

Gabriella Angelletti: How many times has The Fulbright Triptych been shown since you completed it?

Simon Dinnerstein: Including the current exhibit at the Nevada Museum of Art (July 20, 2018 - January 6, 2019), I would guess that the painting has been shown 15 times. The longest displays were at the German Consulate, New York, across from the United Nations, 2011-2014 and the University of Arkansas, Law School-Fayetteville, 2014-2017. After the exhibit at the Nevada Museum of Art, the painting will be exhibited at the New Jersey Center for the Visual Arts from February 8 - June 30, 2019.

How did the booming success of the work make you feel as a young artist?

It was an amazing feeling. I worked on the painting almost every day for three years. On the *very last day* of my first exhibit at Staempfli, a rave review by John Russell in The New York Times came out praising

The Fulbright Triptych. Many people came to the gallery to see the painting that day, including Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Goodrich (former Director of the Whitney Museum) and Thomas Messer (Director of the Guggenheim Museum). Visitors were coming up in the elevator carrying The Times. I believe that much of the hooplah was responsible for my receiving a Rome Prize to the American Academy in Rome the very next year. This brought my family to Italy for the next 2 1/2 years.

Did you have any initial reservations about selling the work to George Staempfli? Given the chance to turn back time, would you have done anything differently?

The sale of the work to George Staempfli was quite amazing. I had seen an exhibit at his gallery in 1968 of the Spanish artist, Antonio Lopez Garcia. It was, up to that point in time, the best single exhibit I had seen of a contemporary artist. In 1973, while I was obsessively working on my Triptych, we completely ran out of money, I did not know what to do. Part of the backstory here was that I believed strongly that a first show should set forth a philosophy, a point of view. I did not care particularly about selling the work. However, my back was pushed up against the wall. I did not know what to do. Moreover, my daughter was 6 months old and I felt under great pressure.

I remembered the Lopez exhibit. I put together photographs of a grouping of works and a maquette of

The Fulbright Triptych. At that time, the middle panel was about 2/3 - 3/4 complete and the side panels were white, with the figures drawn out. I remembered the exhibit at Staempfli of Lopez. I walked in to the gallery, without an introduction, straight off the street. They were located at Madison and 77th Street. I introduced myself to Phillip Bruno, the gallery's Co-Director. I mentioned that I had seen an exhibit a few years before of Antonio Lopez Garcia and thought that there was some connection between my work and his. To my great good fortune, Phillip chose to look through the material. He then said that he wanted to show the photographs to George. They called and asked if they could see the work in person. The

gallery had a rarified quality about it and my sense was that Paris was closer to them than Brooklyn. Brooklyn in 1973 was also light years away from Brooklyn in 2018.

They came to see my work at an apartment we had in Park Slope, Brooklyn and then we traveled to my studio in Sunset Park, a distance of about 25 blocks. The two well dressed, tall and distinguished gallery dealers stood in complete silence for the next 30 minutes looking intently at the Triptych. Then George Staempfli took out a fancy black cigar, lit it up and said one sentence, "This is a great painting and I would like to own it." Four days later, a very well written letter came from George. He explained that he and Phillip were very impressed with my work, in particular the large, unfinished Triptych. He proposed buying the painting in its *unfinished* state. He suggested paying for the painting in monthly installments over the next 2 years. It felt as if I was in the middle of a fairy tale and a *deus ex machina* had arrived.

You've expressed frustration around The Fulbright Triptych being locked in the storage of the Palmer Museum of Art. What have your interactions with the museum been like?

William Hull was the Founding Director of the Palmer Museum of Art. He had a genuine interest and enthusiasm for figurative art. Under his leadership, The Fulbright Triptych was purchased by the Friends of the Palmer Museum and donated to the museum. The painting was purchased in 1982 and has never been shown at the museum since.

I have never heard from the museum about any of the many articles written about the painting (simondinnerstein.com/news.html), which include a remarkable essay on the Triptych by Roberta Smith in The New York Times in 2011. The 2011 book, The Suspension of Time, a publication dedicated to The Fulbright Triptych and consisting of 45 essays on the painting, by such writers as Jhumpa Lahiri, Anthony Doerr, Rudolf Arnheim, Guy Davenport, elicited not one response from the Palmer Museum. This response, or lack of response, is bewildering since the book is the only one out now dedicated to a single painting of a living American artist.

It has been a very frustrating situation. At one point, a great argument occurred between their curator of American Art and myself. I asked why the museum owns this painting if they never show it. The curator told me that my painting did not relate to any of the classes that were taught at the university. I think he meant art history and fine art classes. I recently mentioned this conversation to Alissa Carlson, the curator at the Museum of Art and Archaeology, Columbia. Alissa was flabbergasted and dismayed and said that my painting relates to *all* the classes taught in the fine arts!

There is now a new director at the Palmer, Erin Coe. My communications with her have been much more communicative and friendly. I am hoping that, under her leadership, their policy toward my painting will change.

How much time passed that you were not able to see The Fullbright? What feelings and thoughts did you have when you saw it again in person?

The Suspension of Time was being prepared in 2010. One of the writers, Jhumpa Lahiri asked if she could see the painting in person. I arranged for a car and driver to transport us for the 4 1/2 hour trip to the Palmer Museum. We were accompanied by Marshall Price, at the time a curator at the National Academy and now the Nancy Hanks Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Nasher Museum at Duke University and Virginia Bonito, an art historian. The painting was displayed for us in a viewing area when we came. I spoke about the work, trying to open it up for the visitors.

I remember Jhumpa sitting transfixed, taking notes, and completely absorbed for the whole 3 hours of our visit. I recall that when we left the museum, Jhumpa came running up to me and excitedly asked me what I thought after not seeing this painting in 10 years. I wasn't sure what she was getting at. I asked if she meant *the very first thing I thought*. I said that my very first thought when I saw the Triptych was that I could not believe that I had painted it. It seemed to me, that if I could recall my life on a super smart day, when everything was clear, sharp and in touch with the spirits, then the Triptych was this type of day times a thousand. I could not believe that this was my painting. It was way smarter than any sense that I had of my own intellect.

Can you tell me a little more about how this exhibition came about? What institutions/persons initiated the tour and why now?

The exhibition is directly connected with the publication of The Suspension of Time and the 3 year exhibit of The Fulbright Triptych at the German Consulate in New York. When the book was being planned, I thought that it would be a wonderful opportunity to show the painting to coincide with the new publication. My daughter's manager at the time, Tania Dorn, knew the Consul General, Horst Freitag and she arranged for an introduction. He was extremely responsive to my presentation of images of the painting and to the idea of an exhibit. The reviews, especially of Roberta Smith, brought many people to the Consulate to see the painting. The show kept getting extended. Its last extension was for 2 years. The three year exhibit was a wonderful, very gratifying experience. The response to the painting was disproving a long held adage, "There are no second acts in American lives." Indeed, The Fulbright Triptych was having a second act, a *moment*, as one could put it.

I knew what was going to happen to the painting if it went back to the Palmer Museum.

I tried therefore to interest other venues in the work. Christopher Kelley, a Board member of the Fulbright Association introduced the painting to Stacey Leeds, the Dean of the Law School at the University of Arkansas. That exhibit lasted 3 years as well.

I thought the painting could be a very strong centerpiece of a traveling exhibit. That is, I imagined a show which took threads within the Triptych and followed these themes within a grouping of works. I approached Alex Barker, the Director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. His museum owns a major work of mine, The

Sink. Curiously, Alex had, a few days before, given a lecture to the docents of the museum on The Sink. Alex saw in the Triptych something of his belief that an ideal university would create conversations between different worlds and disciplines. Alex agreed to curate the exhibit. The next museum that signed on was the Arnot Art Museum. They own an important work of mine, Night. I was introduced to David Walker, the Director of the Nevada Museum of Art, by Madylon Meiling, an old friend of mine who grew up in Brownsville, Brooklyn as I did.

Beyond The Fulbright Triptych, the exhibition shows various paintings and drawings from the last five decades. Can you talk about the themes of some of these earlier/later works? And, do you feel that some of your career has been overshadowed by the success of Fullbright?

My work is figurative in direction. I think of it as a sort of modern or *modernist* figuration. I am trying to portray life as I see it, but also influenced by so many varied directions in contemporary life, resonating with psychology, collage, children's art, abstraction, memory, dreams, poetry, surrealism, texture, mystery, thought, form, color, ambivalence and reverberation.

The creation of pictures demand solutions which vary - *every force evolves a form* (Guy Davenport). If one was to think of a literary analogy, some subjects are worthy of novels, some are just right for a short story, some work as poems and some are short, short stories or essays. Taking a short story and blowing it up to a 500 page novel would result in some clearly puffed up presentation.

Many visitors to the traveling show have mentioned to me that their favorite painting was The Sink. Others have said that they were drawn to Passage of the Moon. I can understand these responses. I can even agree with them. However, there is something about The Fulbright Triptych that has a kind of mind boggling, *tour de force* element. One can't just automatically find another subject that has this type of resonance. It has to just come naturally.