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Rediscovered at the Altar of Art

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Any visual artist fated to be a one-hit wonder would be beyond lucky if that hit were as marvelous as “The Fulbright Triptych,” Simon Dinnerstein’s overlooked masterpiece of 1970s realism. This crackling, obsessive showboat of a painting, dreamed up during a decade when the medium supposedly teetered on the brink of death, is a three-panel autobiographical allegory of life, love and art that measures 14 feet across.

It currently reigns over an otherwise desultory survey of Mr. Dinnerstein’s art at the German Consulate General near the United Nations. The show is a reconstituted version of one seen this spring at the Tenri Cultural Institute in Greenwich Village. If you missed it there, as I almost did, don’t miss it again.

“The Fulbright Triptych” is an amazing artwork with a fascinating back story, primarily of obscurity. Mr. Dinnerstein, who was born in Brooklyn in 1943, earned a history degree from City College and studied drawing and painting for three years in the ’60s at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, began the work in 1971. At the time he and his wife, Renée, were in Germany, where he was studying printmaking and the prints of Dürer, courtesy of a Fulbright fellowship (hence the work’s title and its current appearance at the German consulate). He completed it in 1974 in a Brooklyn studio and presented it to the world in his solo debut the next year, at the Staempfli Gallery on the Upper East Side.

“The Fulbright Triptych” was the first painting Mr. Dinnerstein had attempted since art school and unlike anything he has made since. Mixing realist styles from hyper to folk, the work depicts an elaborately detailed interior that seems to encompass much of what he cared about most — in art, nature, politics — and includes on its flanking panels full-length, nearly life-size portraits of himself, his wife and their infant daughter, Simone (now a celebrated pianist), who was born, post-Fulbright, back in Brooklyn.

Mr. Dinnerstein, who is now 68, seems well aware of the work’s specialness. In an interview in the idiosyncratic book “The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and ‘The Fulbright Triptych,’ ” he describes it as “the best possible me, times a hundred.”

The work has the majestic symmetry and stillness of a religious altarpiece, and the intimate allure of a well-kept artist’s studio. The object of worship is primarily art: old and new, high and low, in various mediums and styles.

Art is signified by the postcards of historic paintings and sculptures dotting walls that ambiguously evoke wood paneling, wallpaper and pegboard. It is conjured by the printmaking tools neatly arrayed on the implacably sturdy worktable that is in many ways the painting’s main character, and also by the two large, squarish windows above the table where views of a postwar German suburb and the countryside beyond function as paintings within the painting. And it is all but anthropomorphized by the engraved copper printmaking plate — supposedly the focus of Mr. Dinnerstein’s visit to Germany — that sits on a pillow at the center of the table, a little like the Christ child, available for perusal and adoration. Intricately profuse with depictions of trees, the plate also alludes to nature as the source of all art.

Calling Mr. Dinnerstein a one-hit wonder may not be quite accurate because it implies that his painting brought him some renown. Actually, fame has assiduously eluded the triptych, despite a favorable review of its Staempfli Gallery debut in The New York Times and something of an underground reputation, especially in conservative realist circles. In 1982 George Staempfli, owner of the gallery and also of the triptych (by virtue of having paid a monthly stipend that enabled Mr. Dinnerstein to complete it), sold it to the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University.

Would that William S. Lieberman, then chairman of the department of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had acquired "The Fulbright Triptych." Like all department heads at the Met, he had a discretionary acquisition fund that he could tap without board approval; he also had an eclectic and ecumenical eye. It is not hard to imagine a painting as innately appealing as Mr. Dinnerstein's becoming one of the Met's most popular works of late-20th-century art.

The spell cast by the triptych reflects its nature as an elaborate rebus of subjects, images, occasional texts (Wittgenstein and Melville), paint textures and representational styles. The windowsills are spotted with blooms of color that suggest a well-used easel; the depictions of macadam streets and stuccoed houses outside are often so roughly textured as to be almost the real thing. The art reproductions are loosely painted, with a smooth, creamy thickness; the portraits of the Dinnersteins are relatively dry and thin of surface. (They might almost be painted cutouts.) There are also passages of exquisite trompe l'oeil, like the pocked and chipped floorboards of the studio, in dark reds and browns, which are based on those in the Brooklyn room where the triptych was completed.

For all this exuberant diversity, the work is not without hierarchies. The walls above the table and around the windows, for example, are reserved primarily for images of high art — postcards of masterpieces by van Eyck, Vermeer, Holbein, Degas, Seurat and Donatello. But in the flanking panels, where the artist and his family reside, artworks battle it out with more prosaic visual material: wonderful children's drawings, news clippings, snapshots and photo-booth images of the Dinnersteins, both before and after the birth of their child. Over Mr. Dinnerstein's left shoulder is an exit visa for Semyon Rafielovich Pichkhadze, identified in the book as probably a Georgian Jew, that will expire on July 6, 1971. It reminds us that Mr. Dinnerstein and his family are Jewish, and that they are depicted in Germany, which a little over a quarter-century earlier had initiated a system of extermination from which millions of Jews were unable to escape. It is worth noting that along the back edge of the studio table, a row of tiny worn-down nubs of pencil and pastel evoke the small rocks and pebbles that visitors traditionally set on gravestones in Jewish cemeteries.

It is disconcerting to move from "The Fulbright Triptych," which seems so rich with possibility, to the rather bloodless academic art, often featuring weirdly salacious yet idealized female nudes, that Mr. Dinnerstein has made since. Occasionally you can see him return to the idea of contrasting different kinds of rendering and texture, as in works like "Solaris" (2003), with its encrusted color swirling around a small photographlike self-portrait, but the results are heavy-handed.

It undoubtedly did not help the prominence of "The Fulbright Triptych" that Mr. Dinnerstein failed to make good on its promise, but this should not be held against it. One hit is a lot better than none at all, and this one could definitely have a place in the history of its time. It has qualities in common with Sylvia Sleigh's tightly wound realism, with the encyclopedic scope of Jennifer Bartlett's Process Art painting "Rhapsody" of 1975-76 and also with the art-filled trompe l'oeil paintings that Jasper Johns made in the early 1980s.

The people at the German consulate believe so fiercely in "The Fulbright Triptych" that, after the Dinnerstein exhibition closes on Sept. 15, the painting will remain in place, in the consulate's rather inhospitable lobby, until March 15. 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 else. If it were, anyone interested in the history of recent art and its oversights would be beyond lucky.

"Simon Dinnerstein: The Fulbright Triptych and Selected Works" runs through Sept. 15 at the German Consulate General, 871 United Nations Plaza, at 49th Street, Manhattan. "The Fulbright Triptych" remains on view there through March 15.