THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VELVET AND VELOUR

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Frank: Hey you wanna go for a ride?
Jeffrey: No thanks.
Frank: No thanks? What does that mean?
Jeffrey: I don't wanna go.
Frank: Go where?
Jeffrey: For a ride.
Frank: A ride! Now that's a good idea!

David Lynch, *Blue Velvet*

A door opens. Someone beckons. You hesitate. Do you get in?

Think of all the parables of encountering strangers. Foolishness and dread, fantasies of passion, sagas of empire, stories of love, fleeting friendships. They all follow brief and unstable first moments of thrill and fear. Why trust someone? Why not? We find ourselves out there on a knife-edge of unknowing. Maybe our lives will change forever.

We often say that something or someone catches or grabs our attention. Catch and grab. They're ancient words of hunting, chasing and setting traps. We're lured and taken in. We're prey. Maybe just as often, we're the ones hunting? Sometimes, we're just playing, operating on nothing more than what-the-hell. What do we choose? Or are we chosen?

Maybe I'm amping up the volume too much to talk about a first encounter with a work of art. But it's Simon Dinnerstein's fault. He beckoned. I hesitated. Then I followed. (He's pretty persistent.) I'm still trying to figure out who Simon is, what it was I was following and why I did it. But I'm not being coy. To begin with, there are two Simons. There's the elegant artist in his 70's whom I met a few years ago. And there's the young man in the blue velvet shirt, who's still staring out from his life in the 1970's, when both Simon Dinnersteins were young and in their 30's.

Both the painter and the painter painted appear in the monumental self-portrait, family portrait and—since its setting is a room and town and a time in Germany, a portrait that might be described with a not-quite-translatable word to convey its ambition—Simon Dinnerstein's *weltanschauung* portrait, called *The Fulbright Triptych*.

Weltaanschauung? I know. It's one of those complicated, dressed-for-the-lecture-hall words the German language seems so pleased with itself to own and brag about. In English, we say, "worldview" but that's too weak and too vague for what the Simons were up to. To have a weltaanschauung is really to describe a way of looking that that attempts to place yourself in the cosmos, after a long, searching, philosophical examination of the whole phenomenon of human existence. Yes, all that. Which means, it's no wonder Simon Dinnerstein won't stop staring. There's a lot responsibility in that look. (I mean the Simon Dinnerstein in the painting—though the living and breathing one is no slouch either in the philosophy department.)

I met both Simons the same day.

The beckoning of one and the other turned into the kind of afternoon of unrushed conversation—hitting it off with someone new—that can make you giddy and a bit forgetful of where and who you are when you finally have to get up to leave. And it was only my mid-aged self leaving the lobby of the German consulate in New York. But, for a few hours, I listened and talked and looked back and forth at the two Simon Dinnersteins—artist and his painted, almost life-size self-image, four decades younger.

What was strange was how much the same they looked. I don't mean something out of *Dorian Gray*—the portrait hadn't aged; the person hadn't stood still. But I noticed two fascinating things. It seemed, for one, that Simon had painted himself forward into maturity. He's a new father in the painting, and he's a Fulbright scholar, after all, and there's that whole weltaanschauung business. But —you'd think this might not be a revelation—I became aware of something else while looking from Simon to Simon. We get an unfair advantage in being alive. It was the charisma of Simon the painter moving, breathing and talking that made him seem almost as young as his silent, frozen, younger self. Our animation gives us an edge. It made me wonder if I should be more suspicious of portraits —or if I maybe I should be more patient and give them, in their immobility, some slack.

To be really honest, part of me didn't want to like the portrait project of *The Fulbright Triptych*. "Like?" I know. But it was the State Department that had asked me to see it and to meet these Simons. I had a role as chairman of the Fulbright board under President Obama and I just assumed the artist and the painting had their roles too. I knew *The Fulbright Triptych* had been eloquently evangelized by a large chorus of the great and the good—artists and writers, art

historians, critics, diplomats—all singing, "Masterpiece!" And I know the painting had been interpreted and explicated, provided with confident and scholarly taxonomies of references and allusions. Not that it was pop culture famous, but it seemed to be *known*—or, at least, pretty knowable. The Triptych didn't seem to be causing any trouble.

My instinct was, "Uh oh."

I agree that would not have been diplomatic. But I take artists seriously and I wanted to avoid being fumbling and fake. Even when it's meant, praise can box in both art and the audience. Reverence has a way of evaporating when somebody insists on it. We wander off, or love does, when we're not looking. And—I really believe this—when art is ignored, it can disappear.

Spoiler alert: *The Fulbright Triptych* was in no need of rescue. But I think I was. And that coincidence of me carrying around the loss of some kind of faith and then meeting and being deeply moved by the two Simons is something that's made me thing long and hard about what art does and why we need it. I can describe what happened in two words: *blue velvet*. But I get nervous just putting things out there and leaving them alone. I'm more comfortable when things are complicated. And what if the right words were actually *blue velour?*

Let me explain.

All triptychs encourage storytelling. The three panels act as an unfolding of time, doors opening to deepening revelation. That's what happened the afternoon I met the two Simon Dinnersteins. The door opened, the Simons beckoned. I meet, first, a young wife and their baby girl in arms. Then, next, I'm standing both in and in front of a room with good windows and a good view of a small, sensible German town, laid out on a small, sensible German grid.

On the table in front of the window, the young Simon Dinnerstein has laid out on another grid the tools of his trade. His faith is visible. And he has pinned to the wall small drawings, quotations, postcards of famous paintings— evidence of his education and obligations, correspondence with himself and his friends and family, the living and the dead, citizens of his dreams.

The room feels open and capacious, but its objects—tools, furniture, spare décor—have real weight. They possess the gravity of metaphor and

iconography. What we don't recognize, we think we should. (I'll want to go back and consult some of the explanations and praise.)

Then farthest to the right in the final panel, young Simon sits in an open-collar blue velvet shirt. I wanted to ask the older Simon about that shirt. But the intimacy was a little unnerving. Why would it embarrass me to ask about clothes he'd obviously been comfortable enough wearing to paint himself in them for going on almost fifty years? But that brought up deeper questions, somehow even harder to ask questions, of all *The Fulbright Triptych* was trying to reveal and why.

When we follow strangers, hunches and unmarked roads, it's because something tells us—even in an age when we've pretty much abandoned the idea of forbidden knowledge—that we might discover more than we should know. It's irresistible danger, to risk that our worldviews might be upside down. But why do strangers trust us? Why do artists lay bare their lives and fears and dreams for us? We're strangers to them too. What kind of bravery is it—or curiosity, lust, chutzpah, maybe even moral propaganda for a way of life—that wants us to come in, look around, make assumptions, make as many claims on their lives as they could on ours?

I remember a scene from a documentary about Christopher Isherwood, where the novelist is saying something particularly uninhibited about his past romances. His red-faced interviewer blurts out, "Why are you so honest?" Isherwood looks up and says, "Honesty is all I have." It's a wonderful answer, but I remember liking it all the more because there was probably a bit of an act to it. After Isherwood said, "Honesty is all I have," he waited a beat. Then he added, deliciously, "Honesty and a few adverbs."

If honesty is all any artist has, it really means, out of necessity, artists are exhibitionists. The etymology gives it away: *exhibere* means to *hold* something *out* in front of ourselves. Think exhibit, exhibition, exhibitionist. Then think portrait, science fair, courtroom, nudist colony, museum. But the etymology goes further: the root word *habere—to hold*—also gives us *habit*.

We make a habit of holding things out for others to look at: an object, a voice, a history, an attitude. Sometimes we hold out only our nakedness; sometimes it's only our shadow, eluding our grasp.

Our first habits were actually our clothes—everybody's clothes, not just the nuns. Clothes were what we held out on top of and in lieu of our bodies, exhibiting to strangers our occupations, our hometowns, our epistemologies, and how much or how little fear we had of our bodies. Eventually, the word "habit" came to mean our predictable behaviors—naked or not—because clothing offered such reliable shorthand for our histories, status and predilections.

It still does. Our worlds are defined by the parade of clothes, possessions and behaviors we inhabit and display—until we flee them. Our identities are beholden to our habits—until we shed them. But this way of putting it—shedding and fleeing—is itself a habit: in our time, we've become reflexively attracted to speed, ever-moving images, instability, shifts of gender, attention and geography.

But for almost half a century, Simon's blue velvet hasn't changed. It's there whenever I look for it—the open-collared seemingly casual shirt of a deeply serious artist. Looking at it over and over again—at the far end of the Triptych's story—has made me think that royal, rich deep blue contained some clue about how to encounter, even to dwell in, a world governed, so differently from my own, by habits of stillness and calm, where, for however long its time needs to be frozen, nothing is shed and no one flees.

Habits of skepticism, habits of disenchantment and irony, habits that puncture praise and seek out dissatisfaction—my habits and the habits so common to contemporary art—die hard. But fortunately, even if they don't die, our hard certainties can lose their magic. What has been our faith and our comfortable habits can suddenly seem inadequate, no longer worthy of us, even unrecognizable and weird.

Weird and *worthy* actually have the same root in both English and German. Originally, to be *weird* was to have the power to control fate, to turn the world to our wishes. It is the fantasy of artists to be weird. To be *worthy*, on the other hand, was to have learned how to turn ourselves toward the world, to see things clearly and to face our fates, whatever they are. But is it anyone's fantasy to be worthy? We're so sure we already are. It may be one of the defining characteristics of contemporary life. In our boredom and narcissism, we've twisted desire into the impossible: we want the world to be worthy of us.

And, still, there is, and has been, young Simon in his blue velvet shirt, staring out of the canvas and into … what? The void? What did he and does he want? I

didn't ask the Simon I was sitting with. It's the wrong thing to do and often deeply misleading to ask artists to explain their work. But I realized there was a clue in my interest in their silences.

The careful and learned organization of The Fulbright Triptych makes it easy to make the mistake that you can see this room, these three lives—man, woman, child—as a cabinet of curiosities. The German dictionary has a better word for that thing too, of course: a *wunderkammer*, a room of wonders. And you could think that's what we're supposed to be seeing—a room of the modest wonders and great ambitions of a young American artist abroad participating, with his wife and child, in an official government program of peace instead of being forced to fight, and possibly die, in the insanities of the Vietnam War, a war, in fact, that, just when *The Fulbright Triptych* was being painted, was forcing the end to the political career of the famous senator who fiercely opposed it and who gave the Triptych and the program for peace their names.

But I've come to believe this is the wrong way to read this great painting. It's not about the furniture of this artist's life or what's in his pockets. It's not some revelation about his passions or ambitions. It's not gossip or sexual attraction or politics or intellectual pride. All of these things are there, of course. They're arranged carefully for you to take note of them.

But the real secret and wonder, the real urgency of this stranger having beckoned you and me into this room, is that it's not a room at all. I don't mean that it's a painting, though of course, it is. What I mean is that what connects the act of its making almost half a century ago with the experience of uncertainty and shame and the eagerness so many people who've encountered it have to talk and ask questions and bring the family in it to life—what connects that frozen past to our present is that painting's joyful, mesmerizing exhibitionism freezes our time too. It causes an abeyance.

Abeyance means suspension. Maybe all great art offers that possibility, that feeling of floating, that we might be able to feel an uncanny pause in the unfolding of the next moment. I like to think a triptych offers a natural form for this feeling—three panels, as if to offer arms that can cradle us against its body and keep us from feeling the urgency of exit. It's what T.S. Eliot called "the still point in the turning world."

In the final panel of The Fulbright Triptych, Simon's shirt, the velvet and the blue somehow turn period and personality of the painting into something timeless. There is the blue sky of comfortable, suburban Germany outside window. But over the body of the artist who painted his world of modest wonder, there is the rich, luxurious blue of deep space calling us in.

Somehow, it's perfect that in Hebrew, Simon means "listen." I like to think it also means that the painter and the painter he's painted are exhibitionists of the needs of others—of our need to talk about and reveal ourselves. I like to think it means they intend their work to be more about us than them. And because of that, I never asked Simon Dinnerstein about the fabric of the shirt he decided to wear forever all those decade. I've learned, though, that shirts are more likely to be made of velvet. It's drapes and sofas that are typically velour.