

THE FULBRIGHT TRIPTYCH

Portrait of the Young Man as an Artist, and a Husband, and a Father, and...

BY REBECCA PARK



Simon Dinnerstein's *The Fulbright Triptych* (1971-1974) defies easy explanation. It adopts a form more suited to religious painting from the 1400s and updates it for the secular twentieth century. It takes creative labor as its central theme, yet the artist is inactive and at a physical remove from the tools of his trade. It came into vivid being during a period when painting was declared dead. It is a receptacle of centuries of Western cultural memory, all the while remaining exactly personal. It features saturated color seamlessly situated beside subdued hues. It conflates our notion of time as it represents the past alongside the contemporary moment, a present that is now itself outdated.

But first, some basics: the oil painting on three separate wood panels, totaling at fourteen feet wide, depicts at the most general level an artist and his family in his studio. Begun during Dinnerstein's stay in Germany as part of the Fulbright Program (hence the title) and finished three years later in Brooklyn, the work reflects a progression in time and space. A testament to his experiences during the period, perhaps the most significant record included in *Triptych* is the inclusion of his daughter, Simone, depicted here at nine months, not yet born when he commenced work on the painting. Reproductions of letters and quotes, children's drawings and well-known paintings crowd the wall, an exaggeratedly flattened space compared to the naturalistic

landscape of a conventional mid-century German town of which the central panel's two windows provide a view.

Yet I haven't even touched on the most exciting, thrilling aspect of this monumental (in size and scope) work. That would be the fact that the preceding descriptions are not nearly an exhaustive catalog of all the contradictions, themes, quirks, and intricacies essential to this masterpiece of American painting at the end of the millennium. Thanks to editor Daniel Slager's *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, published by Milkweed Editions in June 2011, a fuller understanding of this complex portrait begins to emerge. Featuring a kaleidoscope of voices (44 essays are accompanied by 70 illustrations) to match the diversity of interpretations and responses that *Triptych* encourages, this book seeks to contextualize the epic work through art historical essays, poetry, and personal recollections of the painting and its maker.

The sheer immensity of this ambitious interdisciplinary project means that the majority of efforts—even those that are less successful—expand upon our understanding of the painting and our relationship to it. When musician David Krakauer describes his experience of *Triptych* as it relates to his memories of New York culture in the 1970s, we are further confronted—and in such a vibrant manner!—with the dualities present in

the work, which somehow exists in a conceptual space both German and American, rural and urban. At the intersection of the written word and visual information, essayist and artist play with our perceptions, illustrating via their own example the instability of definitely establishing meaning to time and place in this layered image. As Dinnerstein arranges elements in his painting to upend our expectations of pictorial narrative, merging into one confined area events and landmarks from across a referential spectrum, so do contributors like Krakauer, who refers to a personal “voyage of memory” when encountering Triptych, challenge us to rethink how we interact with such a work.

These writers provide alternative perspectives not found in the typical academic discourse surrounding art. Questions of international exchange, for one, are investigated in new and inventive ways. Former cultural attaché Richard T. Arndt uses his diplomat’s vantage point to explore how the artist’s experiences abroad influenced his entire oeuvre, while Ulrich Littmann, executive director of the German Fulbright Commission when Dinnerstein participated in the program, constructively provides us with the political context for Triptych. Engaging with the issue of national identity in the painting, film studies professor Roy Grundmann discusses the paradoxes that the cultural ambassador faces as a representative of a particular society while at the same time working towards the post-nationalist ideal favored after WWII by figures like Senator J. William Fulbright. To prove the continued relevance of this dialogue, the location of the most recent viewing of *The Fulbright Triptych* is far from the traditional realm of art spectatorship; that place would be the German Consulate General in Manhattan (otherwise, it can be found at Pennsylvania State University’s Palmer Museum of Art, where it is a part of the permanent collection).

Since June 2011, the work has been on view in the Consulate’s lobby, at one time even alongside other highlights from Dinnerstein’s decades-long career (a discussion of which would constitute another article in and of itself). By the very nature of the diplomatic space, issues of cultural interchange and national representation that might otherwise be overlooked are drawn to the forefront. The roots of the work under a very specific set of transatlantic conditions, already evidenced in the title, are further developed when, in a homecoming of sorts, this distinctly American painting, democratic in its embrace of cultural allusions both high and low, is thus re-situated in a certain European context. The idea of migration is pertinent here. The particularized quality of the landscape of Hessisch Lichtenau outside the generic studio, the latter space rendered specific thanks only to the artist’s (movable) tools and family, reflects ambivalence about this movement. Suggested is that the Dinnerstein, his wife and daughter, his labor and all



its accretions could too easily be packed up and displaced, a feeling relevant when faced with the daunting task of creating such an elaborate project over years, between cultures, and across continents. Comparing the painting’s two settings, we could speak of realms: celestial and terrestrial, if we consider color choices as they related to the conventions of medieval art, but also European and American, the boundary between the two being as flexible as a window we can open or close. And now, decades later, *Triptych* returns, in a sense, to the place of its origin. How fitting, then, that a work unsure of its own national setting finds itself at a space of in-between, in the middle of New York yet taking German representation as its primary purpose. One of the beauties of Dinnerstein’s masterpiece is that it subverts our notions of place; now, it has found an exhibition setting that does the same.

Although Simon Dinnerstein: *The Fulbright Triptych and Selected Works* closed September 15 2011, the presentation of the titular work has been extended and it will remain on display at the German Consulate through April 1, 2014. The Consulate is located at 871 United Nations Plaza and is open from Monday through Friday, 9:00am-5:00pm. Dinnerstein’s work was also exhibited earlier this year in New York at the National Academy Museum, where his painting *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (2008) was included in the show *The Annual: 2012*, which closed April 29. To learn more about the book *The Suspension of Time*, visit the website of the publisher, Milkweed Editions (milkweed.org). 