

Simon Dinnerstein's Family Romance

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I interviewed Simon Dinnerstein extensively in the week of August 9-13, 1989, and when we decided to call it quits I felt we had touched only the tip of the iceberg. For me, honed as I was on the construction of an art historical past that had no opportunity for rebuttal, having to confront a live specimen as a primary source—as if the subject of a recent book of mine, Van Gogh, could be reached by telephone—was fraught with complications. Nevertheless, Dinnerstein's openness and analytical mind finally put me at ease and yielded so much intelligence and information that I could convince myself that I had the makings of a case study of the relations—dare I even repeat the old formula?—between an artist's life and work. Hopefully, out of the welter of our exchanges and personal constructions there emerges a mosaic of some shared reality.

In many ways, Simon made it easy for me. His most audacious speculations always emanate from, and return to, a basic core idea that he recapitulates in his life and his art. Both in his everyday experience as spouse, father, and friend and in his cultural practice (what he might call his “visual diary”), he attests to a profound attachment to the people in his life and the immediate material environment in which his human relations unfold. He studies them intimately: the way they look, the way they feel, the way they interrelate. He draws them in tightly defined interiors, close-up and conscientiously, revealing all the lineaments of their existence. Some critics have called his pictures cruel in their ruthless exposure; I think this is an exaggerated general description of his work. What Dinnerstein does is to relentlessly particularize his subjects in their spaces until the macro and the micro become visually one. More often than not, he chooses models with strong personalities who do not flinch under intense scrutiny.

Dinnerstein's work is full of ambiguity and never lends itself to easy labels. But his close scrutiny and claustrophobic environments consistently draw the beholder in close to share in his lifestyle. The centering of the family affection and the links to the rest of the world through this centering becomes an ecumenical mission, as if Dinnerstein wants to draw the whole world into this family center. Thus the family mediates the world for Dinnerstein, but the family on its own terms. This public expo-

sure of his intimate life is meant to “show people that they might get in touch with something in themselves that is deeply and even painfully private.” What each of us experiences and suffers in isolation is often the result of conditions—physical and environmental—that are generic to the species. Dinnerstein’s awareness of this paradox and need to share it is central to his visual thematics.

This attitude is surely related to the impact of his father on Dinnerstein’s intellectual and psychological development. Louis Dinnerstein was an ardent union organizer and committed leftist preoccupied with the social injustices in the United States. Dinnerstein remembers him as somewhat dogmatic, having a single solution for the world’s ills and pushing it home at every opportunity. This brand of engaged politics left Simon cold and dissuaded him from following in his father’s footsteps: on the contrary, he determined to avoid universal, generalized solutions and instead to satisfy himself with things that were near at hand and manageable, things that he could really change or influence.

Simon observed the despair and the anger and frustration of his father. While Louis Dinnerstein was absorbed in ideas and political solutions, his domestic life fell into disarray. Louis subjected his wife, Sarah, “a very dreamy kind of person,” to verbal abuse and intimidation. In reaction, Simon rejected his father’s public posture to privilege the world within his jurisdiction, to construct a world he could govern. Instead of trying to remake the conditions of civil society, he shapes a harmonious domestic center around which the family, friends, and neighbors orbit. As against the father, Simon elevates the family space to highest priority and relegates the world problems to the periphery.

In this sense, Simon is a red-diaper baby—a child of a radical parent—who switched to Pampers. Like many of his generation, he was more critical of the failings of the Old Left and New Left than of the recalcitrant and conservative sectors of U.S. society that opposed them. He renounced the Left’s global mission as a solution to society’s ills, but guarded their social concern for the wider population and their milieu. His work is not only meant to be accessible to a broad audience, but his subjects are drawn from domestic surroundings and local neighborhoods. His range of subjects embraces his pregnant wife, their extended families, an alienated Polish

refugee, a childlike and awkward uncle, a meditative black female student from the West Indies, a reclusive German tenant, and ordinary objects in his home and studio. But if he keeps within a range of experience that was the focus of his father's social concerns, he does not portray it in overtly political terms. His subjects are not the oppressed proletariat, but psychological creations defined by their relationship to his interior, domestic realm. In other words, he does not go out into the world to preach, but rather he strains the world through the sieve of his family circle. Put another way, he curbs his anxieties about the Other by bringing the Other into his life where it may be subject to dominion. Under these circumstances, his subjects may enjoy a degree of freedom, humanization, and love denied them in the politicized exterior world. The harshness of his scrutiny then becomes a litmus test of his realism—a realism that feeds back his measure of control.

He is equally harsh on himself. His *Self-Portrait*, nude from the waist up, betrays a curious expression. Like most self-portraits, it was done by looking at a mirror, but in its finished state it looks out at the beholder. The quizzical look seems to address the beholder as a kind of superego, a surrogate father that says, "Who do you think you are?" A child, aware of parents watching, acts momentarily on his or her best behavior to gain approval. The parent, knowing full well that this is a momentary state related to the surveillance, addresses the child with the answer, "I know who you are and what you are about"—an attitude that persists and becomes part of the challenge to the child's sense of self. Thus the realism of this work presupposes a firm grip on the artist's response to the question, "Who do you think you are?" The artist can allow himself this degree of realistic self-questioning, since he is confident that he possesses the means to respond affirmatively. Dinnerstein's world is subject to his control that begins tentatively and gradually tightens; everything is inevitably marshaled to insure an accurate response. And it is accurate, and can be accurate, within the limited boundaries he sets for himself.

His major works, starting with *The Fulbright Triptych*, confirm this hypothesis. His by now legendary bulletin board (really, a storyboard) is filled with items rendered with the meticulous and trompe l'oeil perfection of a Harnett or a Peto. Every autobiographical incident or detail is treated with an unwavering gaze. Here he takes his

studio as the center of affection and attraction, with himself, his wife, and child grouped around the worktable. It is an unusual painting, and at first sight I kept wondering how it could be so effective with all of its quirkiness and eccentricities. For all of its complexities, however, he conceived of the image as a whole from the start and carried it out without preliminary studies—an image that burned itself into his eidetic memory. Even the wry title contributes to the strange aura of the picture by being both an echo of the past and a statement about modern artistic patronage: in the Renaissance such a picture would have been named for an individual patron or donor, while contemporary patronage takes the form of institutional grants and prizes that provide a major source of support for the artist. It was while he was studying in Germany with the aid of a Fulbright grant that Dinnerstein began the painting.

Thus the work maps out the autobiography of the artist while under obligation to the Fulbright grant, the enabler of his ambitious enterprise. He received the grant to study printmaking at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Kassel, and in a sense the work pays homage to both the grant and the craft of the printmaker. The entire central panel is built around the table with its clinical organization of the tools of the graphic designer and an engraved copperplate in the center. Thus for his first major painting, Dinnerstein opted to represent a taxonomic chart of the printmaker's profession, an understandably cautious theme for an ambitious first picture. I would call this ironic and sometimes whimsical work "The Taxonomy Lesson of Dr. Dinnerstein." Yet despite its obvious didacticism and cautious thematics, it is spell-bindingly intense: a paradox that is a hallmark of the artist's total production.

The painting's energy derives in part from the intrinsic rebelliousness of the project. Dinnerstein was awarded the Fulbright on the basis of a proposal having to do with a printmaking project, and in the end the most important work he did with it ran counter to the proposal. Dinnerstein refused to be stifled by either the stipulation of the grant or his own initial proposal.

As a result, the work was steeped in paradox and ambiguity from the start. It is the story of the graphic designer in paint, as if printmaking itself was incapable of telling this story. Simon, however, refused to capitulate to the academic "hierarchy of modes" before wresting certain concessions from it: the pigment must humble itself to the

meticulous replication of the scrawls of preschoolers as well as other crude marks and gestures traditionally alien to it, and it must faithfully delineate kitschy reproductive images. Hence alongside the figural and landscape signifiers of high art we find the child's Crayola sketches, printed texts, magazine, tabloid, and postcard reproductions, and the cheap subway mug shot obtained in those fast-disappearing booths that once yielded for a modest price candid photos for passport and wallet. These were not only painstakingly but also painfully duplicated in a recalcitrant medium. It is this struggle between his awareness of the traditional importance of the paint medium and his intrinsic love of the graphic media that is played out in this visual scenario and keeps it from lapsing into genre. He paradoxically elevated the status of his own printmaking experiments to the level of high art that succeeds only on the condition that it too can be transformed into a reproducible object and tacked onto someone's bulletin board. In this sense, it overcomes the loss of high art aura from reproduction by recreating a "lower" level aura through its own fascinating reproductive properties. It resembles a monumentalized projection of those old newspaper comics with built-in incongruities that asked, "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

Thus, on a deeper level, this collagelike depiction of self-identity is a personal view of the history and nature of perception. The clue to this aspect of the work is the paraphrased quote from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, pasted between the two windows just above the table in the central panel: "And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in a language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is." The key to Wittgenstein's thought is the emphasized article "the" before the word "world" that suggests the futility of establishing *the* reality. Reality then becomes at any given time the relativized conception of the extent to which our particular "forms of life"—language and therefore ideology as well—delimit our soundings of what's out there in the void.

Hence the reflective Dinnerstein-Wittgenstein persona could hardly take itself seriously within the bounds of its quest for *the* reality. Just as the artist forces high art to come to terms with children's art, he also juxtaposes the text of the philosophical sage with the haiku-like poem of a thirteen-year-old pupil named Gloria Mintz,

whom Dinnerstein taught at an Orthodox girls' yeshiva in Brooklyn: "Grey and sweating / And only one *I* person / Fighting and fretting." Here is precocious recognition that the quest to make existence rational and meaningful in modern society through fixing *the* reality is in itself a subjective solution taking place in isolation. Dinnerstein accepts this as a given, and thus takes as his starting point the personal lens of family (the extension of himself) and its environment.

The Wittgenstein quote forms part of a series of three objects including an aerogram letter from Dinnerstein's wife Renée (then visiting her parents in the States) and an old broken stopwatch, upended on the worktable, whose face depicted a male sprinter. The aerogram's front has the return address of Staten Island and the Dinnerstein address in Hessisch Lichtenau, and, together with the stopwatch, comments on the heightened awareness of the vagaries of space and time in the modern world. Additionally, Renée's letter to Simon describes a bizarre dream about childbirth that involved both their mothers. The reference here to another state of consciousness that seemed "real" at the time amplifies the epistemological issues raised in the painting.

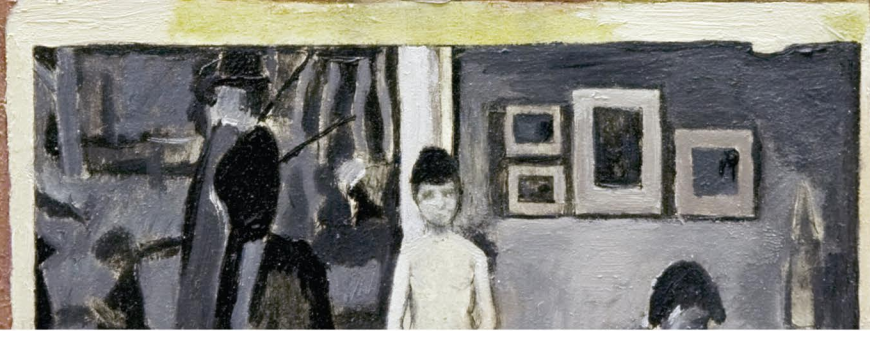
The broken stopwatch suggests that the painting is an attempt to "freeze" or "catch" a moment in space and time, a metaphor that Dinnerstein employs often in describing his particular realist approach. He imagines himself as a kind of butterfly collector trying to nail the subject in flight. Yet Dinnerstein's trail rarely leads beyond his home or studio interior so that the specimens he gathers in his net are neither exotic nor rare, but those in his own backyard. Within these confines he sees every detail with an obsessive evenness so that, initially at least, the viewer seems to confront a rigorously controlled space seen close-up. In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, where the view extends beyond the studio to embrace part of the town of Hessisch Lichtenau (here framed by the windows like two more pictures on the wall and mediated by the perspective of the working table), Dinnerstein deals with the contradictory all-over emphasis by having recourse to his delightful metaphor of the "floating eyeball." He paints as if his eyeball could detach itself from his head and float over the areas beyond his immediate sight and return with the immediately concealed visual information. This is a conceit rooted in childhood fantasy, but it does reveal a good deal of Dinnerstein's desire for a kind of omniscient presence in his own backyard that is the yardstick of his reality.



They send swirling,
 And only one person
 fighting and getting

Solitude

Shorta Mista



The voyeuristic impulse is central to both the making and viewing of art. The beholder in the first instance is the painter, in the second it is the public onlooker. Thus the painter makes public that which was private and the audience becomes complicit in this act of exposure. Dinnerstein's awareness of this dynamic in his own work comes through in an astonishing childhood recollection that he revealed to me in the course of our interview in August 1989. It occurred to him recently while he was drawing a nude female model (*Dream Palace*), and they discussed their earliest fantasies of their possible futures. Dinnerstein then recalled that the first time he had a "vision" of himself was when he was about four years old. He was alone in the apartment and seated on his parents' bed, when he had the sensation of floating outside of his body and looking down on himself from the ceiling. He remembers thinking something like this: "Boy, this is amazing! This is what it feels like to lie on my parents' bed." Then he floated all around the room, taking account of how the dresser, the drawers, and the window shades looked as if seeing them objectively for the first time. By the time he floated back into his head, Dinnerstein knew that he "wanted to do something with my life that was the equivalent of that."

Henceforth Dinnerstein committed himself to being an observer, someone who is able to see oneself and others "in situations." While explaining the curious detachment of his visual practice, his childhood fantasy is also a wonderful modern parable of the origin of art, updating the fabulous accounts recorded by Pliny. According to Freud, about the time our nascent sexuality reaches its first peak, between the ages of three and five, we begin to indicate signs of the activity that "may be ascribed to the instinct for knowledge or research." This activity corresponds on the one hand to the sublimated need to obtain mastery over the environment, while on the other it is impelled by the energy of scopophilia. Its relations to sexual life are of fundamental importance since curiosity in children and the quest for knowledge are inevitably linked to sexual drive. What Freud calls "the riddle of the sphinx"—the nagging question of birth—is a vivid memory of many people during the prepubescent period. Although children cannot make the direct connection between the sexual act and having children, they develop an interest in sexual relations in order to unravel the mystery of marriage itself and discover their role in the process. This early childhood

research is always carried out in solitude. At this point, the child takes a crucial first step of independence and displays a high degree of detachment from both parents and surroundings.

Thus it is probably not a coincidence that Dinnerstein's experience occurred in the parental bedroom when mother and father were absent. The "floating eyeball" emancipates sight from walled-off ignorance, enabling the child to uncover the mysteries and hidden objects on the forbidden side of closed doors, concealed in dresser drawers and behind drawn window shades. (Simon spent many of his lonely childhood hours gazing out of windows, and the window became a fundamental metaphor for his work. Not surprisingly, a favorite movie is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.) The discovery of the private realm of the parents, the wish to be able to gaze unflinchingly into all of its labyrinthine manifestations, must be an integral psychic component of Dinnerstein's quest for self-discovery.

Dinnerstein noted in our interview that at the time he recounted his childhood memory to the model, her expression had something "dreamy" and "vulnerable" about it. These are precisely the terms that he used throughout our interview to characterize his mother, whom he credits for his own creative disposition. Indeed, he often seeks in his female models precisely this sort of expression that resonates with his memories of his mother. (These very often are sexually charged expressions that produce a type of oedipal displacement that may also be signaled in the reproduction of Larry Clark's erotic photograph of *Teenage Lust* that appears on Simon's side of *The Fulbright Triptych*.) Although this look coincides with a traditional patriarchal attitude, Dinnerstein also gives his male figures a similar mood of reverie and pensiveness. Thus this particular expression, and the mystery of it associated with his mother, may have triggered the childhood associations that led him directly to the parental bedroom.

The most cursory examination of *The Fulbright Triptych* reveals that the maternal and domestic theme is central to a number of the images affixed to the walls of the studio: the Virgin Mary, Madonna and Child, pietà, primitive fertility figure, a paternal surrogate for a mother (described as "warm, melancholy, and tender") with his daughter, a reproduction of Seurat's mother sewing (according to Dinnerstein, Seurat rendered it with "lots of mystery and expression for his mother"), a domestic scene by

the artist's brother, Harvey Dinnerstein, entitled *In the Kitchen*, a Käthe Kollwitz portrait that resembles Dinnerstein's mother, and the critical left panel depicting his wife holding their infant daughter. Hence this first attempt is inextricably linked with the Mother image and the domesticated environment, a visual manifesto that sets the direction for Dinnerstein's subsequent production.

There is a starkness and alienation in this studio space so clinically arranged and artfully prepared. Renée and Simon occupy the left and right panels, gazing at us out of their extreme isolation. This quarantined look of the space speaks in part to the curious status of the Dinnersteins: American Jews, residing on their Fulbright in the Protestant German town Hesisch Lichtenau, just outside Kassel. One photo on the wall of the panel representing the artist shows a despairing figure confined to a cell-like interior. It reminded Dinnerstein of the scene in Camus's *The Stranger* in which the protagonist is incarcerated and feels his world rapidly shrinking and consoles himself by investigating his ever-diminishing and restricted space. The Dinnersteins' provisional standing and sense of confinement is demonstrated in part by the need to fix their self-identity so insistently through the bulletin-board motif, and to invent their own environment within the unfamiliar geographical and topographical entity. On the wall just behind and to the right of Simon's head is a Soviet émigré's passport (Dinnerstein's mother was a Russian immigrant, as were his paternal grandparents), metonymically pointing to the conditional and relative nature of national identity. Again, this sense of identity is filtered through his maternal side; the artist claimed that the document reminded him somewhat of "a passport photo of my mother." In a sense, Dinnerstein has sought to create a sympathetic Motherland within the alien Fatherland.

It is through the mediation of this reinvented space that we are allowed a glimpse of the outlying town. The sides of the neatly organized table are extended outside by the edges of the main street, leading us along a residential row of compact houses and gardens as tidy as the arrangement in the studio interior. The one-point perspectival scheme that orders the composition leads ultimately to the hills on the distant horizon, finally asserting in metaphorical terms the Dinnersteins' place in this domain. But the view out remains rigorously controlled by the two windows that subordinate it to

the exigencies of the bulletin-board motif, in effect transforming it into another collage component.

The stringent organization of the composition is part of the artist's acknowledged contradictory attempt to grasp the data of everyday phenomena through a personalized construction. The broken stopwatch in effect is the mocking metaphor for the desire to "slow down" and "stop" reality in order to pin it down on the pictorial surface. The conscientious arrangement of the engraver's burins, burnishers, scrapers, and measuring instruments pointing toward the outside world signifies the imagined potential of human artifice to objectify the surrounding reality. The centerpiece of the table is the oval copperplate, which has a landscape design inscribed in reverse of the actual print. Seen up close, the brickwork and foliage engraved on the plate with the burin are clearly visible, thus creating an equivalency with the phenomenal world as depicted in the picture (though lacking color) and submitting it to the dominion of the printmaker. Thus, reality in this crazy-quilt tapestry becomes a multilayered texture of images woven within images.

The appearance of Flemish and northern Renaissance clippings on the wall clues us in to the kind of obsessional quality Dinnerstein admires in the work of other artists, from van Eyck to George Tooker. (He satirizes his own obsessive impulses in a passage from *Moby-Dick* tacked on his side of the wall, quoting an exchange between Ahab and Starbuck.) His methodical replication of reproductions of works by Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Holbein, Jean Fouquet, as well as more modern painters such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Georges Seurat, and Edwin Dickinson pays homage to his idols but also serves to measure his own performance and ability to "see" against their own. Thus his self-identity asserts itself in this embrace of the history of art that forms as significant a part of the environmental texture as the town outside. Indeed, his own meticulous rendering of his studio space attests to his wished-for position in this history at an insecure moment of his career.

Part of *The Fulbright Triptych's* power attains through the hermetic representation of commonplace subject matter. I found it challenging to reconcile what comes off to me as a medieval or Renaissance allegory with the excessive familiarity of the motifs. The accessibility of the persons and things is contrasted with the remoteness

of the space and its clinical rendering. This ambiguity rescues the work from anecdotal genre.

Yet if it is the evocative character of the commonplace that empowers the painting, it achieves this at the expense of topicality. The arrangement of the familiar in the guise of tradition suggests the deliberate effacement of the topical. Except for the image of a photograph of two men clipped from the *New York Times* that addressed the issue of mistaken identity in a controversial rape case (thus relating to the work's basic theme of perception), little in the picture points to an awareness of the burning political topics of the day. This is all the more surprising when we recall that the picture dates from the period 1971-1974, a critical stage in the war in Vietnam. Dinnerstein's sympathies were clearly on the side of social justice, and he continues to oppose the jingoist and nationalist expressions of the Right. He had participated in protest demonstrations (including the Civil Rights March on Washington in 1963) and did everything possible to get himself exempted from the draft. Furthermore, his own rejecting of nonrepresentation and involvement in figuration shares the cultural ideals of those turbulent years when the need to communicate with the broadest possible audience became an imperative for the generation of the sixties.

But at the peak of the Vietnam and Civil Rights period he grew disenchanted with the public process. At this moment, the anxieties he inherited from his paternal side predisposed him to be suspicious of what could be accomplished by protest. (His own investigations reveal that consolidation of the national wealth increased dramatically during the decade, as if to hint that the wealthy elite encouraged protest as a diversion from their own power play.) He articulates his fear of the rhetoric and sloganeering of groups and movements that espouse drastic change achieved through collective action by an expressed horror of a certain kind of extreme "idealism," the idealism that leads to the creation of exclusionary fraternities such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis. Here he rationalizes his position by assuming the pose of the skeptic and realist; indeed, distrust of idealism he interprets as the only sensible form of modern realism. The misplaced idealism and what he felt to be its shallow rhetoric he associated with the political posture of his father, whose dogmatic public role prevented him from maintaining a rational private world. Hence Simon's commitment to the private as against the public: the desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to succeed in that

realm where his father had failed. His self-identity had to be mediated through the narrower world of the family rather than through public demonstration. At the same time Simon brought all the instruments at his disposal to depict this intimate private life with the scientist's objectivity, as if to lay bare its dynamics for systematic analysis. As in the case of Camus's protagonist, Dinnerstein focused on the walls around him in proportion to the receding of the public world.

If Simon's work shuts out his world from this kind of topicality, it is nonetheless modern in its presentation of the tension between the private and the public realisms and in its deadpan representation of the familiar. (In this he shares the qualities of the painters he most admires, George Tooker, Lucian Freud, and Antonio López García, who unite the grand figurative tradition with the contemporary commonplace.) Above all, he is modern in his openness to other visual media—film, photography, and television—that have decisively affected his mode of seeing. Throughout our interview, Dinnerstein returned again and again to the influence of Ingmar Bergman on his work. Dinnerstein has viewed the Swedish director's films many times over since he first encountered them in the mid-1960s, and he is especially fascinated by the filmmaker's investigation of various levels of self-identification, the intermingling of complementary viewpoints within one identity, the fusion of dream and reality as a part of identity.

The double portrait of himself and his daughter, in which the two are shown in a half-length view close-up to one another but moving in opposite directions, exemplifies the Bergmanesque influence of such films as *Persona* (1966). Dinnerstein and his daughter occupy the same shallow space, with their heads drawn up tightly together, akin to the colossal double close-ups of Bergman's optical field, while preoccupied with their own personal thoughts. Within the domestic foyer Dinnerstein visually unites father and daughter, but also emphasizes their divergent orientations. This convergence and divergence of the two generations may be seen as analogous to the theme of splitting and fusion in Bergman's film.

Dinnerstein's fascination with the tension between and the intermingling of identities, as well as his fascination with the ambiguous space between the dream and waking states, is explored further in the monumental drawing *A Dream Play*. As in *The Fulbright Triptych*, the artist has located himself and his wife and daughter at either

end of the picture to frame the central action that in turns links them like two ends of a Japanese scroll unfurling across time and space. The panoramic ensemble depicts members of the Dinnersteins' extended family entering and exiting in dream, rather than in real, time. Thus deceased ancestors mingle with the living, and the living are seen in multiple stages of youth and adulthood. Renée Dinnerstein is glimpsed not only as a mother watching over her daughter, Simone, but appears also as a child of nine years when she bore a remarkable resemblance to the daughter. Dinnerstein depicts himself at the far left at his drawing table, recalling the self-references of Velázquez and Goya in their royal group portraits. In this case, however, the subject is his own family and leaves no doubt that he is the choreographer of this Dance of Life and Death. He alone is conscious and aware—the “dreamer” who sets the dream play in motion as he “narrates” the text of his extended self-portrait.

The motif of the artist taking over the main narrative function was inspired by a newspaper photograph of Iranian pilgrims. An unveiled matriarch wearing black in the immediate foreground plane addresses the viewer/photographer, while the other figures are self-absorbed in the background. Her full, intelligent face is brightly lit, while the background tourists move almost trancelike in the murky shadows. As a kind of mediator between the beholder and the picture crowd, she functions as interlocutor and chronicler of events. Perhaps it is significant that a maternal image sparked the germinal idea of the familial *A Dream Play*.

The title was suggested by August Strindberg's drama of the same name, which a friend recommended to Dinnerstein after hearing his explanation of the subject. Strindberg's “Note” at the beginning of the play states: “the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist . . . The characters are split, double, and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law.”

The bizarre coincidence of Dinnerstein's design and Strindberg's conception took an even eerier turn when, in the course of executing the elaborate drawing, Dinnerstein watched a televised showing of Bergman's last film, *Fanny and Alexander*

(1982), which itself merges dream and reality in a frankly autobiographical work. As the last scene fades, the screen blacks out, and what appears is the quotation cited above from Strindberg's play read by Helena, the family matriarch (in voice-over). Since the source of the quote was not cited, Dinnerstein experienced an uncanny sensation of *déjà vu*. Bergman's picture (one that Dinnerstein has viewed several times), in fact, was deeply influenced by Strindberg's play, and the filmmaker staged the play for the theater several times in his career. He uses the play in the last scene as a pretext for reconciling the generations through the participation of the grandmother and daughter-in-law ("There are parts for both of us") on a plane that blurs the boundaries of theater, dream, and actuality.

Both the play and the film stress the dreamlike state of earthly existence and the burden of the past that weighs on the minds of the living. Dinnerstein was especially struck by the scene near the climax of the film when the ghost of the recently deceased stepfather rudely reminds Alexander that he will not be rid of him so easily. The anxieties of his own childhood continue to haunt Dinnerstein as he depicts the memory traces of the associative sights and sounds of the past hovering behind the claustrophobic familial procession. A prolonged row of squalid brownstones marches across the distant horizon like an elevated subway, reminiscent of a long horizontal tracking shot in film that suggests time unfolding.

Dinnerstein's realism grows out of his sense of a kind of foreordained trajectory that each individual existence must follow, and *A Dream Play* creates his own world of necessity through kinship, class background, and environment. The psychological vectors of mother and father that shape the personality for further encounters are rhythmically choreographed across the surface. Acceptance of, and facing up to, this "fatalistic" view of existence implies a strategic form of modern realism. Dinnerstein relentlessly depicts his motifs with the documentary quality of old passport photos and amateur snapshots, achieving a montage of the family photograph album. As a result, he establishes a persuasive matrix that predisposes us to accept improbable juxtapositions and anachronisms.

Dinnerstein's sense of predestination does not mean that one must yield wholly to blind destiny: in dreams positive images arise that alert the dreamers to those per-

sonalities who may play a beneficial role in their lives. As he stated in our interview: “If one truly believes in fate . . . then you dream in your dreams of the person that you will be linked up with; you don’t need to search for that person—you just dream of that person; when that person comes along they fulfill what they match in the dream you’ve had. There’s something very beautiful in that.” This implies to me that Dinnerstein feels that he can control his own fate through the re-creation in another medium of mental images.

A Dream Play’s atmosphere suggests a loosening of the stringent gaze that marked *The Fulbright Triptych*. In addition to opening his art to the possibility of representing other states of being, this change also coincides with a shift in thematics beyond the nuclear family to extended kinship associations. Dinnerstein examines the historic strengths of the extended family: the respect for one’s elders (here indicating a more tolerant attitude toward his father), the communal nurturing of children, and the labor of parents to guarantee their children the fulfillment of their creative potential. Allowing for the indirectness of Simon’s visual construction that tends to prevent the work from lapsing into outright didacticism, we may perceive that the work’s content stresses relations in its various forms: sexual, parental, filial, brotherly, and by extension social and political relations. By the 1980s even the militant Left had caught up to Dinnerstein’s position and abandoned an exclusively economic-oriented program in favor of a pro-family analysis. In *A Dream Play*, Dinnerstein has added a vignette of two African-American children gazing out of a window into the Brownsville street, a motif inspired by a *Life* magazine photo. The vignette is placed just above the portraits of himself and his brother and father to the left. Albeit a personal allusion to Dinnerstein’s own daydreaming propensities as a child, its incorporation here evokes another side of family life in America. (This would not be the first time that Dinnerstein situated desolate individuals near windows as symbolic of their isolation; another example is *Nocturne* (1982) which depicts a displaced Polish refugee suffering from his sense of being “alien” in a foreign land.)

The year before he began the picture Dinnerstein organized an exhibition of his work at the Gallery 1199 in the Martin Luther King Jr. Labor Center, New York City. The gallery is named for the adjacent Hospital and Health Care Employees Union, Local 1199. The artist’s father, Louis Dinnerstein (who appears twice in *A Dream Play*)

had been an active member of this organization during its stormy period in the sixties and seventies when issues of civil rights and black participation dominated the agenda. Older members of the union recalled that Louis had energetically agitated on behalf of gaining a fairer proportion of African Americans (the majority of the union's membership was black) among the leadership. Dinnerstein, in a gesture that indicated a greater awareness of his father's role in his choice of career, proudly dedicated the exhibition to the elder's memory, "an ardent supporter of 1199 and a man who followed his deep convictions."

It is no coincidence that the subject of three of Dinnerstein's most important recent works in the Gallery 1199 exhibition was a young black woman named Cheryl Yorke. She modeled for *In Sleep*, the work reproduced on the exhibition's flyer that carried the dedication on the verso. Yorke had been a student of the artist at New York City Technical College and profoundly impressed him with her "inner peace and depth" and her "extraordinary outer, formal beauty." The third work in the series, the one that provoked the most comments, depicted her asleep and dreaming. At first glance, the work presents the viewer with the Western stereotype of the exotic languid woman, vulnerable and exposed to the patriarchal male gaze. Dinnerstein, however, plays with the stereotype in wanting to represent the model "in her fullness"—including the "baggage" of the past that she carries into the present. Above her reclining form Dinnerstein repeated the model in an interwoven chain of recumbent poses that almost cinematically trace her bodily shifts in sleep. These less conventional postures—such as one on the right in which she cups her chin in her hand while hunching her shoulders forward—reach beyond the Gauguin-like cliché of the native woman. In the zone directly above the garland of sleeping poses, Dinnerstein inserted representations of the model's childhood memories of her homeland, the island of Saint Vincent in the Caribbean Sea. On one end of the panorama is a portrait of her father as a youth, while at the other are snapshot vignettes of herself alone and one showing her together with her mother and sister. Just left of the father's image is a scene of the construction of the family dwelling with the help of the extended family and friends. Thus the intricate dream imagery evokes multiple associative memories of the communal experiences on the island of Saint Vincent, building on the motif of the *Nocturne* and anticipating *Night* and *A Dream Play*.

There was a good deal of comment regarding *In Sleep*, with contradictory interpretations offered depending on the point of view of the spectator, “from plantation scene to migrant workers, to William Blake and Gothic entombments, to Caribbean mysticism and Mexican realism,” according to the artist. One black woman wrote emphatically in the visitors’ book, “Unfortunate Reality of Our Past, Hopefully not Our Future,” while a white woman commented that the woman is “asleep like her people are asleep.” Dinnerstein was surprised by the variations of these interpretations from his own “vision” (no artist can predict the reception of work because, like the weather, the political climate changes constantly), but clearly he and the model are partly responsible for these reactions. One of the vignettes in the zone of reverie portrays a group of workers cutting and harvesting sugarcane, a scene the model remembered as common when she was growing up. Although blacks on the island (who constituted the majority of the population) would have been wage laborers at that time, the rising stalks in the background are metaphorically inseparable from the history of slavery in the West Indies. The reason that Africans were wrenched from their homeland and transplanted to the New World in the first place was because of the voracious demand for sugar in European markets. Thus the complex visualization allows for the multiple levels of association carried by the model in the deepest recesses of her memory, embracing not only the immediate recollections of parents and indigenous community, but the earlier trauma of disrupted family life and the building of a new life under radically altered environmental conditions.

Yorke’s dreamy, introspective traits evoke Dinnerstein’s reminiscences of his mother even while linked in his thoughts with his father’s efforts to make Local 1199’s leadership more responsive to black participation. It is not surprising that her contact impelled him to re-create her extended family as a fundamental component of the picture’s content. The year following the 1199 exhibition he commenced *A Dream Play*, which amplifies the same theme in an autobiographical context while maintaining the link to *In Sleep* by the introduction of the two contemplative African American children gazing out the window.

Thus the question of the nature of the family unit was very much in his mind the year (1986) Bill Moyers presented his negative CBS Special Report, *The Vanishing Black*

Family—Crisis in Black America, that stacked the deck for a pathology in black families so overwhelming that they seemed beyond redemption. Moyers's viewpoint would have been adverse to that of Louis Dinnerstein, who had long ago perceived that behind the familiar "blaming-the-victim" syndrome laid race, class, and gender discrimination in America. Simon's own recent connection with Local 1199 and the critical presence of his father in *A Dream Play* would have predisposed him, if only inadvertently, to consider some of the wider implications of the "crisis" in the American family structure.

Despite the affirmative theme of the drawing, Dinnerstein unfurls an examination of the politics of the family that is about power and domination even at its most positive moments. The human family is almost predominantly defined in sociological terms by males, who generally posit as its foundation the fundamental presence of the father. Yet the "ideal" of traditional family structure and the values on which it is built is becoming singularly rare in this society, thus belying the narrow definition of family Moyers accepted in his documentary. While images are always multivalent and rarely reducible to single explanations, to my mind Dinnerstein's *A Dream Play* is especially significant in its metaphorical restoration of the power of the family model so recently degraded to a symbol for exploitation by opportunistic politicians. Through the complexly nuanced figuration of an extended family of mothers, fathers, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, Dinnerstein establishes the family as a unifying principle, the essential nurturing unit from which human beings draw their mental, emotional, and physical sustenance. It is perhaps the renewed sense of kinship and communal ties developed within the traditional extended family that can make room for single-parent units, especially mothers, and the homeless.

But it is women who give birth, and it is children who represent the one entity absolutely indispensable to any notion of human family. Dinnerstein's frank acknowledgment of the tensions of childbirth had been expressed in 1972—when still at work on *The Fulbright Triptych*—in his astonishing pair of drawings of his pregnant wife, entitled matter-of-factly *8th Month* and *9th Month*. Their shallow fields, almost wholly filled with the dilated body and accentuated by the riveting focus on accessory detail, convey a distinctly claustrophobic atmosphere. Although the swollen torso relates

his wife to the great Earth Mother, few artists have made their studies of the naked model such a vivid and disturbing experience for the beholder. These large, ungainly, looming portrayals of his wife near to term, and therefore representative of their intimate private life at that moment, surprised me in the public space. Ordinarily, it runs counter to expectation to see the nude model pregnant (an exception like Gustav Klimt's *Hope I* manages to keep within tradition by making pregnancy erotic), but in this instance Dinnerstein probed the female body with such relentless and uncompromising objectivity and from such unflattering angles that one becomes less aware of the academic tradition than of a tense vigilance bordering on the grotesque. Dinnerstein's commitment to microscopic realism in this period inclined him to view the depiction of his pregnant wife as a clinical and historical obligation. It is as if the artist deliberately set out to debunk the mythical notion of the blissful state of pregnancy near parturition and capture the *angst* of the experience. In this sense, the distended abdomen and enlarged breasts with their taut network of veins complement the overstretched nerves of Renée-Simon sharply registered on her face. In *9th Month* the carefully executed chain lock on the door follows the curve of the breast and abdomen, metonymically pointing to her "confinement." Yet the rawness of the study with all of its awkwardnesses and lack of conventional decorum infuses the older tradition with new power by repositioning the nude in a modern context.

Mother and child are the subjects of another innovative attempt at the nude, done five years later as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. *Roman Afternoon* is a startling and unexpected composition of Dinnerstein's nude wife and child listlessly stretched out at opposite ends of their couch in a kind of mirror image. There is a distinct sculptural quality in the sharply defined mattress edge, akin to a marble slab, that runs parallel to the horizontal axis of the work. Draped with crisp white folds of the bed coverings silhouetted by the dazzling Indian red wall behind, the setting is reminiscent of eighteenth-century neoclassical interiors.

This time sensual warmth is restored to his wife's body, as well as an appreciation for the smooth contours of the body in relaxation. Mother and daughter gaze out of the picture, intent on fixing the artist-viewer's gaze, who happens to be both spouse and father of the models. Hence they must vie for his attention. The work is singular in its equal emphasis on the nudity of the mother and prepubescent child. Traditionally,



Roman Afternoon, oil on wood panel, 48 ¼ x 67 ¼ in., 1977

the mother is depicted clothed and holds and/or attends to the nude child without being conscious of the viewer. Thus did religious sanctity and bourgeois decorum dictate the figured modesty of the maternal role. But Dinnerstein overrides the convention by representing mother and child with their respective fully developed and nascent sexuality.

Rome clearly represented a more affirmative historical moment in the family's evolution. The Vietnam War had ended, Nixon had resigned, and the bicentennial celebrations seemed to hold out the possibility of national reconciliation. On the personal side, Dinnerstein had found a perceptive and sympathetic dealer, George W. Staempfli (who purchased *The Fulbright Triptych* when it was still unfinished and paid monthly installments until its completion), had his first one-person exhibit, was a member of the faculty at the New School for Social Research, and in 1976 ran off with a Rome Prize Fellowship. Formally, this chronicle is recorded in Dinnerstein's new delight in textured and painterly surfaces, and in his exhilarated response to the brilliant colors of his new environment.

In the ritualistic interview of the Rome Prize candidates, Dinnerstein explained to the committee that he believed it still possible to create a modern figurative art on par with the work of the past. His ambition was to go to Rome and produce a "total vision" of the contemporary world with the intensity of the old masters. His major project at the American Academy, *Flower Market, Rome*, attests to a sense of elation and well-being marked by a more public theme and the explosive colorations of fifty identifiable species of blooms. This is demonstrated by the artist's own impulse to jump into the floral ensembles as if they were a sea of cushions when he first discovered them in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome. He wanted to re-create this sensation or vision of himself "jumping into the painting and lying on the flowers." Dinnerstein's definitive work is ten feet wide and took nine months to accomplish. It depicts one of the characteristic flower stalls swarming in the Campo dei Fiori, where the retail florists set up their booths for locals and tourists alike.

Dinnerstein was struck by the iridescent play of flowers in these stands, which seemed to "float off the ground." Their endlessly varied hues and textures set off by the ochre-orange-tinted stucco of the walls "would just glow." Returning to the stu-

dio, he reconstructed one of the flower stalls on canvas by building up the surface with a dense mixture of pigment, marble dust, and stone to capture the variegated textures. As a result, the rich layering resembles a fresco with its heavy relief underneath. Although the pervasive relief is justified because so much of the canvas is given over to the luminous floral passages (standard academic practice calls for the highest relief in the brightest lights), the final effect gratified Dinnerstein by amusingly duplicating the avant-garde look of the dense, all-over webs of Milton Resnick's nonobjective paintings without the loss of the subject.

Both the theme and the title suggest a more public content than we have heretofore seen in Dinnerstein's work, but in fact it enlarges upon the personalized vision we have identified with the theme of the family. The figure of the flower vendor was posed by Teresa Gregorini, a native of Trastevere and close friend of the Dinnersteins, who stood in for the actual owner of the stall. The cropping of the outdoor space at the very edges of the flower ensembles creates the familiar claustrophobic space of the painter's indoor scenes and in fact yields a "hothouse" effect. Gregorini, seated in the center, presides over the tiers of flora like a venerable matriarch of a family portrait. Traditionally, flowers are metaphors for childbirth, sexuality, and regeneration, and here they suggest surrogate children. Indeed, the work could easily be entitled "The Madonna of the Blossoms." The Madonna image is invoked by Gregorini's stately frontal presence, her dark sedate costume, the crossing gesture of her right hand, which preserves her modesty, and the ingeniously contrived halo formed by the arc of the window behind her.

Teresa Gregorini's subtle smile recalls the preclassical Greek kore, and brings us back again to the characteristic expression of Dinnerstein's mother. Gregorini, however, represents the more ambivalent attraction of woman/mother embedded in a matrix of efflorescences. We may recall the artist's vision of himself jumping into the painting and lying among the flowers—a wish to be "absorbed sexually or sensually in the painting." Dinnerstein also stated at one point in our interview, "I'm a real sucker for flowers," referring to a desire to compensate for the absence of flowers in his childhood. Surely, the association of mother/Madonna/woman and flower is central to the unfolding dynamic of Dinnerstein's work and relates back to the parental space. The



Renée and Simone Dinnerstein, c. 1973

regenerative ideal is further implied in the simultaneous display of nearly an entire year's growth of flowers—autumn chrysanthemums, spring dahlias, and otherwise ephemeral forget-me-nots thrive side by side—so that Dinnerstein's picture becomes a “real allegory” about blossoms that perpetually glow: a flower stand that could not exist in actuality. The work took exactly nine months to complete, and in a real sense, Dinnerstein gave birth to his ideal environment centered on the maternal memory trace.

The flip side of this affirmative and brilliantly illuminated picture is the large drawing known as *Night*, representing the eruption of nightmare or infantile anxiety caused by the absence of the parents. A procession of pre-kindergarten children marches out of the drawing trancelike in the direction of the spectator. They are enveloped by a vast terrifying landscape that recedes rapidly into space toward a pale crescent moon spreading its eerie network of lunar beams over a universe haunted by dreaded creatures of the night—demons, skeletons, witches, bats, and a frightening subway “El” screeching around a curve. This is a world of children without parental presence and the security of the family embrace, a world that is, according to a friend of the painter, “unsafe.” Dinnerstein himself recalled that in making the drawing he “wanted to get at things that I felt as a child made me anxious.”

Dinnerstein's unusual mixed-media drawing was based on an incident that occurred in Renée Dinnerstein's preschool class. She had organized a dramatic representation of Maurice Sendak's children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*, and each child went to work eagerly creating his or her own mask from supermarket bags. But a startling thing happened after they donned their makeshift costumes: they began to grow frightened by the sight of each other and by their own claustrophobic reactions to being enclosed within a mask. The wearing of the masks had transformed the world of the secure classroom into the world of their nightmares. The result was a sense of apprehension and alarm that led to a quick removal of the disguise. That this experience resonated with Dinnerstein's memory traces is registered in the terror-stricken expression of the child at the extreme left, the artist's “surrogate,” who serves as interlocutor for the visual scenario.

As in *The Fulbright Triptych*, Dinnerstein wanted to express a childhood vision in

a style consistent with the subject. He executed the chimerical figures with the “scratch out” technique, which consists of laying down a multicolored surface with Crayola crayon, covering it with black tempera, and then scratching through the black layer with a pin to reveal the colors underneath. This interception of “high art” with children’s imagery and drawing style is made possible through Dinnerstein’s mastery of graphic techniques which contest the established boundaries of high art.

The painting known as *Gregory’s Party* further attests to Dinnerstein’s desire to conjoin the child’s world with the realm of high art. In this case the pretext was the “party” organized by the artist’s daughter for the Raggedy Andy toy she had named Gregory. Children create their own fantasy world within the “real” domain of their parents, in effect acting out the role of “parents” toward the miniature world they create. This is especially evident in the dollhouse (a conspicuous emblem of Simone’s world in the later *Sonatina*), where the child stands in relationship to the dolls as the parents to the child. The fearful presence of towering adults is now worked through in the child’s analogous relationship with miniaturized toys. This is most vividly observed in Simone’s tabletop community of every conceivable type of figurine arranged in a hierarchical society (*The City, the Town, the Emperor of China*). The child, powerless in the adult realm, now exercises control over a Lilliputian realm set up on a tabletop or floor.

For Dinnerstein this type of children’s play is yet another instance of the blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality. The organized play space that Gregory inhabits is subjected to the dominion of Simone, who in turn establishes the composition for Simon. In this sense, the artist’s own cultural practice relates to the childhood fantasy of governing a reduced version of the adult environment. The sheer delight of the artist in the crisp colors and outlines of the toys takes us right back to the invented world of *The Fulbright Triptych*. Here again the depicted and actual are not sharply distinguished: the contrast between the casual—almost “natural”—pose of Gregory and the more formal pose of Simone suggests that the artist telescoped the distance between play and actuality. Reminiscent of the scene in *E. T.* where the extraterrestrial creature conceals himself among the toys, Dinnerstein subjects the unknown to the known.



Gregory's Party, oil on wood panel, 42 x 64 in., 1979

The whimsical but macabre self-portrait entitled *Emerging Artist* reconciles many of his anxieties and intellectual aims under the rubric of a powerful metaphor. Dinnerstein portrays himself as a hybrid creature, with his head issuing from the body of a turtle. He crawls hesitantly across the foreground space, fumbling for his pencils and crayons, while in the background the immense landscape falls away to infinity under the radiating lunar network of the crescent moon. The frightening atmosphere of *Night* is linked with a crisis of professional self-identity.

As in *Night*, it was Renée's preschool class that inspired the work. The turtle was the class pet and totem, and the children even read books to it. Renée suggested the turtle as the subject of a picture, and this sparked a vision of the hybridized self-portrait of the merging and emerging artist. (Renée also suggested that he add the pencils and show himself wearing glasses.) Dinnerstein thinks of the portrait as an example of a Quixote tilting at imaginary windmills. No matter how determined we are to make life meaningful, the "shell" we carry about always constrains us from "delivering the goods."

Hence Dinnerstein reveals in this autobiographical parody his innermost anxieties: the concern for the "baggage" of the past that haunts the present, the fear of losing control over the environment, and ultimately, fear of immobility at the moment of self-understanding. The metaphor of the turtle answers to more than one facet of the artist's self-portrait. He claims to work slowly, and he talks often of wanting to slow down the pace of reality to the point where he can capture it on the drawing surface. Finally, Dinnerstein talks of making works so intense that spectators are stopped in their tracks. What could be more natural than to choose as his totemic emblem the animal that sums up so many sides of his personality? In the race between the tortoise and the hare, who would not place their bets on the tortoise?