

ARTFORUM

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Donald Kuspit on Simon Dinnerstein

Simon Dinnerstein

GERMAN CONSULATE GENERAL

Simon Dinnerstein's *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, is the centerpiece of this exhibition of twenty works at the German Consulate. Writing about the painting a year after it was made, critic John Russell called it a “scrupulous representation of a suburb in the sticks” and an “inventory of the kinds of things that in 1975 gave [young] people a sense of their own identity.” In fact, the “suburb” is the small town of Hessich Lichtenau in Germany, where Dinnerstein spent a Fulbright

year in 1971. Two windows, both in the painting's central panel, offer a bird's-eye view of the village, revealing a placid street and the rooftops of single-family homes. The “inventory” consists of postcards depicting works of art, mostly Northern Renaissance paintings, which hang on the wall alongside sketches suggesting works in progress. On the right panel is a self-portrait, and on the left panel a portrait of the artist's wife and daughter, also seated and frontal. The piece signals Dinnerstein's continuing interests: the figure, his family and friends, and old-master artists. Among the artists who have influenced him, he says, are van Eyck, Dürer, and Rembrandt, and the twentieth-century artists who emulate them, such as Andrew Wyeth and, perhaps unexpectedly, Edward Weston. There is always an air of moody insularity to Dinnerstein's works, as though the studio were a *hortus conclusus*, a sort of prelapsarian space signaling Dinnerstein's self-sufficiency.

Russell thought Dinnerstein's triptych “deserves to go to a museum.” At the time, such a statement may have implied that the work was regressive “museum art” rather than “progressive” modern art. Certainly the Museum of Modern Art would never have bought it—the painting is now in the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University—but MOMA might be interested in Dinnerstein's more recent “Palette Paintings,” 2003–. These works—also on view in this exhibition—incorporate raw pigment piled up on a palette, sort of like a tower of painterly Babel, paired with an image. Sometimes the image is a small self-portrait, as in *Pensados* and *Solaris*, both 2003. Most strikingly, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, 2008 (the title is based on a quote from the poet William Butler Yeats), features a meticulously realistic image of a case of paint tubes, some seemingly new, others clearly used, all piled in disarray juxtaposed with a grand gestural painting—that is, a display of real or “pure” paint alongside a “fake” illusion of the paint tubes necessary to make a painting. It is an unresolved conflict of opposites—a demonstration of the contradiction that has haunted twentieth-century painting from the start.

The “complementation of the abstract by means of the objective and vice versa” that existed in traditional art ended in modern art, Kandinsky wrote circa 1912, but it didn't really end, if one looks at modern art as a whole. In Dinnerstein's work, feelings are always associated with, even embodied in, what Kandinsky called “external reality.” The exquisite technique and subtle means—conté crayon, colored pencil, pastel—with which he realizes objects convey his intense feeling for them, even as it confirms their inescapable givenness. Dinnerstein may have titled a 1986 painting *A Dream Play* (after a 1902 dramatic work by August Strindberg), but he didn't dream up his figures; art, for him, entails the “verification” of objective facts. Subjectively inclined abstract art is incompletely art, not to say an escapist fantasy of “liberation” from the world, and as such peculiarly antisocial, and inconsequential.

—Donald Kuspit

Simon Dinnerstein,
The Fulbright Triptych,
1971–74, oil on
wood panel, overall
14' x 6' 7½".

