

Where Beauty Lies Next to Violence and Despair

Mary Pope Osborne

The Fulbright Triptych is a rich view into the inner life of an artist. Simon Dinnerstein sets the scene with precision and order. The center panel consists of a table neatly laid out with engraving tools. Above the table, two windows open onto the outer world of a German village. A man and woman sit on opposite ends of the table, and it is their inner world that the *Triptych* reveals through the drawings, prints, and scraps of paper tacked on the wall above their heads. Some of the prints are by great artists like van Eyck, Ingres, and Donatello. There are pieces of paper filled with quotes and a passport or identification card from Russia in 1918. Because the children's drawings spring from the primal imagination that is the genesis of all great art, their work is particularly powerful.

The composition of the *Triptych* is anchored by squares and rectangles. This orderliness gives the work a geometric tidiness that belies the worlds within the room, worlds that must have been fundamental to the development of the artist. The juxtaposition of the children's pictures against the other art gives the *Triptych* its tension. What is one to make of the childish drawing of a beaver attacking a piece of wood with its terrible teeth? Why does one feel despair in a page of zeros signed by Alfredo? Monsters shooting death rays appear in Roberto Ortiz's drawing, while a picture signed by Jean Miele shows a figure distorted by the deadly effects of pollution. The young artist has given the body "smaller ears to cut down on noise pollution," a little torso "stunted from smoke," and puffed up cheeks "to hold some good air."

Children learn to link context and meaning through their imagination. C. S. Lewis once noted that imagination is "the organ for meaning." Perhaps it is the constant need to blend the atavistic chaos of a child's imagination into a larger context of beauty and culture that makes *The Fulbright Triptych* powerful.

Perhaps the artist is saying that while the primal imagination is the engine that drives the artistic process, the gifts of art and culture balance the fierce teeth of the beaver, Alfredo's zeros, and Jean's bleak view of the future. The serene world inside the



studio where beauty lies next to violence and despair just might be ample fortification against the banal menace of the German village and the world outside. In *The Fulbright Triptych*, Simon Dinnerstein gives us an artistic view fueled by the primitive psyche, enriched by culture, and balanced by order. And seated solidly in their chairs, the man, the woman, and the child stare out at us with hope and endurance.

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class 3-3



