

An Interview with Simon Dinnerstein

December 2008–January 2010

Marshall Price

Marshall Price: The first question I wanted to ask, Simon, is when was the last time you saw the painting in person?

Simon Dinnerstein: In 1999 and 2000 the *Triptych* came to New York, was exhibited at Saint Peter's Church, and then toured the United States. If you look at the catalog for that retrospective, you will see the different venues. So, basically I haven't seen it in about eight years.

MP: How did it make you feel to see it again after that period of time?

SD: My first response was that I couldn't believe I had created this. It just seemed well beyond anything that I was capable of. I'm not saying this to pat myself on the back. It just seemed like the best possible me, times a hundred.

MP: And that was something we talked about in the car on the trip to State College.

SD: It is both an act of bravado in a way, but it also has a certain amount of confidence—weirdly confident for someone so young. Even with financial support, it is a hard painting to believe that you could pull off, because you have to have a tremendous amount of belief to do this. I think that the painting has an odd combination of a certain intellectual side and a lot of innocence. I think the innocence is an interesting characteristic. It's not a painting about entitlement. There's something about it that—it's not about rendering or entitlement, it's about the *belief* in these images, not patting yourself on the back.

MP: One thing that struck me about the work is the use of a very strong iconographic program. Iconography played such an important role in northern Renaissance imagery as well. So there's an interesting parallel that I've always thought between this painting and iconography of the northern Renaissance.

SD: You mean people like Panofsky?

MP: Panofsky's explorations of iconography in Renaissance painting.

SD: I think what you're saying is true. The difference is that I think the best art to me does not have a program, and so, if I had carefully figured out these images, they wouldn't have looked like this. In other words, there's a disparateness and a diverseness to the imagery that goes from quotes to children's art to adages to northern Renaissance painting. But there isn't a *strategy* here. I believe this is connected to a sense of innocence or awe that I had at that time in my life.

MP: I think we were joking on the trip to the Palmer Museum about your youthful ignorance or bravado, or this combination of things as far as the genesis of the picture. It's interesting in the context of your overall body of work to think that not only was this the first real painting you did, but I remember when we were there standing in front of it, I asked you if you thought it was one of your most important works as well, and you said you thought that it was. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

SD: Well, I think that sometimes knowing too much holds you back and sometimes not knowing enough, out of a sense of ignorance or a sense of incompleteness, allows you to attempt something that is far greater than you, in your most wise state, would think impossible. If you took an analogy which was literary and you thought of certain pictures as being novels, certain pictures as being novellas, certain pictures as short stories, certain pictures as poems, this painting, I might consider to be the equivalent of a large novel. There is a wonderful essay that I remember reading by D. H. Lawrence, "Why the Novel Matters," in which he compares a novel to a human being, to the

well-roundedness of the human being. Not all art demands to be painted ten feet wide. You have to have the right subject and if you don't have the right subject the image is going to appear puffed up. The subject is what calls for the scale. Fourteen feet is the right size for this painting, as strange as this may seem.

MP: When I first saw the *Triptych* it reminded me so much of Courbet's *The Artist's Studio*. In thinking more about the relationship between your painting and Courbet's it struck me that Courbet's painting is an allegory of the past, while *The Fulbright Triptych* seems to be in some ways almost an allegory of the future, with your wife and your newborn daughter and of course the medium itself—being a painting and the first painting and your future as a painter. I'm wondering how that strikes you—if you were thinking of Courbet's painting at all when you did it.

SD: I have to tell you that I'm very touched by what you're saying. That's quite a painting to compare mine to. I did not consciously think of that painting at all. In fact, I didn't see it until a few years later when I was living in Rome at the American Academy and I traveled to Paris. During my year in Germany, I think I was more interested in Flemish painting and the way that the Flemish painting and the Flemish sense of reality combined with a contemporary idea of life. Also, there's a very interesting thing that takes place in the dialogue between the artist and the art historian or an artist and a critic. Art historians like to wrap something up in a nice neat package and convey the fact that this is this, this is this, this is this. From an artist's point of view, I learned a great deal about the painting *after* I completed it. I learned themes that are present in this painting after the painting was done and I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing at the time that I worked on it. Really good writing on art, it seems to me, tries to deal with the *mystery*, the *doubt*, or the reach of the artist. By putting it all down concretized, it loses something. For instance, in my painting, the use of children's drawings standing right next to icons of Western art is, I thought at the time, very interesting, but I guess secretly you could argue that it's a rebellious activity and maybe a transgressive act on my part that I didn't think that much about.

MP: You painted the painting when you were fairly young and you had a daughter, and in the central panel are the tools of the printmaker, of the engraver, but it's a painting and it was really, in many ways, your initial painting. In thinking about it in more of an allegorical context than simply a portrait of you and your wife and daughter in your apartment, it struck me that in many ways it's a harbinger of your future as a painter.

SD: You know, if you examine all of those visual pieces of information, that's what I had circa 1970, 1971, 1972, and 1973, when I worked on this. If I did this painting now I would have completely different images in there.

MP: But there are also those artists who work in series, George Tooker being one of them. And I'm wondering if it occurred to you to revisit this theme in an updated version.

SD: Actually, that's a very interesting point because there are small paintings that I've recently done. I'm not sure if you saw these, but they are about eight by ten inches. Each painting juxtaposes a reproduction of a work of art with a still life. What I was trying to do was to see if I could do a really tiny painting, control the forms, and get a composition that was dynamic and striking. I could easily see those paintings shown with the *Triptych*. And they're painted even better than the *Triptych* was and they share that same theme. In other words, they both explore the theme of the importance of visual imagery and how they intersect in your life. They become the baggage that you bring with you. I wanted the complexity of this visual baggage. In the car ride that we took to the Palmer Museum, I mentioned to Jhumpa [Lahiri] that if I visited her office and looked at her bulletin board, I could probably surmise something about her. I could guess at who she was. So, in this painting there is a kind of detective story going on as to, "Who is this person that all of this information represents?" At the end of the visit to the [Palmer] museum, which was a very emotional experience for me, I said to Jhumpa that I thought the secret of the painting was the space between the images.

MP: That's interesting.

SD: In art—you must know this—but when doing a portrait or figure there is what's called *negative space*. The negative space is the shape that is not elucidated, that is the absence of what is portrayed.

MP: And sometimes, often I think, that is just as, if not more important, than the positive space.

SD: That's in a sense what I'm getting at here. You know, there's another part of this that I've always wondered about. There are no studies for this painting. This image came to me totally, and that's not the way I usually work. I think sometimes the best images come like this but they usually demand some studies, or something that comes before.

The other thing that I would say about this picture, the thing that I really like about it, is that it has no commercial value whatsoever. It represents to me a certain type of art that I am incredibly moved by. It goes under the category of “it *has* to be done.” In other words, the walls will fall down, the building will fall down, I'm in my studio and one of us is leaving this room alive: me or the picture—the picture or myself. And, it has nothing to do with whether it can be sold or the financial part of it. It has a compulsiveness about it. I think my best pictures are like that and the art that I like the best really has that quality. In other words, the artist just *had* to do it. Van Gogh's pictures have that kind of character. There is actually one study that I did for the copperplate. I had to do that study because I had never used gold leaf before. I did the study to understand how gold leaf could be used and how I could make changes in the gold leaf—manipulate it. Basically the gold leaf form represents the copperplate. The print, from that plate, is of *Angela's Garden*. I had to paint over the gold leaf to give a sense of the ink that is stuck in the plate. At the museum, when we lit the painting correctly, I hope you can remember that the plate gave the appearance of levitating.

MP: I was delighted to see the actual plate in your home. One can look at the painting and miss so many things because it is so complex. But the plate is at the center of the painting and it is very difficult to miss it. I remember it made such an impression on me when I saw it in the book, especially reproduced in detail. When I went to your house last week and saw it, I thought “I’ve seen this before; I know exactly what it is.” It was that present in my mind.

SD: You should know that this is an engraved plate. Engraving is different from etching. It is done with a burin. In the painting, these are the instruments on the table with the wooden handles, I cut into the plate by moving the burin in a straight line, directly ahead. The burin is always moved in a straight line and to get curved lines or circles the plate is turned—turned a little bit or turned 360 degrees. The plate sits on a pad (leather pillow), and the pad is sprinkled with powder so it makes the plate easy to turn. Dürer worked on a very similar type of plate. Dürer is one of my heroes and you could use the appellation for him, “the Prince of Art.” I think he literally was the prince of art. He knew this and he carried it off. It would be impossible for someone to cut those plates other than him. My plate was cut in the same way. In the *Triptych*, the plate is depicted in perspective. It is basically a circle seen in perspective as an ellipse. There is a certain way that this effect is achieved. The front part of the circle—the part that faces you—is bigger than the back part of the circle and that gives you a sense of perspective. I first painted the image with a red ground and added the gold leaf over this surface. I scratched into the gold and worked it to make the gold look more like copper, giving it a sense of glow and vibration. I did not use gold leaf again after this until I did the painting of a woman reclining with a gold screen behind her [*Passage of the Moon*, 1998.]

MP: And it’s used over a much larger area of the surface in that painting.

SD: Yes, it is. The curious thing was that I used to do the engravings at night. And, what kept me going is that I would listen to basketball on the radio. These games were broadcast by Marty Glickman, who was a long-term New York City sports commen-

tator. This man could speak seven hundred words a minute. He would be talking as fast as possible and then he would say “basket.” And then he would go through another seven hundred words and he would say “basket.” There was something about listening to that rhythm while I was working that really kept me going, even though it sounds quite nutty.

MP: Of course, that’s when the Knicks were winning, though, right?

SD: Yes, a lot different than today. [Laughing]

MP: You went to Germany on a Fulbright grant to study Dürer, correct?

SD: Yes. You have to understand that 1970, when I went to Germany, was only twenty-five years after the Second World War. There were definite ambivalences about going to Germany [on my part], considering the Holocaust and what went on there. There is another aspect to Germany which is very intellectual, very well-educated, classically educated, deeply studious, musical, artistic, and so forth. It’s a country that has almost a split personality. It’s quite amazing that—between ambivalence and antipathy for going—such a remarkable painting came out of my experience of living in this country. It gives one pause as to whether life is realistic or surrealistic, because very unusual things happen, unexpected things. For instance, you came to visit an open studio that I had two years ago and a few days ago you accompanied me to Penn State University. Now, that’s very unusual—you just have to let things happen. Don’t you agree?

MP: I do, I do.

SD: Well, you know, my wife’s father was quite sick at the time that we left. There were some mixed feelings that we both had about going. I didn’t know about his illness until well after I applied for the Fulbright grant. Something in me felt that if the picture was exceptional or remarkable or really pushed to its limit, it somehow would have overrode any second thoughts I had about the country, the time, Renée’s father, all of

that. I guess many artists and many people have different senses of perfectionism or what perfectionism means to them and how it pushes them on. Does perfectionism come from your family, does it come from your father, or does it come from some commitment to the things that they felt were important? This painting is sort of a perfectionist's dream or a perfectionist's nightmare. It's very much *pushed* and not every painting that I do can have this quality. In Degas's oeuvre there's a painting he did of the Bellelli family and that painting is much bigger and much grander than most of his paintings. Many of his paintings are impressionistic but *The Bellelli Family* is a very formal painting. It has a different motivation than many of his other paintings. I think he may have done only one painting like that. An artist may have only a certain amount of grand paintings that he or she is motivated to do. Maybe a novelist only has a certain amount of novels to write, because we are fallible human beings.

MP: One of the things that I've noticed in looking at your paintings and in speaking with you is the importance that Renée has played in your life. I remember talking to you about this painting, the *Triptych*, last week, and you recounting the story of when Renée had to go back to the States to see her father. I'm wondering if you could talk about that again because I found it so interesting with regard to the genesis of the picture.

SD: Well, a few things hit me on this score. One is that, for some reason I thought of the painting in its totality as being cool and warm. So, the exterior wings with the human beings in it seem warm—not mushy warm or off-the-charts warm—but warm, and the interior seems cooler. Right away I felt that was important. And, there is a left-right element in it, and I'm not sure if I'm right about this, and I'm not even sure if you agree, but the right-hand side of the painting is stronger than the left-hand side of the painting—not just this painting. This may be a Western way of thinking, as opposed to Eastern. Somehow Renée and Simone seem to balance my side. So if you reverse the two it really wouldn't work as well, to me. Well, as far as Renée is concerned, I would say: the sun, moon, and stars, so she was a natural for this, i.e., to be depicted. Simone came later. She came after the painting was well on its way and she

adds more form, more strength to the left-hand side. The letter that Renée writes, which is in the middle of the middle panel just above the plate, is a letter that she wrote to me when her father was sick. When she returned to New York we wrote to each other back and forth. That letter dates the painting. It can be actually read and I've always thought that the letter was extremely funny—serious, but funny.

MP: What was Renée's initial response to your conception of this painting?

SD: I should preface this by saying I could not be the type of person I am or the type of painter I am if not for the fact that I met this person who—I guess the thing is I am the best possible person because of her and I really hope that the reverse is true. I thought of this painting when she was back in New York and really it was a difficult time. I think in the forty-three years we've been married we've lived apart maybe two or three times. That's a lot of time to spend together. In this case, she was back for a month and I thought this idea up and I wrote her on an aerogram card a diagram of the whole thing, I wrote out all kinds of information, rebuses, arrows, and all different things—I was very worked up about it. I knew where to get the panel and how the panel would be made and I was going to gesso it and I was really like *over the top*, fantasizing about it. I sent off the aerogram and our aerograms would cross, because it took six or seven days to go one way, six or seven days to go back. I finally received a response from Renée. The start of the letter dealt with some small issues and what she was doing, and then at the very end she said, "Oh, and regarding your wish to do this painting, this very large painting and your descriptions of it and so forth and so on, my advice is *don't do it.*" And I have to say that her reasoning was that I had spent the last three or four years entirely doing drawings. Up to that point the Fulbright year had been spent on drawings. One of the drawings I did right around that period of time was a drawing that is in the National Academy's collection (Renée's uncle Arnold.) These drawings are incredibly worked out and incredibly extreme, but still they are not paintings. Since I was out of art school, I had not done any paintings and now, in my letter to her, I was proposing doing a *fourteen-foot* painting.



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MP: If we could go back, just for a second, to the works that are depicted within the painting. In the painting you juxtaposed a variety of images from the northern and southern Renaissance, the nineteenth century, contemporary art, and even photographs—all things that just about any artist might have on his or her studio wall. You've also included children's drawings. I'm curious to hear you talk a little about their inclusion. I'm wondering, for example, if you were familiar with Paul Klee, or Kandinsky's ideas on children's drawings, or Robert Goldwater, the art historian, about how children's drawings are completely free of any sort of societal influence because they were created by people who were too young yet to have had any inhibitions. And I'm wondering if you were reading any of those texts or if those ideas interest you with regard to children's drawings.

SD: I never read one text about any of that. The impetus to do this had to do with Renée's teaching and the fact that I loved the way these drawings looked. I'm a big fan of Edwin Dickinson and there is a wonderful painting, *Artist's Hand Holding Children's Drawings*. It was in the Academy's exhibit of Edwin Dickinson's work and I think it was located at the ground floor. There is also something I remember reading about Dubuffet wanting to have a *museum* of children's drawings. For me the issue was the beauty and primal energy of the children's drawings. I wanted to get oil paint to look like the art of children. In other words, could I get oil paint to look like a watercolor, a pencil drawing, or ballpoint pen? So the idea was to manipulate paint to describe all these subjects, to *occupy* these visual enthusiasms. Somewhere, secretly, I must have had the desire to tweak fine arts and to include without any sequencing of "higher" and "lower," children's art and fine art. And so, high and low art are mixed together. Also, it seems to me that the use of children's art in my painting could have only been done in the twentieth century. There are some examples of children's art in previous centuries, but it is incredibly rare. I think I've seen one in a book on self-portraits, but I can't remember the artist's name. It puts the painting in a context which I like very much. It puts the painting in both the tradition of fine art and yet something that is very much in our contemporary time, very much *now*, without pandering to *now*—it just *is*.

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MP: As far as the study of children's drawings goes, I believe it was in the early part of the twentieth century when people actually started to look at the work of children as being important in any context whatsoever. Just at the same time when modernism and abstraction really took off. So it's interesting to think that modernism was almost *necessary* for someone like Kandinsky, Klee, Goldwater, whoever it was, to look at children's drawings, to recognize their importance.

SD: You know there's a great quote from Matisse which has to do with "To look all life long with the eyes of a child." He says it much better but that's the idea. It's a very unusual concept and I think that your point about it being connected with modernism is absolutely true. The thing about modernism that I am struck by is that it has two identities. One is the small-m modernism and one is the large-M Modernism. The small-m modernism is a much more intriguing notion, as it is full of contemporary ideas, contemporary thought and a certain open-ended element. The large-M Modernism is a club with a few members who aren't interested in things beyond their few members. A lot of people have trouble with the large-M Modernism, but the small-m modernism, the part that lets the children's art into this contemporary world of art, is wonderful. Do you think I'm right?

MP: Yes, I do. And I also think it's interesting to consider the area of crossover between the small-m modernism and the large-M Modernism and how there's an interdependency between them. But at the same time they are separate realms.

SD: As a figurative artist the thing about the difference between small-m and the large-M occurs when you consider a museum like the Museum of Modern Art. To me, the Museum of Modern Art is an example of Modernism with a capital M. It's like a club. It has membership, but you can't apply to be a member. That's my take on it. The issues in modernism are way bigger than the Museum of Modern Art, way more interesting and questioning, probing—a real example of modernism would not be a club because it would, by definition, be so open.

MP: Yeah, well, the Museum of Modern Art was constructed, unfortunately, by art historians. [Laughter] So, it's a construction, in many ways. That's probably a topic we could spend hours on, I'm sure. I have many problems with the Museum of Modern Art and its recounting of art history.

SD: Well you know, when I was in art school, the most prominent painting that they had on display was Tchelitchev's *Hide and Seek*. They haven't shown that painting in twenty years. I grew up looking at that painting. I always thought that painting was quite stunning. Why would it not be around? It's because it lost its membership to the club. How could it lose its membership? It is highly individualistic, quixotic, quirky, adventurous, pulsing. It has more of the aspects of modernism with a small-m but it lost its cachet and so it's been kicked out of the club.

MP: And likewise today, the most requested painting and the best-known painting in MOMA's collection is Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. It's the best-known work in the entire collection—not the *Demaiselles*, not *Starry Night*—but Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. And again I think it's a bit of a pariah within this world of modernism.

SD: Now, if you really wanted to mix things up you could show *Christina's World* next to the Jackson Pollock. For instance, there's an exhibit now at the Met of works bought under the regime of Phillippe de Montebello. It's a very interesting show. You come into a room and you see Balthus's painting *The Mountain* and next to it is, I think, a Renaissance painting by—I hope I'm right about this—Guercino, which is a Caravaggesque image. The eclecticism means you can admire an African sculpture with nails running through the chest of some human being and respond to a Balthus painting together in one space. I would like to see that type of eclecticism at the Museum of Modern Art. Why should the Wyeth be in the corner just as you're leaving that floor? And, you know, finally about that, the Balthus paintings haven't been displayed since the museum changed its format. So, they own a few Balthus paintings which are now being given the Tchelitchev treatment. It is a little bit like what happened to writers under the Soviet regime, when the commissars came in and decided that a

writer was *déclassé*. So this major painting by Balthus, *The Street*, which is a totally weird, wonderful painting, is all about modernism and yet isn't shown in the modern section of the Museum of Modern Art. I don't get it. You know that painting?

MP: Yes.

SD: It's a wonderful painting. The first time I saw that painting I was really put off by it. It got under my skin. It had a perverse sense of thumbing its nose at the viewer. But the more I saw it, it grew on me. I like the fact that so many things about the painting seem not to work, seem to be mistakes or incorrect. But the mood of it is almost out of *Alice in Wonderland*, one that envelops you as though you are lost in a fairy tale.

MP: I've always felt that *The Mountain* painting at the Met is an unsuccessful painting. But I also think on some level—and it's something intangible that I can't quite explain—but I've also felt that on some level Balthus was . . . did it almost on purpose to be deliberately irreverent or something, because the other painting of the young girl with her skirt showing is I think incredibly irreverent. I don't know if you feel that way about his work, but I think there's an inherent irreverence to it, or deliberate irreverence.

SD: He would say that you're reading into his work. That's his take on it. As far as *The Mountain* goes, all figures in that painting seem isolated and separate one from the other. And it seems as if it earmarks an event that has happened which is quite unclear about a possible fall—a moral fall or a sexual fall. And it's a curiously choreographed scene. Part of it looks like visions from *Wuthering Heights*, which is something he had illustrated. In his illustrations, he depicts himself as Heathcliff, and I think his former wife, a woman named Antoinette de Watteauville, plays Catherine. So, I think the painting might be related to that.

MP: That actually brings me back to your painting. I find it really fascinating how we continue to engage with works of art over the course of time and how we change over

time, but also how the work itself can change over time and how our interaction with it can change over time. Could you give us a sense of how your interaction with the painting has changed over the course of—it's been almost forty years since you painted it.

SD: Curiously, when I did this painting I thought I was very old. And I thought I hadn't really accomplished anything, or a lot, or really my potential. So, I was very critical of myself. I was all of twenty-seven. So, you know, that gives you a sense of how you see yourself and how you don't see yourself, because really I was incredibly young. When I hit thirty it was very depressing, because at that time in the sixties, the antiwar students and political activists had a statement which was their credo, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." Thirty marked the point where you were supposed to have accomplished something, and it was very depressing.

In my home, when I move a picture from one wall to the next, the image appears different. I remember traveling to Washington to see an exhibit of Lucian Freud. I went to Washington at three o'clock in the morning to see this exhibit, arrived at eight o'clock in the morning, went to the Hirshhorn Museum, got in line at nine o'clock in the morning, saw the exhibit at ten and revisited it four times during that day. I liked all of the paintings—I love his work. But there was one painting that I really didn't like. It really bothered me, *Naked Girl*, 1966. It is a painting of a woman who is reclining on a bed. And that painting struck me as too much. It was as though someone was really hitting on this woman and I felt it was kind of pathetic. Two or three years later I remember going to Hirschl & Adler and seeing an exhibit of British painting on the School of London. It was on two floors. When I got to the back of the second floor—oh, it included really good examples of the artists Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, who works almost in a childish way, i.e., thick, thick, thick paint . . . and, Kitaj. When I got to second floor, to the very back of the second floor, I saw the painting I had seen two or three years earlier in Washington and it was the *best* painting in the show. The same painting, the exact same painting. Hands-down the best painting in the show.

MP: Was your recognition of it being the best painting in the show immediate?

SD: Immediate. Immediately, I thought it was clearly the best painting. It disturbed me because I had such a strong negative response earlier to it. I think it speaks to a number of issues, one is that you can't step in the same river twice. But sometimes a painting disturbs you or gets to you and it must be for some reason, some secret or hidden reason. The painting, in this different context, stood out to me to be so singular and so stunning and I thought of the absurdity of the two responses.

MP: It just shows you how works of art continue to have a dialogue with us—a very active and engaged dialogue—long after they are made and even after we've seen them numerous times.

SD: That is really something that we probably share in common, which is a belief in the palpability of visual images.

MP: I wonder if you could talk about the Staempfli Gallery and how the painting was purchased.

SD: I did not know Staempfli Gallery at all except for a show that I had seen five or six years before of Antonio López García, and that show, I thought, was the best show I'd ever seen by a contemporary artist. To me it had everything that art should have.

I had a particular idea about showing my work and this idea is different than many of the students I've had. Many of my students are in a hurry to show their work. I wanted to wait and develop a point of view before exhibiting.

I had come back from Germany with this painting drawn out in Rapidograph pen and I worked on it in a room that someone gave me in Park Slope. The floor in that painting is the floor from that room. A German apartment would not have a floor that looked like that. That's the subfloor in a brownstone. After having that place, I then shared a studio with a sculptor friend, Joel Rudnick. Some months went by, my daughter was born, and I found myself completely running out of money. I mean it's

not like I had trust funds or anything like that—we were completely broke, and we were really feeling it. So, my original idea about exhibiting had to be amended (and quickly!).

I then remembered the López exhibit at Staempfli Gallery. Because of the feeling that I was being pushed against the wall, I took a bunch of reproductions of my work and went up to the gallery. I walked in off the street with *no* introduction and first met Phillip Bruno, co-director of the gallery. I showed him a grouping of photographs. Phillip said that he would like to show the work to George. After that I got a phone call saying that they were interested in coming to my studio in Brooklyn. I didn't realize at the time that coming to Brooklyn [from Manhattan] was a further trip for them than going to Paris! They first came to my apartment in Park Slope. Then they came to the studio which was on Twenty-Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue, a very working-class neighborhood. The two of them were tall, well-dressed, distinguished, strong-looking men. I remember they stood looking at this painting for a long time. The middle panel was about three-quarters done, the left and right panels were gessoed white. I had previously given them a maquette showing the images for these panels. They looked at my painting for about ten or fifteen minutes but didn't say a word. Then, breaking this palpable silence, George said to me: "I think that's a great painting, and I'd like to own it." I'm a very worked-up kind of person. I can quickly get excitable and I, of course, was very struck by what he said. I easily heard all the words in the sentence and I was waiting for him to clarify his thoughts; however the two of them got their coats on, walked down the stairs, and I trailed along behind. They waved down a taxi and just before they got into the taxi, Phillip Bruno looked at me and said, "Don't call us; we'll get in touch with you." I immediately called Renée, told her what had happened, and said, "Do you think this guy is shitting me or what? You know, what does he mean?" We were both amazed.

Four days later I got an incredibly well-written letter from George Staempfli, which started off by saying: "Phillip Bruno and I were very excited by your work, especially the large unfinished *Triptych*. We propose to buy this painting in its unfinished state and to pay for you every month to work on it, and when the painting is finished to have a show here which would have at least two other paintings, plus all the rest of the



Carroll Street studio, Brooklyn, summer 1972

work we saw.” The amount of money was substantial, enough for me to live on per month for the next two years, with just the addition of a part time job one evening a week. The offer was totally remarkable, but there was a condition. The condition was that the painting had to fit into the gallery. Staempfli Gallery was located at Seventy-Seventh Street and Madison Avenue on the second floor. As part of the condition, I was to build a cardboard dummy, a mock dummy of the middle panel and bring it up and make sure it fit. So I came up there with a piece of cardboard eighty by eighty inches. It didn’t get in the elevator and it didn’t go up the stairs. My heart was sinking. I was trying to think incredibly quickly as to how this picture would get in. I was sitting in a very fancy office and a whole direction to my life was ahead of me in one way and a whole direction was behind, tugging at me. George said, “Would you cut the painting?” And I said, “No, I’m not going to do that. It’s on wood, so it can’t be cut.” (It could be cut but I didn’t want to cut it.) Then I said to him, “What about the windows? You could take out the window and have it hoisted in through the window.” He said that taking the window out would cost more than the painting. I was not sure if he was right. Anyway, I was trying to think as fast as I could. Somehow, I thought to ask, “Is there a service elevator?” He said, yes, there was. This man was like Mr. Casual, and he was probably born that way. His personality and my personality were so different. He said, “I can show you where it is.” We went out the front door of the gallery, into the hall, and then through a door and there was an elevator. The cardboard dummy that I had brought up with me fit by about two or three inches. I was jumping up and down, really jumping up and down, and this man was cool as anything.

Every month he sent me a check. On the first of the month, like Swiss time—his family was Swiss—he sent me this check. It was an amazing period of time. It was so much pressure. It was wonderful, but we were terrified.

MP: Was that your first solo show in New York?

SD: Yes. I did this painting and two other paintings and there were a lot of drawings. But it felt eerie, like it was kind of like a story, like a children’s story, or a fairy tale. So many things could have happened to *not* make this work: if George had gotten up on

the wrong side of the bed, if he had had a fight with his wife, if maybe some business downturn took place. Really remarkable. And this was, at the time, a major New York gallery and it was very well-respected.

MP: Do you know if Antonio López García saw the show?

SD: I don't know if he saw the show, but the catalogs that they printed—I should show you a catalog, they're very well done—they went all around the world, so he would have been sent the catalog. I had the good fortune of meeting Antonio López a few years after, and he only speaks Spanish, so we spoke through a translator. But he is a very interesting man. Had I not seen a reproduction in the newspaper of a sculpture of López's of a woman sleeping, which was written up, I would not have gone to that gallery, because that gallery was not particularly a gallery that was friendly to figurative art. In fact, López was the only figurative artist they showed at that time. All the rest of the work consisted of different types of abstraction or different directions. But I didn't know this. Harry Bertoia was there for a long time, as was George Rickey and Morton Kaish. And a Japanese sculptor, Masayuki Nagare. But it was not necessarily at that time a pro-figurative gallery. It changed after this period, and they brought in other Spanish realists such as Claudio Bravo, who showed there a lot.

MP: Interesting.

SD: It was very lucky. You know, it was lucky seeing the reproduction of López's work and it was lucky that I came to this crisis and it forced me to act. This was literally the first gallery I every approached. I mean, you know, there are people who spend years doing this. I suppose an artist needs an incredible eye or vision.

MP: And, with this in mind, maybe you could talk a little bit about your theory of the flying eyeball.

SD: Well, when I did this painting I saw the movie *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. It's a movie where David Bowie plays an extraterrestrial who is absolutely wonderful-looking but really a total space cadet. There's a scene in the movie where he goes into an apartment house, but before he goes into the house he sees a plant in front of the house. The camera shows him looking at the plant and then, amazingly, he takes his eyeball out and puts it into the plant. Then he goes upstairs and he can tell who's coming into the house because the eyeball keeps feeding him the information. When I started the *Triptych* in Germany, I saw a very deep landscape out the windows. What appealed to me was the way that the landscape diminishes down to tiny pieces of visual information that are like a sixteenth or a thirty-secondth [of an inch] in size. Each one of those "dots," when juxtaposed with the figures, appears almost smaller than they are. I almost had this feeling that when I looked out on the landscape I could send my eye *out there*, all the way out, and the eye would look down and send back the information to me and then I would record the information the eye was sending. That's my theory.

MP: Well, it's interesting too, when I started thinking about it, the windows here in the central panel create a binocular vision into the landscape and we often forget that we actually see with two eyes and not one. We see in a binocular fashion. And, the way the landscape is rendered is so clear, there's no atmospheric perspective, there's no sort of fading off into the distance. It's not like you're looking at something in an eidetic kind of way. It's crystal clear. It's there, in front of you.

SD: I think the difference is the diminution in size. I would say it's not a painterly diminution, it's a graphic diminution.

MP: I wasn't quite clear on what you meant [in your e-mail] by *seeing* versus *perceiving* or *looking* versus *seeing*.

SD: In the painting, there's an image on my side of two men. Many of the images in

the *Triptych* came to me from newspapers. The story about those two faces is that a year or two before I began this painting, one of these men was arrested in New York City for committing rape. It was a trial that was covered in the news and got a lot of attention. This person was arrested and he was a very quiet, maybe even somewhat nerdy individual. He claimed that it was not him. He was *positively* identified by the victim. It was in the early seventies, a period of time when there was lots of crime in New York. A few months later, another man was picked up on some other charge and ended up confessing to the rape. The newspapers show these two heads together and they differ slightly, but they are very close. I think that's the difference between seeing and perceiving and looking versus seeing, because if you take students of mine, they will tell me that after we focus on a portrait, the eye, the nose, or the mouth, they start seeing things so differently. They'll tell me that people they see in the subway, or their families, or loved ones, lovers, husbands, wives, that now they're really seeing their eyes—the glow in their eyes, the shape, the movement. And we don't really *see*, we just sort of look in a casual way. I think that's one of the themes in the painting—really looking at something, and through that intense looking we are becoming who we are. We are becoming ourselves. We are becoming the best of ourselves that we can be.

MP: I think only a few people really are even aware of that or think about really seeing things. Most people just go along and look at the world in a very superficial way. I think for artists, because of the training, because of what artists do, they inherently look at things much more closely and see things.

SD: Giacometti would be a great example of that. If you read some of the things he says about perception and seeing, they're remarkably insightful. Yes, I think it's incredible and a wonderful part of doing art. Especially a certain type of figurative art. And you could almost argue that the instruments on the table are a means of harnessing this seeing to make art.

MP: It may have been Robert McGrath who pointed out a number of similarities between the images on the wall and the figures in the painting. The Madonna and

Child figure by Donatello and Renée and Simone. There was even a reference to your beard being Assyrian, I think.

SD: And I think he talks about the hands, the gesture of the hands. Some of it I think is conscious and I would say a good deal of it is not conscious. I never thought of the gesture of the hands. I liked the Donatello sculpture. It's not that I was trying to say this is the echo of Renée and Simone, I just liked it. Maybe I liked it for the same reason I liked Renée and Simone. It's kind of hard to say.

MP: And the Holbein portrait is at the center of the painting.

SD: The Holbein painting is located in Berlin. That painting is wonderful; it really has to be seen in person. Holbein used colors that you would not think of in the Renaissance. Like a certain type of green that he used which is like an acidic moss green and you don't really see that color in Renaissance painting. What he's depicting there is a merchant, whose name is Georg Gisze. He's depicted with the accoutrements of business, notes to himself, or notes that other people have given him in terms of loans, jottings, all kinds of things. There's a tapestry that he is leaning on. It's painted with the immaculateness of Holbein's paintings. And I loved the painting and it somehow, in a reproduction, found itself on my wall. It was only afterwards that I thought "this is such an interesting thing to put there because it's kind of a paragon of the whole painting." In other words, the objects around us identify who we are. Just a bit above it there's this wonderful painting by Edwin Dickinson. It's not as expansive as the Holbein painting, yet it's really the artist in the artist's world. That also seems a bit of an analogue for the *Triptych*.

MP: It's almost as if it says something very similar but the language is just much different.

SD: Yes and that also has to do with the studio and the studio world. The painting by Holbein makes me think of the stories of Thomas Mann. And I think in *Tonio Kröger*

he describes himself as a *bourgeois manqué*. What he's saying is that he had all of the everyday mannerisms and effects of a member of the bourgeoisie. The regularity, the businesslike quality, the "at it" work ethic, *but* he is a writer, and in a sense, this depiction of Georg Gisze is for Holbein, his *Tonio Kröger*.

MP: It's also been noted that there is an altarpiece-like quality of the *Triptych* and I'm wondering if maybe you could say something about that.

SD: I'm very unreligious. I think I have a strong spiritual side, but I don't think I believe in heaven. I don't want to alarm you.

MP: No, no, I gathered that from our previous conversations, that's why I find it so interesting.

SD: The altarpiece would be an altar of study, or the study of art, or the study of the meaning behind things. I'm not a person who knows a lot about Kabbalah, but I think one of the cruxes of the study of Kabbalah is to find the hidden force, the hidden meaning, or struggle behind an object, below a table, behind a wall, and I must say I'm fascinated by that. So, it could be an altar to the hidden Kabbalah, I don't know, but if it is an altar it may be an altar to perception. I'm not sure I know how to put it.

MP: I know the importance of the painting in your overall body of work, and you've mentioned a "search for identity," and I'm wondering if by that you mean that this [painting] played an important part in simply your maturation as a person, not only an artist, but just as a human being.

SD: Yes, yes. But I guess I don't think of it for myself, I think of it . . . we all have things that we care about for different reasons, and sometimes the reasons aren't apparent. We could almost say that we are the sum total of the matrix of all those things that we care about. So, in my case, they are very visual, but some of them are not—some of them are written. So, you could almost argue that this visual baggage—all of

these pictures, all of these images—is an attempt to define who this artist is, who this person is. Just as in a weird way, if you went over to someone’s house and looked at their office space and looked at the pictures they had up, or looked at their refrigerator and looked at what they put on it, or followed them around for a day and looked at what they clipped out of the newspaper, what was important to them—that may change over a period of time, but if you are a good detective, I think that it would say something about those people. We collect these things, that’s how we deal with the world. We are making choices and those choices say who we are.

MP: Absolutely. We talked a little bit before about your desire to go to Spain initially, and you eventually ending up in Germany [on the Fulbright]. Maybe you could elaborate on living near Kassel and you mentioned wanting to be in a small town with an old-world character.

SD: I think both of these examples would be a good example of life being surprising, perhaps you could say “be careful what you wish for.” I tried to go on a Fulbright grant to Spain, and I had written as my proposal, to study with Antonio López García, which seemed perfectly legitimate and heartfelt. I think that if I had gotten that grant to Spain, I could never have done anything as good as this *Triptych*. My second choice was Germany, and amazingly that came through. And I should add that I never thought I was even a fit candidate to apply for a Fulbright grant. An artist friend, Shirley Pulido, previously had a Fulbright grant to France. I had told her that I was interested in applying for one but I didn’t think I was yet skilled or mature enough as an artist to apply. She really encouraged me to try for it. So, the application to Germany came through and I ended up being connected with the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Kassel. We had a lot of difficulty finding a place to live. I remember we drove through a town which was called Rabelshausen. This was a totally intact 1500s town. The roofs of the buildings were thatched, the animals lived on the bottom floor and the people lived in the floors above. We looked at an apartment that was for rent. This apartment looked like Van Gogh’s bedroom. It was unbelievable. I could have worked there in that apartment for years. Renée looked at this and said “No

way are we going to live here.” We eventually found an apartment in another town where we looked at a building and saw windows with no shades or blinds. It was in a very nondescript town, called Hessisch Lichtenau. The apartment had no furniture, but the landlord, who was a little offbeat, said he would give us his garden furniture, which he did. We lived with his garden furniture all year. It was a big apartment and there was a room which was I think called the *Wohnzimmer*, which was the living room. There was the kitchen, and the kitchen had no appliances, no refrigerator, no nothing. We spent the year cooking on a hot plate. There were no beds and for the first few months we slept on the floor. The view out the window was so boring and the apartment was so boring. I said to Renée, “You know, I don’t want to be here, this is so uninspiring.” Because we had so much difficulty finding a place to live, Renée felt antsy and anxious about the apartment search and she said, “You know, this is a really nice apartment, you’ll find your subject here.” And I think that is an amazing example of . . . it’s what you bring to life; it’s what you bring to the subject . . . that counts.

MP: You could have had a much more beautiful view and ended up not making the painting because of it.

SD: That’s right. Oftentimes it seems to me in life you have to feel vibrations. It may not happen right away, but if you can feel these vibrations, they’ll tell you what to do. I can’t remember, maybe it was one day I was working on something and I looked at the table and looked at the pictures on the wall and I looked back and looked at myself looking at them and I thought, wow, this could be something. Actually, just recently, I was trying to find something which I would like to have in this upcoming book. I could not find it. It’s a photograph of Renée standing in front of the middle panel of the *Triptych*, and there is no color, it’s all in Rapidograph, and there’s Renée at the age of twenty-seven. And, Renée is just wonderful looking. And you see the wallpaper and some of the images on the wall.

MP: Do you want to talk about the theme of the artist’s process, and incorporating influences of art?

SD: Actually, you said something toward the end of our last interview, which I don't think I really understood. You were using this idea of process or this idea of quest and bringing it back to today. I thought about this and thought it was a very interesting question, an interesting point that you made. When I first started doing art, I had particular artists I liked and particular artists I didn't relate to. Then, as the years went by, one artist got stronger, more profound and interesting and another artist got less so. That's just the way it is and we should be thankful that all of our thoughts are not recorded, because we might sound really stupid. The one artist that seemed to me to grow the most in all these years was Cézanne. I can think of a few others besides Cézanne, like Giacometti, Max Beckmann, or Bonnard, but I think mostly of Cézanne. When I was a student, I didn't really connect or understand his work and now I am totally impressed with his mind and voyage. So, it seems to me that some of these palette paintings that I've been doing are not just about depicting the idea of process, but actually using process literally as an accumulation of palettes and paint and verve to paint. I could see the connection with artists like Dubuffet, Kiefer, and Cézanne. I like the openness to modernism. I don't like to feel defensive. I like to feel that I can use all different materials and ideas without hesitation and it's still about the human condition. That's very important to me. So, I would not be in the figurative camp that would decry Dubuffet, Kiefer, and Cézanne. I think it's a much more open situation, and it's incredibly appealing to me.

MP: I think that the notion that modernism can be thought of in a variety of ways and especially or specifically as far as abstract art goes versus representational art, that both of them can encompass the human condition as equally as one another is a fairly recent notion. You've got institutions and organizations such as the Museum of Modern Art for example, that have historically been very dogmatic about how they think about this.

SD: This really calls to mind something that is connected to Antonio López García. When I saw his work I began to realize certain things about him. He was the first figurative artist that I encountered who showed his work with contemporary non-objective artists, in Spain. Now, the figurative artists I knew would have never, I mean never,



Hess. Lichtenau, Germany, spring 1971

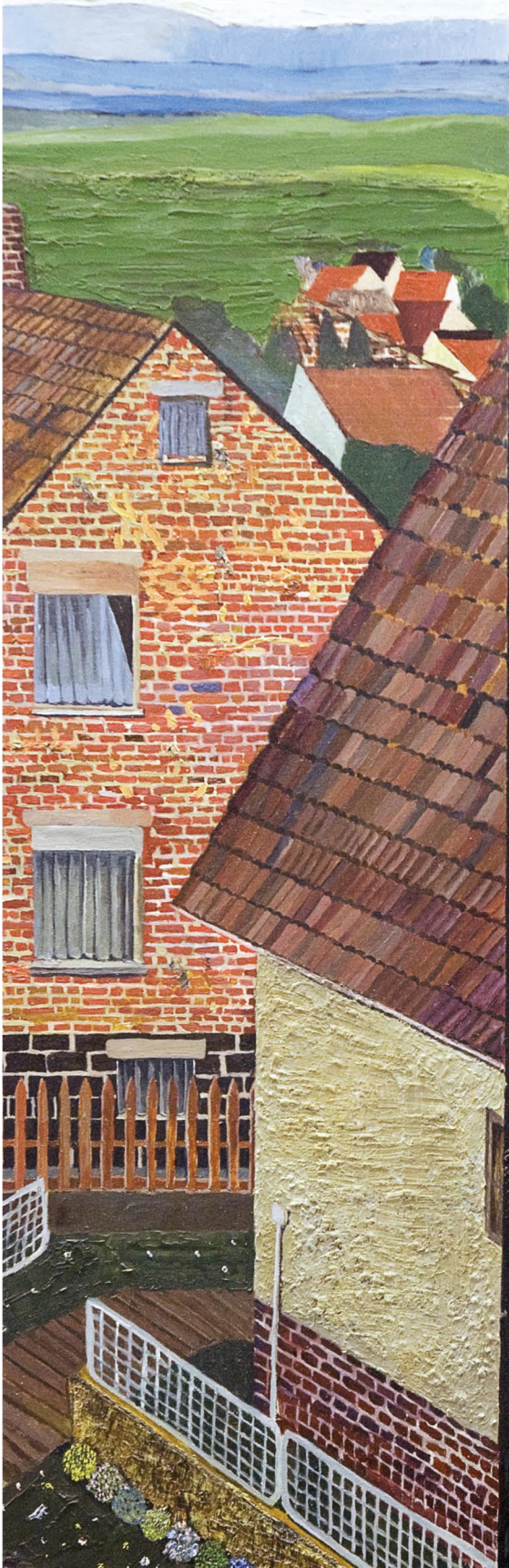
shown their work with non-objective art. And what I liked about this point of view that López had was that he was basically saying that good art is good art. That good art is abstract, and that his art would project strongly wherever it's shown, whether it's [with] non-objective or figurative art. And he wasn't defensive about it. I thought that it was a way of coming at contemporary figurative art that was incredibly refreshing.

MP: Will Barnett said something to me once that I thought was interesting. When I had a studio visit with him, he had work from the seventies on the wall—you know, quintessential black-line figure, very stylized figures, as well as some earlier abstractions he had done in the sixties and some abstractions that he was working on then, this was maybe three years ago. And I looked at all of these together and I said to him, "There are so many similarities between these abstract paintings and that painting there with the figures in it." He looked at me and said "I don't make any difference between them. The compositions are similar and the same rules apply to both types of paintings."

SD: I remember seeing a show of de Kooning and there's a painting de Kooning did called *Excavation* that I think is totally stunning. I just was stopped in my tracks by that painting. If I was to do a figurative work on the level of that painting, I think I would be doing just fine.

MP: Maybe we could return to talking about the Courbet painting. Perhaps you could elaborate on what you said before.

SD: He's a very interesting artist and that is a painting I've always been attracted to. You're not the only person who's mentioned the connection between *The Artist's Studio* and my *Triptych*. The first time I saw that Courbet in person was when it was hung in the Louvre, in a long gallery near *The Raft of the Medusa*. Now they have the painting in the d'Orsay Museum. Actually, it's quite hard to see because of a lot of glare on it. I don't quite know why the curators don't see that. It's a very romantic painting and it's a romanticized image of the artist and the coterie of friends who are visiting



or schmoozing or whatever they're doing in the artist's studio. It's a wonderful image of an artist, the nude, who you might guess was the artist's muse, and a child sitting nearby. I guess the studio is a place of great wonderment and kind of a hymn to who we are and where we're going, and I think that Gauguin's title for one of his paintings, which I can't remember now, would be perfectly appropriate.

MP: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

SD: Yeah, it's perfect.

MP: Linda Nochlin wrote a major iconographic analysis of that Courbet painting and she identified each one of the characters and how they were related to Courbet.

SD: I think the painting has had a curious history in that I think he rented an exhibition space to show the painting and it was one of these things that really got very little attention when it was first shown. There's not a little bit of ego in that painting. It has a certain kind of bravura about it.

You know, I'm going to go back to Penn State University with Renée, Simone, Simone's husband Jeremy, and their son Adrian, my grandson. Everyone is very keen on seeing the *Triptych* again. Art is amazing in that if you just move it slightly from one wall to the other it looks different. And if you don't see it for a while and you think about it, and go to see it, it also looks different. Both my wife and daughter have seen this painting a number of times, quite a number of times. Renée especially saw it from zero to the fruition of the painting. She is really interested in seeing it again. Art can be especially communicative, special, and tangible. Some people feel that art has that tangibility and some people, no matter what you can convey to them, they don't get it. I feel very fortunate because my daughter gets it, my wife gets it, my son-in-law, hopefully my grandson, and that's terrific.

MP: I know one of the things that you wanted to discuss was consciousness and the way that visual images provide a baggage that pushes a more and more acute con-

sciousness. Certainly the *Triptych* is filled with so much visual imagery, and different visual images assembled in a very specific way. Maybe you could elaborate on your thoughts on how visual images provide a certain type of baggage.

SD: I should preface this by saying that I didn't do a painting about consciousness, but consciousness is something that I'm very interested in and it must have somehow come through in the painting. I would like to think that human beings can live very fully, i.e., live with a high degree of consciousness. I mean that they are accepting great amounts of stimuli and are enjoying it, going with it, embracing it, riffing on it. Consciousness means that you're getting your money's worth. You've got your one shot and you're . . . the blues are bluer than blue, the reds are great, the yellows are wonderful and we are amalgamations of so many different things from grade C to grade A and from a van Eyck painting to a child's drawing of a dragon; from a spelling lesson to Wittgenstein. I think that's an important thing to be aware of.

MP: Do you think that . . . this may be veering off topic just a little bit, but do you think that there's so much overstimulation of imagery in our society today that the ability to achieve a higher consciousness has changed on some level or become more difficult for people? My feeling, at least, is that very few people operate in their lives with a higher . . . greater receptivity to being open or a greater consciousness operating on a higher level in some way. Many people just go through their lives without experiencing that.

SD: Your hunch is that very few people experience that?

MP: Yes.

SD: I agree with you, but I think it's a worthwhile goal. It's really the way to live. It's as though each day you received all this stimuli, ideas are bouncing around in your head, and you just can't contain yourself because there is so much that you were taking in. Earlier on we were talking about this book by Herman Hesse called *The Glass*

Bead Game. If I remember this right, I think those glass beads would be equivalent to the different images in my *Triptych* that could provide non sequitur responses to life.

MP: Movies have been very influential on your visual development, haven't they?

SD: Yes, I am a very big fan of cinema. In fact, I think that film has kind of replaced a certain direction in visual arts or has co-opted that place and it's a shame.

MP: The medium does something that static pictures can't do. They're moving, there's sound.

SD: I wasn't thinking about the moving part, I was thinking about the depth, the challenging subject matter. There's a modern element, but human and touching and dealing with our human condition. There seems to me to be less and less of that in the fine arts and more of that in film.

MP: Recently I've noticed a resurgence of interest in humanist content in contemporary work, especially with artists of my generation. I think on some level that's probably a response to the current cultural climate that we're facing. There's a bit of a crisis type . . . the same thing was true in the late sixties and early seventies in response to the Vietnam War. Maybe humanist content waxes and wanes as far as its popularity.

SD: I could agree with that.

MP: Another point that I know you wanted to discuss is your experience living abroad, both in Germany and then in Italy.

SD: I lived in Germany for a year and when we got back I really thought that was the limit of my good luck and good fortune. To my great amazement, a few years later, I received a Rome prize to study in Italy at the American Academy in Rome, so I was able to study or continue painting in both the north and south of Europe. Those are

very different experiences. Perhaps it would be interesting to write about that. There were people I encountered who didn't like living in Rome. But if one likes living in Rome as I did, it's the most beautiful place that you can imagine, ravishing, stunning. This was five years after we lived in Germany. Living in Germany was not the most beautiful place one could think of, but it was very thought-provoking, very engaging. Life offers great ironies and I guess one of the most supreme ironies is that we went to Germany with a certain amount of mixed feelings—my wife and I. Yet, I don't think that the painting that this book is the subject of could have been done anywhere else but in Germany. I guess it really speaks to surprise in life, and not being too sure of what you feel.

MP: The aesthetic tradition is very different in the South as opposed to the North.

SD: Yes, it is very different. Aesthetically I can easily identify with a certain German idea of what would be called plain statement. Exact plain statement. Which I think John Russell would have said if he wrote about Dürer and engraving and a certain kind of German character. I can easily identify with that. I think there are aspects of this painting that identify with that spirit. That's not what I'm talking about really, I'm talking about a political and moral side which . . . nowadays it's a different time period, but 1970 was simply twenty-five years after the Second World War. We had lots of questions about going there, but it was a period of great growth for us, really stunning.

MP: Do you think you grew as much during your time in Rome as you had in Germany—as an artist?

SD: I think I did, but there, what caused the growth was the people I kept meeting. These were very strong personalities that were at the American Academy in Rome, people that I would have never come across: a composer like Bob Beaser, a poet like Miller Williams, I would have never met them. Miller came from Arkansas, Bob had been to Yale and was either teaching at Yale or going to school there, and I had no connection with those two worlds. It was incredibly stimulating meeting someone like

Rudolf Arnheim. It was really challenging. The city of Rome wasn't challenging in that way. Rome was simply unbelievably beautiful, architecturally beautiful. It's not a city that you can argue with. The main phrase is *pazienza*. The city doesn't yield; you yield to the city.

MP: I'm embarrassed to admit I've never actually been to Rome. I've been through it a couple of times.

SD: There were lots of people who didn't like Rome but, for the people who did like it, Rome was like a dreamscape. I heard that many times over and over from people who have spent a period of time there and liked it, that it had a dreamscape quality, a dream city quality.

MP: You didn't feel that?

SD: I did, very much so—a real dreamscape. This is extremely fortunate, it's good luck times two—squared.