

# A Letter to William Hull

Simon Dinnerstein

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Mr. William Hull  
Director  
Art Museum  
Penn State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania 06802

Dear Bill:





Phillip Bruno called me this past Friday to mention the news of the loan of the *Triptych* to Penn State University's art museum. I am very pleased about this wonderful news. I have a very special feeling for this painting, and showing it in a public space is so exciting to me.

Phillip mentioned your desire to have more information, details, and particulars about the painting. I feel somewhat at conflict about writing at great length in that there are so many words written about works of art. Moreover, the painting I have produced here is full of great layers of information dealing, as it were, with complex and subtle feelings, mysteries, and "wonderment." What I would like therefore to do is spend a bit of time "free associating" about the picture. Art historians/iconographers would say that the artist "knew" great hulks of knowledge and painted out of this knowledge. I can say positively that a great deal of my thoughts regarding this work came to me

after I started and also while I was finishing and during the years after! This fact is hard to understand, and I guess it is representative of the incredible complexity of psychology and thought and human motivation.

I started the painting in Germany (1971) while on a Fulbright (1970–71) and living in Hessisch Lichtenau (Quenteler Weg 31) and attending an art school in Kassel, Germany, completing the picture, after three years of work, in a studio on Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Fourth Street in Brooklyn. (My daughter was not born when the picture was started and was almost two years old when the work was finished.)

The imagery for the picture came to me “at one shot” in its totality! I mention this because it is a rare example of such insight; many artists work differently, myself included. Following are a number of my thoughts: the overall visual organization of the painting is an attempt to be abstract and formal as well as detailed and expressive; “perception” is a major theme, or the “grasping” of “what is out there” (the artist’s attempt to “slow down” reality and “stop” or capture it); the presentation of tools and instruments and graphic utensils involving the measuring and the use of objectifying equipment as aids in this quest (i.e., as in Dürer’s *Melancholia*); the sheer visual treat and joy in painting; the understanding of “forms of life,” as in Wittgenstein’s treatise on the difficulty or impossibility of language and visual identity; the various pictorial “excitements,” such as other “forms of life”; the “humor” of a painting about a graphic artist (Fulbright–Graphics) and printmaker–engraver (gold leaf as copperplate), burins, engravers, etc.; the *Triptych* was my “first” painting since being a student at the Brooklyn Museum (1964–67) and was the first time I had felt the need to express myself in paint—the time in between spent mainly on drawing and graphics (there is a “humor” in attempting a fourteen-foot “first” painting); the possibilities, mystery, and enigma and wonderful potential of “paint” with its own suppleness and beauty “as an end in and of itself”; there are the various contrasting themes of sophistication/children’s drawings with paint becoming “crayon,” “ink,” “pen”; the duality of sophistication/naïveté as expressed in colors, but also indicative generally of an approach to the world, i.e., seeing it for the first time like a bubble that somehow can be grasped (as the “beads of knowledge” or *Glasperlenspiel* of *Magister*

*Ludi*); the organization of left and right; there are the “time” themes, as well as the sheer risk of “time,” the “gamble” of time well spent to fulfill a work of art; the concepts of “seeing” vs. “perceiving” as a major theme (note the importance of the picture of two men in the right panel: “seeing” closely—“seeing” significantly vs. “seeing” closely and not seeing at all); the belief that art (in the *Triptych*) is the visual counterpoint of the novel, i.e., the full measure of a man (art as a layered experience, complicated, design-oriented, enigmatic, but expressive internally as “thought” or “concept” or “idea”; “the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble . . .” D. H. Lawrence; the inspiration of such writers as Hardy, Mann, Dostoyevsky, Kafka to summarize, engulf, and “compel” a large experience of “weighted, rounded form,” “fecundity,” “full-bloodedness”; the use of paint as an illusion and paint, literally, as an internal vehicle toward an idea (abstraction) (thoughts of trompe l’oeil, a beautiful but limited realism); the belief in art as a “force” or “compulsion” (Starbuck/Whale—white heat and purity of form and thought); the ideas of “seriousness” and “humor” and in contrast causality and absurdity; an attempt to get at design concepts of deep space vs. close forms ; the ideal of an ultimate viewing distance; up close vs. great distance, and optimally about 10'-12' away so one can just take in the two exterior panels; an interest in peripheral “close space” vs. exterior distance, the intimate depiction of a family, as “idea,” and as pinpointed and “held” in time, living together and striving to understand and “get at” what is “out there”; the use of triangulation  as a design motif, or in other words, the triad, or the trinity of protection, harmony, and love and sensuality within; an interest in both internal and external movement; the rather personal and perhaps idiosyncratic theory of the “flying eyeball” ; the obsession with empiricism; the belief that paint can yield “spirit”; and organization and/or placement of the elements in the painting in terms of three, within which there is a division of “warm” exteriors and “cool” interiors ; the very strong conviction that every individual has a need for identity and the search for one’s axis; the very real conviction that a “seeking” life is the most meaningful in that it provides understanding (possibly indicative of the idea of “art as diary”); and ultimately the fact that we carry on alone, singly or single-minded, with this search—

Grey and sweating / And only one *I* person /  
Fighting and fretting.  
—Gloria Mintz, 1965, age 13

Ultimately it is really the visual impact of the experience of the art on the viewer that counts. I have been struck by the amount of time people spend looking at this particular painting. I do not know that this is truly an important criterion; i.e., whether this aspect really matters; I simply put it out as something I have observed, and it is rather odd and wonderful to see one's painting looked at (or "read") for fifteen to forty-five minutes.

For your practical information, the spacing should be about 3¾" (-4") (use your judgment) between the panels. The area allows for the floorboard lines and general overall perspective to line up.

Please feel free to use any or all of this information or to edit. I leave it to your good taste and judgment. Furthermore, I would be curious to know how the painting is received—perhaps we could get together when you next visit New York. (I've two large drawings on exhibit now at the City Gallery, Columbus Circle/New York's Department of Cultural Affairs—announcement enclosed. I hope you would have time to see this work and that we could have a chat.)

So, again; I'm most excited!

Very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Simon Dinnerstein".

