exist in potential; that you can sense something which is invisible and not there, and that you have to be kind of daring and willing to believe in that risk. Doing a painting like that, you have to be a little nutty—a little nutted out, or whacked out. And it becomes the only thing you want to do.

KP That being said, you did have the support of a Fulbright grant in doing that painting. How have those kinds of opportunities factored into your idea of what is possible?

SD That's a very interesting thing you bring up. I knew an older woman who had had a Fulbright to France. She encouraged me to try for the grant, though I felt that I wasn't really ready for it. I had put Spain down as my first choice, after seeing the work of Antonio Lopez Garcia, and I put Germany as a second choice. And then all of a sudden, there I was with a grant to go to Germany to study printmaking. Both my wife and I—who don't have a great background in Judaism—had some ambivalence about going, frankly.

KP Because of—

SD —because of Germany, and because it was 25 years after the Second World War. And we went on a boat, okay? That's the way they sent the people on the Fulbright. And if there had been on that boat a fortune teller, and that fortune teller would've said, "You're going to have a year full of conflicted feelings—ambivalence—and you're going to come back with a great deal of personal growth, and a painting—a fourteen-foot painting," I would've said to her, "You are crazy." So I like to mention that because it seems to speak to me the idea that you just never know.

I should add—we had difficulty finding a place to live in Germany. We made a 30 or 40-mile circle around Kassel, and we couldn't find anywhere [to live]. Finally, we came to this town where we saw this building that had no curtains on the windows, indicating that it was vacant and for rent. And I remember saying to my wife, "This is such a middle class apartment. I'm not getting any inspiration here." I wanted something with more mood, more character, and so forth. It had parquet floors, and was . . . very middle-class. And my wife said, "Simon, *this* is eight or nine rooms! We can't find *anything!*" And I kind of repeated what I had said, and she ended up saying, "If you don't take this apartment, I'm going to kill you." And so that is the apartment with the view that you see in the *Triptych*.

So that's another example of "you never know." Because that room—that view—was a very middle class view in a very middle class apartment. And I think what it says is that art transforms things; it brings things to some other level. And that's what happened in this painting and in our stay.

KP Just to back it up a bit, for those who have not seen the *Triptych*, do you want to give a verbal description of what the painting is in your own words?

SD So, basically what you see is a painting of a studio: a worktable, objects on the worktable, a plate—an engraving plate—which is being worked on, and a view with great distance. That's the middle panel. And then the right and left panels, which continue the middle panel—the left is a painting of my wife and daughter, and the right is a painting of myself. And spread throughout the painting are I think fifty-three reproductions of different paintings, drawings, children's drawings, poems, letters, photographs: a kind of non-sequitur identity that we have—meaning all of us—that we all have . . .



The Fulbright Triptych, detail.

KP Like an internal cosmos or something?

SD That's right. Like a kind of refrigerator door gone astray, and you're putting all these pictures on this refrigerator . . .

Someone mentioned recently that this painting is sort of like "a geography of the unconscious," and I really like that expression. But the thing also about this is that it doesn't have a strategy. In other words, it's something that just kind of happened. And I think that art that has a strategy, you will know that it has a strategy, and it depletes the art.

KP Can you talk more about that? Are you talking about a gimmick?

SD Well, I mean work that has a cunning about it, a canniness—work that was figured out before it was begun. I think that undercuts the art. Really important art—whether it's literature, or dance, or music, or painting, or drawing—it *really* happens. It doesn't have a strategy, and I think sometimes you can tell if the art is natural or if it has a kind of agenda.

KP Would you say that art with the word you're using—art with a "strategy"—is more typical in contemporary art than in art of other times?

SD Well, no, because if you took older art, if it was some kind of commissioned piece, then you might see in it that the artist was trying to do something strategic to get favor. It wouldn't come out of an essential need that the artist had; it wouldn't come out of an immediacy of feeling that art should have. As much as there's a certain rationality that takes place in my *Triptych*, I think there's a part of it that just sort of happened.

KP I am noting your use of the words “immediacy” and “feeling”—words that are more commonly associated with movements in art like Abstract Expressionism, and less with movements that may equally merit them—like strains of Realism—but just aren’t described in such a way. When I first saw the book *The Suspension of Time* at the Strand, which featured the *Triptych*, I thought immediately of artists like Alice Neel, or even Andrew Wyeth, or David Hockney, who are figurative artists but whose works embody a kind of immediacy and feeling and presence of thing and place. Do you feel that you are part of some movement or some greater lineage in art history, a kind of immediacy-based or feeling-invested figurative tradition? Where do you see yourself?

SD Well, I think that those examples are very good because I would say that all of those examples are artists that are unclassifiable. So that’s the movement I’m part of—*unclassifiable*. There are actually three contemporary, (or for most of my life, contemporary) artists that I would mention that have been of particular influence and interest to me: Antonio Lopez Garcia, Lucian Freud, and Balthus. What interests me in them is the figurative tradition, and yet something modern, something fresh, with a lot of heart and humanity, but a certain amount of craziness, or weirdness, or pulse—or singularity—that is very appealing.



The Fulbright Triptych, detail.

KP I'm interested in this idea of "unclassifiable," because as you know I'm a younger artist and I find that to not have a kind of movement or collective or MFA program alliance—some sort of greater classification that you're part of—can actually be detrimental, in that without this almost clannish affiliation, you may not have access to certain shows or opportunities, or it may simply not be understood (by critics, peers) who you are, where you stand, in the greater art world. But the way you use that term, "unclassifiable," it's almost like a badge of honor, and you're using it to classify some incredible—*indisputably* incredible—artists. So, it makes me wonder, did you ever feel alone in your pursuit, or did you always feel that you were working in some greater tradition that grounded your practice?

SD I think that this idea of "alone" comes out of the understanding, or misunderstanding, of the figurative tradition by today's critical world. The problem

is that critics don't understand the figurative tradition. They'll use a word like "illustration" as a put-down, and they'll use it to lump together a whole group of artists because they don't know how to deal with what is figurative art. So, yes, there are figurative artists that are academic and conservative. But the artists that you mentioned are not academic, nor conservative—nor do I think my art is academic or conservative. "Academic" means rule-bound: that you get taught certain rules, and if you follow those rules, you're going to be successful. Really good art isn't about following rules—it's about finding your vision and betting on it—betting a lot on it. So, yes, this has hurt me, because my work is put together with other figurative art which is generally considered "retro."

KP Okay, so all of that being said, what is "figurative art" to you? If it's misunderstood by critics—and it ends up lumping you into a category you don't see yourself in—why was that still a form that appealed to you or seemed worth working in?

SD Well, previous to a hundred years ago, most artists were figurative—in fact, you could even say Picasso, Matisse, Redon, Rousseau . . . they all were figurative. I mean, I think that something about the Abstract Expressionist turn made figurative art assume a kind of fuddy-duddy position. And then within the figurative tradition, there is a group that really is very conservative, which added to the perceived rift.

As for my own work staying within a figurative tradition, I think that I wanted something about humanity, something about people. But I also felt that it should be something that was—without it being a strategy—something that was modern and made use of formal inroads in art.

If you took the literary analogy of this . . . so you could go from, say, Charles Dickens to Kafka. It's all figurative, but Kafka was way out there, or Camus is way out there, whereas Charles Dickens is quite a bit more naturalistic. And why couldn't figurative art have all of this, all of these distinctions?

KP Why not?

SD That's right. That's what I asked—why not? It feels to me braindead or limiting that the critical understanding of figurative art does not seem to accommodate real variety. In fact the area where figurative art is the most appreciated or the most advanced is film, not contemporary art. If I want to see how people live, I'm not going to turn to fine arts, I'm going to turn to film. And that saddens me, because I think that it is still possible to convey this in drawing and painting, and that's what I am trying to do. I've done a lot of thinking about this.

KP Well, thank god! (*laughter*) Since you mentioned literature and kind of the false analogy that exists between the varieties of accepted forms of Realism in literature versus the limited range of those forms in painting, I will mention that when I first saw the *Triptych*, my first thought was: *this is a literary painting*. Without denying the fact that it's a painting—and a painterly painting about painting, at that—there is something about it that has an epic quality that I associate more with literature. Does that mean anything to you?

SD Yes, it does. I think there are certain paintings that seem kind of like novels or symphonies. And certain paintings and drawings that may seem like novellas, or short stories, or certain ones that seem like short-short stories. And I thought that this one, the *Triptych*, was like a novel—a very big, five-hundred-page novel. And I think that it's a cautionary tale, too, because if you have a subject that's a short story, you shouldn't make it into a five-hundred page novel. As weird as this may seem, this painting—at fourteen feet in width—couldn't be smaller. That's the right

size for it. You have to know what the framework is for your art.



The Fulbright Triptych, detail.

KP Actually, that leads me to the question of scale. When I first saw this painting in reproduction form, I thought, Where is this painting and how can I get out there to see it? Because this, this glossy image among images I'm staring down at in the Strand, this is not the painting. And I was planning my road trip out to Penn State when I happened to find you. (*laughter*) It was perfect!

SD Incredible, incredible.

KP But I think that—especially dealing with literal subject matter like *humans* and *objects*—scale is very important. It's very important that Philip Pearlstein's women are slightly larger-than-life, and it's important that Alice Neel's figures are contorted to fit in the spaces dictated by the frame of her canvas. It's important in a generic sense—a sense of genre—the same as what you said about novels being different from novellas or short stories. But we don't seem to have the vocabulary for this in the realm of painting.

SD It's a fantastic question. I like this sense of scale, but it's extremely impractical, because this sense of scale means that if someone buys this work, it's

extremely demanding, and they have to have a certain amount of space for it. And I don't have a trust account, I don't have someone supporting me, so it's based on my willy-nilly way of living. The images are very relentless, and strong—they're not like wallpaper.

When I did this painting, I had a grant to study drawing and graphics. And previous to this painting, I did drawings. My wife, her father was quite sick when we went to Germany, and at one point she went back to New York to visit him. I stayed, and one day I was sitting at the table, and I moved back from the table, and I looked out at the landscape, and there were some pictures up on the wall, not as many as here, but some pictures—and I thought to myself, *Wow, this is quite a scene.* And I saw that this would be interesting—but not as a drawing, and not as a print—as a painting. But I had not done any painting at all since art school.

Back then, I communicated with my wife by . . . (*finger snap*) Airgram. So you'd put together an Airgram, fold it up, and send it, and six days later it would arrive. And if she responded quickly, six days later you would get a response—just like twelve days. So I wrote to her about this idea that I had. Twelve days later, I got an Airgram back from her. The Airgram was full of all kinds of extraneous things and then at the very end she said, "And by the way, regarding your idea for this painting, which I imagine would be very large, this is my response: don't do it."

KP (*laughter*) Meaning?

SD Meaning it sounded extremely ambitious, and bizarre. So in her loving way, she said, Cool it.

KP And what happened to that bit of advice?

SD I did it anyway. It was like I had to do it.

KP So does this somehow add to the epic quality of the painting, this external narrative?

SD Well, generally I don't like narrative paintings. I think that they're too anecdotal. I think that painting should be more abstract, more serious. And I could see that someone could say that this painting is narrative, but the part that I like about the painting is that you can't tell what the narrative is. And that's the reason that the book [*The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*] which contains a number of different essays by different writers, really works, because you can enter the painting from many different thoughts. You could enter it from the back of the landscape, you could enter it from the plate and the table, you could enter it from the point of view of process and art, you could enter it from the point of view of the two people, or the child, you could enter it from the conversation between the people, or between conversation and the table, you could enter the painting from perhaps a German point of view, or a Jewish point of view. You could enter it literally from the copper plate—everything seems to point to that plate. That plate is something like a sun god. So that strikes me as very appealing, and especially because it didn't have a program, it didn't have a thought up—again, to use the word—"strategy."



The Fulbright Triptych, detail.

KP I'm noticing now, as we talk, because I speak to artists frequently, that you have a way of talking about your work and specifically about this painting as though you were not the one who made it. You seem to have an almost critical distance, uncharacteristic of artists talking about their own work.

SD I think that when you're doing something that's really strong, or really touched . . . personally, I don't feel that I'm the person doing it. Like there's someone in the room with me who's moving my hand. I am not that smart. But this is, this painting is . . . however smart I am, it is as smart times a hundred. And I'm just like a conduit or catalyst for something that is well past what I am.

The Fulbright Triptych is presently on exhibit in the lobby of the German Consulate, 871 United Nations Plaza (First Avenue and 49th Street). The

display continues until April 1, 2014 and the hours are Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm.

Simon Dinnerstein will participate in GoBrooklyn, a Brooklyn-based tour of artists' studios on September 8 and 9, from 11am-6pm, as sponsored by the Brooklyn Museum.

Kaitlin Pomerantz is an artist based out of Philadelphia. Her work will be on view this fall in the show *imaginary gardens, real toads: work by Kaitlin Pomerantz* at the University of Pennsylvania's Brodsky Gallery at the Kelly Writers House (Opening Reception and literary reading, September 13).

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