

Classicism vs the Unbridled Individual Voice/ New York Madness of the Early 70s/ And Other Meditations on *The Fulbright Triptych*

David Krakauer

It totally made sense to me when I found out that Simon Dinnerstein's epic masterpiece *The Fulbright Triptych* was created in New York between the beginning of 1971 and May of 1974. No wonder this amazing painting resonates so strongly with me personally. The time period of its creation corresponds almost exactly to my three years at NYC's legendary High School of Music and Art . . . the time in my life when I truly came of age. Every time I see the painting so many feelings and sensations are conjured up that relate to this truly remarkable era living in New York City. Yes, the painting is set in Germany. But what I see depicted here are Jewish-American New Yorkers looking transplanted and lonely. It feels somehow like this painting could only have been realized back in New York, with the tremendous energy of that time and place feeding Simon to create something of such epic proportions. It seems to me as if the viewer is witnessing the Dinnersteins in Germany suspended in a kind of faraway dream, with both Simon and Renée in their separate worlds: literally on each side of the triptych, each with their own specific iconography behind them. I get the feeling that life is on hold for these two individuals and their child. It seems like they are waiting to get to the next place. I had a similar sensation when I lived in France in the midseventies. I remember dreamily walking through the streets of Paris wondering what kind of effect the whole experience would have on me once I returned to NY to "do my own thing" on home soil.

So what was this crazy energy of home/New York City at that time? The place was a gritty mess . . . brimming with energy and excitement . . . and the potential for danger all the time. The romantic days of "New York is a Summer Festival" (c. 1965) were over. The subway hardly functioned. The city was broke. I remember that strong vestiges/ruins of 1940s NY still remained: rotting Burlesque signs ("twirly, whirly girls") . . . right next to the old Howard Johnson's sign, faded placards everywhere,

Fascination: with its pinball arcades, creepy fortune teller lady machines, and the store mannequin cowboy who would “challenge” all comers to “draw!!!” . . . and the giant Camel billboard of the man who blew smoke rings . . . So New York could have been thought of as a mess . . . but it was also magical and wonderful . . . caught between an older period and a newer time yet to come. I was constantly running around town until the wee hours of the morning with my composer/jazz pianist buddy Anthony Coleman. We caught Monk at the Vanguard, Mingus at the 5 Spot, Ornette Coleman at his loft on Prince Street (which was a ghost town at the time), the up-and-coming Steve Reich at BAM, the legendary “Papa” Jo Jones and other former 30s Basie sidemen in small spaces in Midtown, etc., etc. Plus we had the amazing experience of seeing Duke Ellington several times at the Rainbow Grill where all we had to do was put on a jacket to be served a drink. I remember one night the lights went low, and Duke started striding on “Honeysuckle Rose” behind the tap dancing of “Honey” Coles. It was 1925 all over again. New York in the early 70s was truly like being in a perpetual time machine. Amid this, Anthony and I were creating our own music, using New York as our great “university of the streets.” We were performing jazz repertoire way before Jazz at Lincoln Center . . . playing everything from Jelly Roll Morton to Monk. But we also did many Coleman originals and were fiercely obsessed with the desire to find our own individual voice. The city was our playground. I remember rehearsing everywhere from East New York to the South Bronx, participating in the loft scene with concerts and jam sessions, and going to play all night at the café Pepper and Salt somewhere in the Bronx. It was a wild time for me . . . this sheltered Jewish Manhattan boy.

I can just see Simon and Renée returning to this mad, mad post-60s world of New York in 1971. Perhaps I’m projecting, but I can see Simon in a totally possessed state, driven to break free of the sense of isolation and waiting he must have felt in Germany . . . compelled to put this smoldering tension into a huge-scale work. I can palpably feel through the painting a tremendous sense of liberation and the crazy energy of New York driving him forward. And then what blows me away and seems to pull the painting all together is the pegboard! In this day and age of sampling and exact photo reproduction, perhaps we might take a copy of a master painting for granted.

But when one takes the time to REALLY LOOK at these amazing depictions of paintings, children's drawings, newspaper clippings, and photographs, it's clear that this collection of images on the pegboard tells the story of the life and craft of a master painter. (What it must have taken to execute just one of these miniature images in and of itself is mind-boggling.) What I also find interesting is that Simon, whose lyrical/fantastical depictions of the nude are astounding, chose to copy a poetically sexual photograph as his one "personal" earthy/nonclassical nude on the pegboard. This seems to create a small epicenter of energy where extreme passion wants to burst out of the bigger painting. Thinking about my own pegboard that I created over the years, with pictures of my teacher Leon Russianoff, drawings my kids made, paintings that rocked my world, the Elect Hillary's Husband button my daughter gave me, fortune cookie missives, Times Square photo booth snapshots, postcards from friends and lovers, it's clear to me how a pegboard can be such an extremely intimate look into a person's life. The pegboard in the *Triptych*, with its wild mix of imagery, seems to create an amazing tension between the control of classicism and the desire to burst free. I can really relate to this thinking, how my study of classical music in conjunction with struggling to find my own voice as an improviser created an incredible inner tension for me that I was only able to start to resolve in my early thirties. This resolution came through an embracing of my own "roots" music (klezmer) with the goal of creating my own personal voice from that place. Perhaps again I'm projecting, but I see this kind of tension between classicism (held in passion) and the search for an individual voice (bursting out) in *The Fulbright Triptych*. For me it's that specific tension in the painting that creates its incredible emotional power.

Lastly, there's one other level of connection for me. I remember the first time I personally felt the power of paintings to inspire tremendous emotion and change lives. This happened shortly before the coming of age period I've been talking about. Still a boy, around 1967 or '68, I went over to my first teacher, Joel Press's, apartment on Thirty-Third and Third for a rare lesson at his house. Joel is a wonderful jazz musician whose home reflected his close relationship to painters, dancers, and the avant-garde movement of the late 60s. It was an enchanted place for me. Joel had been married to the Chicago School painter June Leaf. June's paintings and dioramas were all over

the house. Their stark emotions, insane sense of humor, and delicious sexuality were an incredible awakening for an eleven-year-old boy. Once I had seen these paintings, I knew I had passed the point of no return. I couldn't be "normal" ever again and was irrevocably put on the path to find my own creative voice. Being asked by Simon to write about *The Fulbright Triptych* encouraged me to look really deeply into a specific painting and at painting in general. The more I ruminated on the subject, the closer I came to remembering what inspired me in the first place to do what I do today. Thank you, Simon, for encouraging me to undertake this voyage of memory; giving me the opportunity, through a deeper exploration of *The Fulbright Triptych*, to ask myself the eternal question once again: What does it all mean?