

Pictures of the Lasting World

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How do we recover the fugitive flight of time? Memory does its best. It recalls the cool spring, twenty years ago at the American Academy in Rome, where a group of fellows and residents had the chance to spend some time in the spirit of the Eternal City.

Among the artists in 1978 was Simon Dinnerstein. In his spacious studio I remember a large wall occupied by a faithful depiction of the flower market on the Campo dei Fiori. The painting reminded me compellingly also of the similar display at the foot of the Piazza di Spagna, where its symmetry, marked by the saleslady sitting in the center of the floral display, is in keeping with the overall symmetry of the Spanish Steps leading to the facade of the church of the Trinità dei Monti. This timelessness caught in the midst of a bustling city is in the character of Dinnerstein's work. It maintains the tradition of representing the lasting world as it lives in the work of the van Eycks, Dürer, Vermeer, and others.

Great paintings have always been more than a mere reflection of reality. But there is a particular quality I find in some of Dinnerstein's recent work. It is a kind of detachment from the immediacy of presence, an early example of what I find in Piero della Francesca's paintings. This quality has sometimes been called "magical realism." The figures are sharply outlined, which moves them from the realm of reality to that of depiction. There is a preference of frontality and profile, two firm positions resisting the natural turn of bodily movement in space.

Some of Dinnerstein's recent figures adopt these qualities of detachment because the naturalistic tradition has been affected by modern art. It has resisted the otherworldliness of cubism as well as the plaster-cast puppets of make-believe. The influence of these stylistic developments remains noticeable, but Dinnerstein's independence preserves his endearing nearness to our world, even when he watches it with the detachment of the observer.