

Simon Dinnerstein and His Wings

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In the spring of 1973, Simon Dinnerstein—unknown and unannounced—marched off the street and into the Staempfli Gallery in New York City in an act of youthful bravado, with some reproductions of his work. Clearly, this work had something to it, and the sheer chutzpah of Dinnerstein's gesture perhaps did not go unnoticed either. Within a few days, George Staempfli and his associate, Phillip Bruno, in an almost unheard-of excursion for a major New York gallery owner to make, went out to a then-not-at-all “hip” Brooklyn to visit Dinnerstein's studio and see the originals of his pictures.

Among the works that engaged Staempfli's interest was Dinnerstein's uncompleted *Fulbright Triptych*. The center panel of the work was only half-finished and the side panels were not far beyond the imagined stage. When Dinnerstein showed his maquette of the project to Staempfli, all that existed of the wings were photographs of the figures that would be painted onto the panels, Dinnerstein and his wife Renée. The baby sitting on Renée's lap in the current finished work had only been born a few months earlier in late September of 1972.

On the basis of that Brooklyn visit, and in only a few days' time, Staempfli sent a letter offering to buy the picture in its unfinished state and to represent Dinnerstein. In the letter, Staempfli also suggested that the end panels of Dinnerstein's triptych-to-be were probably a bad idea. “I would urge you to think carefully before you start on the triptych wings,” he wrote. Not only did Staempfli feel they were unnecessary, but that if they were part of the piece, the size of the work would make it unsuitable for anything but a museum or institutional purchase. Indeed, in the letter laying out a contract with Dinnerstein, Staempfli worried that he might not be able to get the work into the gallery for an exhibition and proposed that he would make a dummy first to see if the painting would fit.

One has some sympathy with Staempfli's point. Framed and with proper spacing between the panels, Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* has an overall dimension of 79 ½ inches in height by 168 inches in width. Each of the “wings” is 79 ½ inches high by

38 inches wide. Without the wings, the center panel alone approximates a square with 80-inch sides.

Here I want to discuss what I sense to be the transformative impact of those wings on Dinnerstein's triptych. But first, let me say that the story of the young artist's resistance to the wishes of the older, far more powerful gallery owner testifies not only to Dinnerstein's daring but to his integrity and artistic vision. It is hard to imagine such a singular act today, especially when most young artists kowtow without resistance to the demands of the gallery, the market, and its clients.

At a current exhibition of his work at the Loupe Digital Studio, Dinnerstein talked about his philosophical argument with Staempfli and his insistence on completing the two wings. He described in some detail how they added a certain quality of "warmth" to the overall work, how they were a kind of invitation into the entire conception that lay behind the triptych.

If the side panels of Dinnerstein's triptych are "warm," then the uninhabited space with the etching table in the center panel is, by contrast, "cold." For what it demonstrated primarily is the cool, impersonal violence of the art gesture. The gaze from the viewer's eye transmutes itself into the brushstroke, the carving, the burin's line on the copper surface, all similar acts insisting that you will see *this* and not *that*. A space and volume are created in which a projection of that gesture, one amounting to a culmination of effects, takes place. As well, there is a kind of coldness or objective edge of nonambiguity to the engraver's art. It is one of incision, of cuts inflicted on a surface as opposed to paint laid upon a material, canvas or paper, almost as if the surface were being engarbed. With the two wings bracketing the center panel, this coldness is even more emphatic. One thinks of the oppositions at work: while the human form dominates the wings, the center panel is all about art and its supersessions. Everything about it is dominated in some way by art and the artist's vision. Even the landscape beyond the windows of the workspace has fallen under the control of or been mediated by the artist and by the architect who built the structure in which the engraver's work space is situated. The center panel embodies in every conceivable way the active vocabulary of the artist, making a visual entity, something like the poet tuning words, trying to heighten some of them and dampening others, in the hope that you hear what the poet has meant you to hear.





But to return to Dinnerstein's comment about warmth and the more elevated temperatures of those peopled wings. The left panel containing the image of his wife Renée, hands clasped around their child, hints at medieval altarpieces and pietàs, even as the matter-of-factness about the rendering of the figures suppresses any indulgence of overt religiosity. The right panel shows Simon, his hands held together, his boot shoes almost impossibly large in the foreground. He looks less the artist than the workman at a construction site. Yet both figures are surrounded by the objects they love and care about, Renée by the work of her students, and Simon by reproductions of art and its memorabilia. The two figures express a kind of thereness, of being comfortable and at-ease in their place. But for the eyes (of which more in a moment), there is something unassertive and nonaggressive about the poses, which alone marks the panels off from much American family portraiture. The two figures exhibit little of the pride and self-righteousness found in those of say Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. One could write an essay on how Dinnerstein's two panels in fact reverse and even invert the psycho-social values of that older painting.

Yet another, even more profound dimension of *The Fulbright Triptych* is made manifest not only by Dinnerstein's insistence on having his wings as part of the picture, but also by the way he wishes the entire work to be exhibited. When the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University borrowed Dinnerstein's triptych for exhibition, he specified that it was to be hung with a separation of three and three-quarters to four inches between panels. In this instruction, something interesting and mysterious is going on. For even the most casual glance at the *Triptych* shows that the two sides are to be seen, in an illusionistic sense, as just more of the room depicted in the central panel. The sameness of the wall paper, the height of the floor molding forming a continuous horizontal line across all three panels, the orientation of the floorboards in terms of a vanishing perspective in the center panel, all these are meant to suggest one continuous space in which the work desk, wife with baby, and artist are cohabiting. And yet Dinnerstein's instructions were that there should be gaps between these panels.

The older Christian religious triptychs, depicting scenes of the Trinity or biblical episodes, were in the service of unity, of bringing the aspects of God or of his worldview into a single vision that contained and embraced all sorts of phenomena. On altarpieces or on walls, the side frames of the pictures usually abut each other. Even

the frames for such works were often determined by material and weight, by the necessities of the site where they were to be placed, and by the wealth of the patron, perhaps more so than by artistic considerations. The close grouping expressed a religious or cultural unity. One could imagine that for some artists the need for frames and the dictates of location were interferences with expressing that unity.

In our time, one senses some reversal to this order of things. In a world filled with the loss of many forms of authority, with chaos and suffering the lot of much of the world's inhabitants, the modern artist is uncomfortable with the idea of unity itself. What once belonged together no longer seems properly connected, and the old projected universes of religious and cultural meanings have been blown apart, shattered into fragments, and isolated. Such disjunctions have become the essential elements of much art, especially that of artists such as Bacon or Beckmann or Paula Rego who make use of the triptych form. Dinnerstein, here in his *Triptych*, seems to join this company. If I read these artists correctly, their use of the triptych painfully reminds us that the form today signifies a broken totality that can only be unified, at best, by an act of artistic creation. Dinnerstein's wish to have the panels separated by a few inches, despite the illusion of unity they depict, seems to be an ambivalent expression of that cultural and social brokenness.

Wallace Stevens, in his essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," calls the making of art or poetry a "constructive faculty." For Stevens, revelation and repair of that brokenness is the essential task. And in Dinnerstein's *Triptych* we see such a constructive, unifying faculty firmly at work, even as it depicts the isolation of the artist from his work and from his family and from any other number of combinatory "decreations"—another word Stevens uses to describe the modern artist's gestures.

One unifying force is Dinnerstein's powerful and often astonishing technique, which in his painting offers a partial answer and repair to that question of dissolution and brokenness. Throughout the *Triptych*, there are bravura moments of artistic magic, such as the painted airmail letter over the workspace in the center panel or the school children's exercise sheets. The precise representations of engraving tools and the highly detailed engraver's plate of a soon-to-be Dinnerstein, *Angela's Garden* (the actual engraving turns up reproduced as No. 22 in the Hudson Hills Press catalog *Simon Dinnerstein: Paintings and Drawings*) are other instances. Moreover, the care that

Dinnerstein takes with all these elements is almost spiritual in nature. In its loving, skillful, and democratic embrace of person, object, postcard-sized old master renderings of portrait and landscape, remnants of memory and souvenirs, Dinnerstein's encompassing technique *is* itself a basic unity.

And there is also something more which lends a mysterious and complex unifying power to the work contained in those two "warm" wings with their psychologically acute life-size portraits of the artist and of the wife with her infant daughter on her lap. The eyes of both adult figures are wide-open, staring straight at the viewer. These are not inviting looks, but, like their own representations on the wings, they are strong gestures of discrimination and question. They project much more than a mild curiosity about who is looking at the painting, looking at the "me" of these pictures. Rather, it is as though the visual act mirrored itself back to send a message to the spectator: this intense unsettling look is what this picture is about, is what being human is about. Suddenly the spectator has become the subject of the artwork rather than the other way round. In fact, one could intuit a fourth panel to this picture, one facing the other three in which the spectator, subject to the same intense scrutiny as the couple in the panels, is almost transformed into an artwork or, as in contemporary theater, forced to become a participant in the play.

Here the act of creation is at its most naked and clear, one in which the artist says: this is what my life, my history, my training have led me to do. And we, as spectators, can't leave it at that because this work of art, with all its variations and tonalities, draws us in. It plays us like a work by Shakespeare or Beethoven. The final decisive act, like the existence of that after-the-fact *Angela's Garden* or the instructions to keep the wing panels a little distant from the center one—is given meaning by the viewer as he takes it all in: the incredible richness of detail, the little pictures and memorabilia so beautifully painted on the painted walls, and by the pictures of man and wife, and of a child who did not exist when the picture was first conceived. Through all those elements we get to a deeper understanding for ourselves, which, once grasped, leaves us captured by those figures in the wings. They look at us more powerfully than we can look at them. We've been brought to something as strong as the last scene of a *Lear* or a *Tempest* or the final note of a symphony. The details both move and release us, as though Dinnerstein's wings had unfolded themselves once again to embrace us.