

John Thornton: The Lasting World, what does the title of your show mean?

Simon Dinnerstein: The title comes from an essay on my work by Rudolf Arnheim. It was Alex Barker, the Director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia, who was struck by the phrase and suggested it for the title of the show. I think that Arnheim is referring to something which is timeless, existing "outside of time." According to Arnheim, "Great paintings have always been more than a mere reflection of reality....a kind of detachment from the immediacy of presence. This timelessness caught in the middle of a bustling city....maintains the tradition of representing the lasting world...."

Your brother Harvey has a muscular style that reminds one of 17th Century Baroque. I feel your work is much more attuned to the Late Gothic, an early Flemish and Northern European sensitivity. Your brother is quite a bit older than you. Did you have to define your artistic identity in opposition to his?

Harvey is 15 years older and there are no other siblings. He was a strong role model, but because of the age difference, he was literally living somewhere else by the time I was 2 years old. I don't have a memory of his living at home. I guess you could say that I was brought up as an only child but I also have a brother.

Although Harvey is quite an accomplished artist, his work has more of a social side to it than mine. I think you are correct that my work appears more Northern. I think that I personally have an interest in a more internal way that art explores the human dimension as opposed to a more social or political idea.

You and Harvey are both very prominent artists and your daughter is one of the greatest of the up and coming classical musicians. How does that happen? Give me a brief family history and tell me about how you became an artist. Did it start in childhood?

I had a great interest in drawing throughout childhood, but I was interested in many things.

I attended City College in New York, majoring in History, and in the last 2 years took classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. They had, at the time, a flourishing arts school within the museum. Because I was about to graduate college, I began to think that many of the interests I had in psychology, history, philosophy, writing could be combined into the fine arts. I did not think that clearly about how difficult it would be to earn a living in this field.

My father was quite far on the left politically. He was a member of the American Communist Party.

This was right through until 1975 when he passed away. My mother was a somewhat dreamy woman, who had a certain degree of psychological challenges. My father did

not buy into the American capitalistic system. So, for all of the ambivalences that I felt about his political allegiances, his influence was strong. He was keenly interested in following an ideal, a spiritual dimension. This was a great example for an artist or for someone who wanted to live devoting himself to art.

It's hard to understand why there are so many artists in one family. My daughter, a pianist, my grandson, Adrian, is keenly interested in acting and theater. My niece Rachel is an artist. I am sure something of my father's belief in a cause, a quest, is here, but also something of the thin skinned sensitivity and poetic psychology of my mother.

The obsessive complexity and mystery of your work reminds me of Gregory Gillespie, but your outlook seems much more optimistic. Did you know Gillespie? What other 20th century artists do you align yourself with? And am I right about the Gothic period?

I met Gregory Gillespie once. It was quite brief. I know his work very well. More influential for me would be three artists: Antonio Lopez Garcia, Lucian Freud, Balthus. The thing that entrances me about these artists is their ability to engage the figurative tradition and to do so in a modern way. Their work seems so alive and not really a repeat of the figurative direction of 100 to 150 years ago. They do this also without a programme or strategy. A more recent member of this group is Anselm Kiefer, who seems to have the same combination of the figurative tradition and a contemporary or modernist architecture.

Yes, I believe you are right about a certain Gothic response. There is something very particular about the Gothic world. This reminds me that I would include Andrew Wyeth with the other artists I mentioned. If I am correct, what you refer to as 'Gothic' implies a great deal of looking and concentration. It is the world of great visual insight and obsession. I think I would include George Tooker here as well, Edwin Dickinson, Edward Hopper and Ivan Albright.

Optimism is an interesting word. I think I understand the word within a range of emotion. I agree, my work is more optimistic than Gillespie. However, it is less optimistic than my brother, much less, I believe. In any event, perhaps the goal, if possible would be to realize a work of art that is *outside* optimism. That is, it just *is* without being wedded to any pre-determined strategy.

Does your Jewish identity inform your work? I read that you are very interested in early Christian art. Your Guggenheim was in Germany, that must have set off a cascade of emotions. Many of your pieces seem to be about community, or individuals within a community. What are your politics and thoughts about how society might be organized? For instance, some of your work features African

American models. Was this any way related to the struggles for equality and rights of all people regardless of religion or ethnic background?

I applied to the Fulbright Program for a grant to study with Antonio Lopez Garcia in Madrid. I saw a spectacular exhibit of Lopez's work at Staempfli Gallery a few years before. I was asked to list a second choice. I chose Germany and to study the art of Durer. The Fulbright Institute requested that I bring a few pictures down to their headquarters. I remember that one of the three works I brought down was N's Kitchen, a piece that is in the current exhibit. It uses an actual door within its construction. It is a drawing and a mixed media assemblage. A letter from the Fulbright Program came a few weeks later. It mentioned that they were sorry to mention that the grant to Spain did not work out but pleased to tell me that the grant to Germany did.

Going to Germany in 1970 was different than going there in 2018. 1970 was just 25 years after the second world war. Here in the United States, we were in the middle of the Vietnamese War. We, and all the other Fulbright recipients, went to Germany via ocean liner. If a fortune teller existed on the ship for passengers and my fortune would have been told, it might have sounded something like this: "You will experience an incredible year of questions, doubt and struggle and will come back with a major work of art, 14 feet in width" I would have said, "You are totally crazy."

I don't think my work is particularly Jewish. However, there is some strongly outsider element in my art that might connect with a Jewish point of view. There is also much interest in thought and consciousness, if that can be interpreted as Jewish. Study, consciousness and intellect - I am not really sure, it's a difficult question, hard to find a good answer to.

The family is also very important, and the male/female relationship seems at least as much about procreation as erotic pleasure. Talk about sex, and the depiction of the female nude. Two of your paintings are icons of female carnal beauty. How have the notions of painting the nude changed over the course of your career?

Some years back I saw an incredible exhibit of Degas at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. His work has so many fascinating dimensions. On this visit, I was struck by his interest in the nude. It seemed that he saw the tradition of the depiction of the nude within Western art and was making an attempt at dealing with this tradition, commenting on it. I sensed that his aim was to be a part of this tradition and to bring something modern, fresh and new to this study. Something of this same quest informs the various depictions of the nude in my work. (see, a few added images)

Tell me about the three people in the triptych and where they are now.

An interesting question. My daughter, Simone, has no doubt changed the most in this trio. At a very, very early age, she showed a great interest in music. In Rome, at about 4, she studied ballet and the recorder, but really felt a great affinity for the piano. About 10 or 12 years ago, her very promising career as a pianist, received a thunderous jolt, with her recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations.

Renee continued to work as a teacher of young children. In fact, the left hand side of The Fulbright Triptych relates to her work as a teacher. For the last 18 years, she has worked as a consultant. Her recent book, *Choice Time*, in its third edition, is an attempt at presenting ways for curiosity, exploration and investigation can be encouraged in the education of young children. Her book, published by Heinemann, will be translated into Chinese, and she will shortly be doing some consulting in Hong Kong.

I continued to grow and stretch as an artist and have had many one man exhibits, including shows at Staempfli Gallery and ACA Galleries in New York, as well as two large-scale traveling exhibits. Four books have been published on my work.

One, The Suspension of Time, Milkweed Editions, is a book of 45 essays devoted to The Fulbright Triptych by such writers as Jhumpa Lahiri, Anthony Doerr, George Crumb, Guy Davenport and John Turturro. It is the only publication out now which is devoted to a single painting of a living American artist.

Talk about technique. Did you start out as a printmaker and then made the triptych as your first painting? Some of your work is very matter of fact and then some is very painterly. How and why did that evolve? Talk about the works on paper and their techniques.

I am very fond of drawing and have an instinctive feel for this media. I have spent consecutive years working in this media, without painting. I use a variety of media and paper supports. The drawings are usually large-scale and are a kind of drawing equivalent of a painting. The drawings are very extreme and, unlike sketches, are taken very far. After I finished art school at the Brooklyn Museum, I spent a few years drawing and then applied for a Fulbright in graphics, which for me, then, was mostly drawing, but there was also printmaking as well. I had painted as a student at the Brooklyn Museum. However, given the journey I was on, the first painting I did after being a student was The Fulbright Triptych. This is quite crazy, definitely *out there* when considering some sense of the overall logic to life.

Compositionally your work is highly symmetric and balanced, very much in keeping with Renaissance design as opposed to the more dynamic designs of the Baroque. Can you tell me about your ideas about composing?

I really believe in the art of composition or the architecture behind the construction of a picture.

I find the issue of space to be very interesting. Space and architecture can almost act as an extra participant in the psychology and construction of an image. I enjoy the way that abstraction and abstract constructs can work within the figurative direction.

Many of your images have many pictures within a picture. How do you want your work to be read by a viewer?

My sense is that there is an aspect of my way of seeing that is quite surreal. Perhaps pictures are part of this theme. They provide portals to another world. In this way, the pictures converse with the larger world within the picture. They also provide an added dialogue with the viewer. In

The Fulbright Triptych, a number of viewers have asked if the pictures on the wall are tromp l'oeil.

(Actually, some have asked if the images are collages.) I can understand why someone would use this term, but it seems to me that the pictures in this painting, and others, bring you *out*, *beyond* and *through* a portal to some other world. In most trompe l'oeil painting, once you have understood the illusion, that is just about it. The painting may be dazzling, but it has a surface strength, usually without a great deal of depth.

Tell me the story of the Rise and Fall of the triptych as a public work of art, once lionized in the NYTimes and later in the basement of Penn State's art collection. What do you want to happen with your work, and can you be a bit philosophical about the nature of fame? And how do you advise your fellow artists how to survive in this era of spiraling suicide?

The Fulbright Triptych received quite an unusual response when it was first shown in New York in

1975. A rave review on this work by John Russell came out in the New York Times.

There was an enormous response and I am quite sure that the attention brought my family to Rome, to the American Academy, where I received the Rome Prize. After returning from Rome, the Triptych was shown again at Staempfli Gallery in 1979 and then in the early 1980's it was sold to the Palmer Museum of Art. The administration at the Palmer changed hands a few times. The last administrator there was a woman who was the Director for more than 25 years. I cannot understand her reasoning, but the Triptych was not shown once at the museum since the painting was purchased.

1982-2018. That Director expressed no interest in the work or the book on the painting. I was totally mystified. It was very frustrating and distressing.

In 2011, a highly unusual book, The Suspension of Time, Milkweed Editions came out, which was followed by another extraordinary review in The Times, this time from Roberta Smith, their current senior art critic. It was thoroughly exciting. There was much attention brought to the painting during a 3 year exhibit at the German Consulate in New York. It was almost as if the painting had a second act. Wasn't it Fitzgerald who said "There are no second acts in American lives."

However, there was never any interest in the book, the review, or anything else connected with the painting, from the Palmer Museum. There was simply no interest in the painting or any sense of pride in ownership of a magisterial work of art. I have mentioned this response to other curators and they are all baffled. At one point, I remember having quite an argument with the curator of American art at the museum. I asked him why the museum owns the painting if they never show it. He responded by saying that my painting did not fit into the courses that were being taught at the Museum and College. I remember mentioning this statement to Alisa Carlson, the curator at the University of Missouri, which hosted the first venue of the present traveling exhibition. She was flabbergasted and said that my painting deals with *all* the classes that were part of an art and art history curriculum.

At this point, there is a new director. Her name is Erin Coe. My recent email conversations with her have been quite pleasant. I hope this signifies that matters will change with this museum.

Can you give me a short description of what you were thinking with each of the pieces in the show?

The Fulbright Triptych:

As many times as I have viewed this painting, from the 3 years (1971-1974) that it took to work on the painting, to all of the multiple exhibits, including the most recent traveling shows, I cannot wrap my arms around this work of art. It eludes me.

The Triptych owes its birth to the Fulbright program. It comes from the disappointment of not going to Spain on this grant to the excitement and ambivalence of going to Germany in 1970. Its birth is connected with the fact that housing wasn't provided in the city of Kassel, where I studied at the Hochschule fur Bildende Künste. The fates looked kindly and an apartment materialized on the top floor of a house in Hess. Lichtenau, about 20 miles from Kassel. The view from this apartment is the view in the painting.

I spent the first half of the year completing a number of drawings as well as working on the print, Angela's Garden. One day, while working on this engraving, for some reason I moved back about 8-10 feet. I saw the table, the widows, some pictures on the wall. The very next day, I began to think of two wings for this center, wings that

would deal with my wife and myself. The room could not contain these wings - the picture could. I saw the wings as somewhat warmer than the cooler middle. The resultant trio presents a conversation, from the wings to the middle; from the space between the wings and the landscape. Perhaps the mystery of the painting lies in the space between the pictures on the wall.

N's Kitchen:

Although I did all of the works in this exhibit, I have never seen all of these pieces together. I have not seen N's Kitchen in 35 years. Seeing it again, I was floored by its intensity and incredibly obsessive pursuit of reality. The kitchen depicted actually existed. It was the kitchen of two dear friends of ours, Nancy and Dave Gilbert, and was located on the top floor of a brownstone. The kitchen was a small sized room, with 2 large rooms on either side. The room had a door, which had a window pane in it. Inside was a dazzling display of the daily ephemera of life. It was mesmerizing. This daily and intense microcosm is what I hoped to depict. The glass window provided a separation, a portal, to enter this surreal world.

The Sink:

The Sink was the very next painting I worked on after The Fulbright Triptych. It is a large painting, 8 x 4 feet. The actual sink stood across the studio from the wall where I worked on The Fulbright Triptych. When I turned around from the Triptych, I saw the sink looming out into the distance. As in many of the works, there is an abstract architecture that was created to construct the image, a kind of pictorial armature would hold up the forms. There is much texture in this painting, built up surfaces and a moody, dissolute psychology prevails. It almost feels as if you can walk into this reality and disappear. The mood is ambivalent-one wants to get up close and look, and one feels a bit anxious and wants to pull back.

Renee:

This drawing preceded the painting of the Triptych. The landscape is quite similar and Renee poses here reading a book. This drawing and its graphic world relates to other works produced during the period. The aim was to seize and occupy and channel all of the details of a world. All kinds of graphic notations attempt to engage with the psychology and presence of Renee. Renee is a very serious reader and during our stay in Germany she read approximately 100 novels. I have always thought that watching her read was very sexy. The image reflected in the book is one of Durer's engravings, Melancholia. Life reflects art and the reverse.

Marie Bilderl:

This drawing was done in Germany. Marie lived next door to us. Her flat, a studio apartment, did not seem much bigger than the actual drawing, which is 41 1/2 x 49 1/2." I was fascinated by Marie and her apartment. She seemed to commune each day with these photographs, with her radio, and with her memories. Marie agreed to pose for me. She was very serious about it and posed for 5 minutes each hour for 3 consecutive hours. I worked wildly on the drawing the whole 3 hours. When it was time to return to New York, Marie gave me her smock, the beadsprad, the heart (which I still have). The drawing is very graphic in feel. Every nuance is represented by a change in texture and graphic notation. The whole piece has an electrifies sensibility in which every element is obsessively worked up.

Arnold:

This certainly is one of the most worked up and intense drawings in this show. At 7 feet in height, the drawing is quite obsessive compulsive and is full of a huge variety of graphic modes of expression. Every hair, pebble, check, nodule, grain of wood is worked out. Over the years, viewers have often mentioned Ivan Albright and Stanley Spencer when looking at this piece. I knew a tiny bit about Albright when I did the drawing About Spencer, I knew nothing. Over the years, I have become quite familiar with these 2 artists. I certainly can see some approach here that connects my work with Albright and Spencer. Arnold was Renee's uncle. His given name was Abraham Lincoln Friedman. Since he was a child, he was called Arnold.

Night Scene 1:

This drawing was inspired by a night view out our window in Brooklyn. What one is viewing here are Brooklyn backyards in a deep night light. The drawing was worked on over consecutive nights, over a period of a few months. The light and swirls provide for a certain amount of energy and pulse within this world. The drawings I do usually are on Rieves BFK paper. The paper has a nice satin-like white to it, a very luminouw white. The lightest lights in the drawing are the paper. In working in this manner, these lights take on a certain mystery. They seem to be coming from inside or underneath and the glow has, I believe, a mystical, surreal character to it.

Purple Haze:

This piece was the last of a grouping of 4 works of the same model which were completed over a few years. Passage of the Moon, has a surreal luminosity. At 5 1/2

feet in width, the piece has a jarring and demanding presence. The drawing attempts to juxtapose an image of a figure with a panoramic landscape of New York. The vista looks out to New Jersey from the 19th floor of an apartment on 14th Street and 7th Avenue. The woman floats over the city bathed in an eerie glow.

After viewing this drawing, a Russian friend of mine suggested I take a look at a book by the writer

Mikhail Bulgakhov titled The Master and Margarita. I had never heard of this writer or the book. However, his book is most amazing and the connection with my drawing is stirring. How lucky I am!

In Sleep:

This drawing was the third of four drawings of Cheryl Yorke, a young woman who had taken an art appreciation class with me. Cheryl possessed great internal and external beauty. She spoke with me about her family and growing up in Saint Vincent. I felt a great connection with her. It seemed to me that, in this drawing, I was channeling Cheryl's world. The drawing had one study for it and proceeded so smoothly. The project had an eerie feel. It seemed as though someone or some mysterious spirit was holding my hand or whispering notes on how to proceed. The four drawings were shown together once at Staempfli Gallery. It would be wonderful to see these works displayed together once more.

Night:

A major and quite mystical image, Night is a drawing that is quite large in scale, about 75" in width. The medium is colored pencil, pastel, conte crayon, wax crayon, oil pastel. The drawing has a great deal of energy and pulse to it. It has a very close space juxtaposed to a very far away panorama. A silvery moon sends out rays from the far left. Children immersed in bag-like masks present themselves in a frontal sweep, quite close to the picture plane. Anxiety fills the landscape, populating it with skeletons, masks, bats, beekeepers, a kind of apocalyptic vista.

Scratch out, a child's way of drawing is used here to find the right character to the light within this scene. The work is inspired by a play that Renee's class did. It was a free form translation of Maurice Sendak's, Where the Wild Things Are. Presented at the very end of October, the play brought for the children, a great release of spirit and electricity. My drawing attempts to channel a scene and mix it with childhood memories that I have of my own anxieties.

Passage of the Moon:

Included in this current show is Passage of the Moon, a major work, which is one in a series of paintings and drawings of the nude. This painting began its life as a drawing, Passage. As I have mentioned, many times my drawings end up to be a kind of visual equivalent of a painting. The drawing was inspired by a model I had worked with and a stunning and ecstatic pose she had taken. I spent months on the drawing and I loved the experience of working with this model. A few months after the completion of this work, we happened to travel to Rome. As luck would have it, the city hosted an incredible exhibit of Japanese art. Within this exhibit, a group of Japanese screens was displayed. One of these, which dealt with the seasons had me transfixed. The image of the screen mixed in my head with the recent drawing of the nude. These conditions provided for the birth of Passage of the Moon.

The painting makes use of gold leaf for the screen echoing the gold leaf used to depict the copper plate in the Triptych.

A Dream Play:

The drawing was inspired by a mysterious photograph I had seen in The Times.

(show image) The photo seemed special and very different than the usual newspaper images. I was struck by the image of the woman, depicted on the far left. I imagined a drawing in which I would replace her, and the figures in the photo would be replaced by individuals in my life, in shadow. As in a dream, these personae would visit, older and younger, alive and not alive. It was difficult to figure out how to compose the image, how to locate the architecture of this vision. A dear friend of mine, listening to my description of this visual idea, suggested I take a look at Strindberg's A Dream Play. My friend's suggestion was perfect and here is Strindberg's introduction to his play:

“ ...Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns make up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations.

The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness hold sway over them all – that of the dreamer...”

Angela's Garden-copper plate

It's rare to see one of these copper plates. In the exhibit we can observe the actual copper plate that I am attempting to depict in The Fulbright Triptych. In the painting, we can see the plate shown sitting on a leather bag on the table in the middle panel. Engravings are done in a particular way. Instead of *drawing* on a plate as would be

the case in etching and drypoint, the engraved relies on *driving* the lines or pushing them forward. This is done with a burin. The lines are driven straight through and the copper is incised with a fine groove. The resultant copper shard is quite sharp and is pared away with a scraper. Curved and circular lines are created by turning the plate. For a circle the line is driven forward as the plate is turned 360 degrees. When the plate is finished, it is inked and the top surface is cleaned. It is a very beautiful jewel-like surface. After successive printings, the ink sometimes stays in the lines, providing a sort of visual after-image of the print. This is what I tried to convey in the painting, by using oil paint over the gold leaf.

Angela's Garden-engraving

Here is an engraving of a garden that existed behind and below an apartment we had in Park Slope, Brooklyn. The burin was used to create all sorts of different graphic notations of this garden.

Dots, circles, swerves of line combine here to create a mini universe of visual activity.

I like the printmaking media and especially the engraved line. Durer's engravings were also done on copper plates. It is rare to see one of these. We traveled to Gotha, a small town in Germany to see Durer's plate of the German philosopher Philip Melanchton. Durer's copper plates were melted down by the Nazi's during the Second World War to make bullets. The Fulbright Triptych is a large painting showing the studio of a printmaker. The engraving that is going on describes a garden in Brooklyn being engraved within a landscape of Germany.

Polhemus Place-engraving

This engraving was done in 1970. I really enjoyed the media and should have done more of these.

Staempfli Gallery, which became my dealer in this period had very little interest in these works. Prints are also very hard to distribute. Staempfli was interested in large and expensive works of art.

A should have continued anyway, even if I only did one of these prints a year, I would have accumulated quite a few.

Polhemus Place is a one block street that was located behind where we lived in Brooklyn, which was Fiske Place in Park Slope. The row of houses faced our back windows. It almost seemed to be a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window. In the movie, a photographer sits with his broken leg, looking and looking out a window. What he sees, what he thinks he sees, what he doesn't see becomes his journey. It's the difference between looking and seeing. He is the artist.