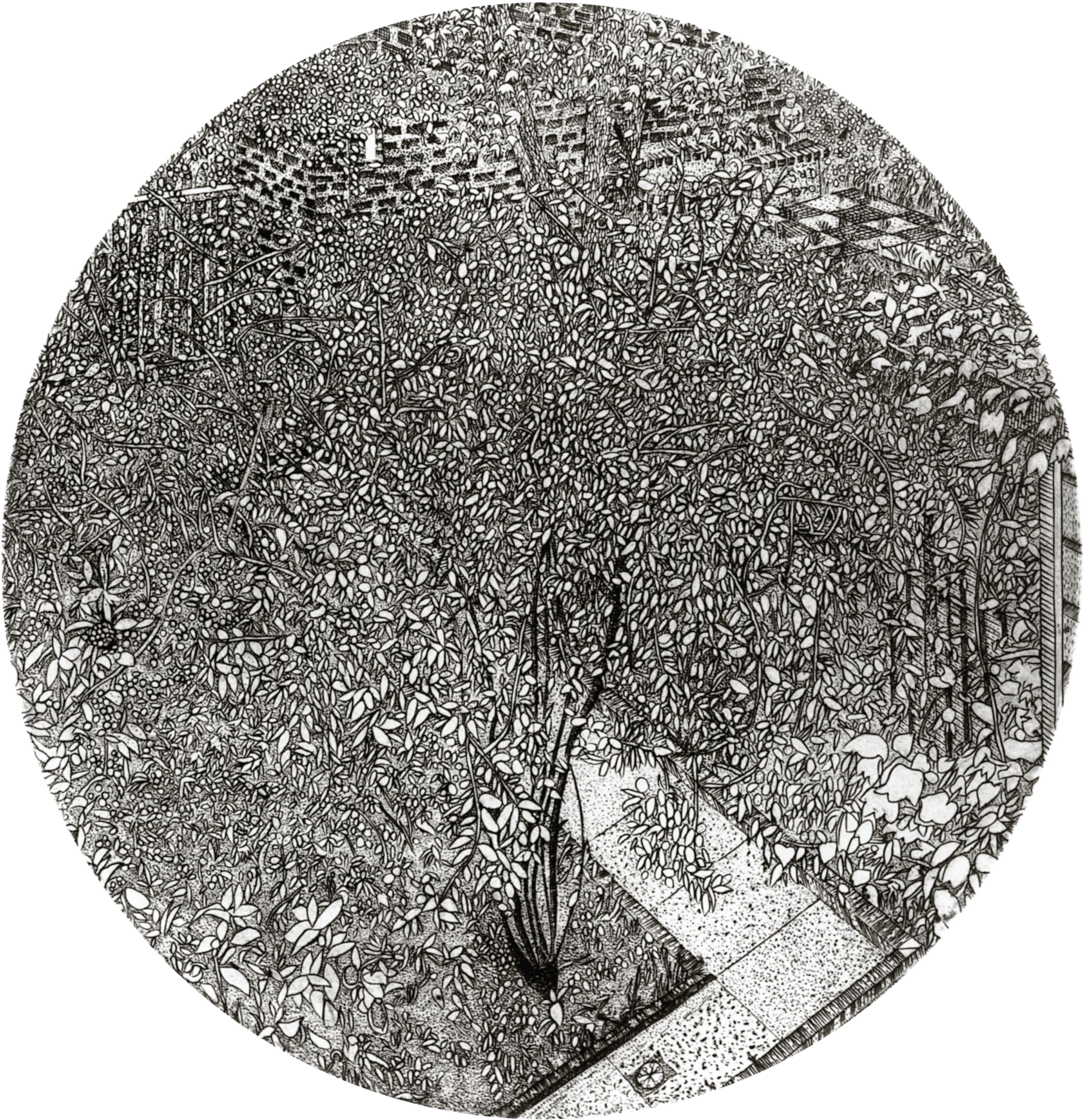

"A view? Oh, a view! How delightful a view is!"

Virginia Bonito

Or, in our case, a room with many views . . .

E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* is the story of a young woman's journey to break free from Victorian social mores and in so doing to discover the transforming power of life and love. Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* shares many of the same qualities—in this case an artist at a crossroad in his life and with his work.

Our first glance at this truly monumental painting reveals an insistent rectilinear geometry that serves as the armature for a stunning variety of elements—elements which one ultimately discovers belong to a realm of reverie celebrating themes about life, traditions, and art. The underlying physical structure of the painting broadly follows the Renaissance system of linear perspective with diagonals converging in a single vanishing point just above—not accidentally—the precocious, poignant, penned lines of the poem "Solitude" by a thirteen-year-old girl, Gloria Mintz. (From the Renaissance period forward, the artistic temperament has often been characterized as solitary, saturnine, and melancholic, a state of mind that prompts flights of fancy, genius, and self-knowledge.) Linear perspective was codified by the fifteenth-century architect Leon Battista Alberti, who proposed that in order for a painting to appear realistic, it should seem as if the viewer is looking through a window; and, in fact, the central of the *Triptych*'s three panels opens to the outside world through two large "windows" that offer a view of a tranquil village where the warmth of a late spring day rises to meet a clear blue sky.

However, we sense immediately that it is the inner space, the artist's studio on the viewer's side of the "windows," where the energy is alive and kinetic, where art and

Angela's Garden, burin engraving, 11 ¾ in. diameter, 1970

life, the formal and the personal, coexist seamlessly. To the right and left of the main panel, we meet full-scale seated images of the artist and of his wife with their infant daughter. The back wall connecting all three panels is covered with postcards, photographs, newspaper cuttings, and scraps of paper—collective leafs in the diary of the artist that, like an extraordinary constellation, reside over and illuminate his own personal cosmology. We are confronted, we discover, not just by one structural perspectival convergence-point, but by a myriad of images, each with its own perspective system, in the richest sense the meaning of the term *perspective* allows. And we soon realize that each and every item tacked onto the wall, no matter how seemingly diminutive in the grand scheme of the *Triptych,* is its own window . . . portal . . . threshold, if you will, onto countless lives and a wealth of thought—time capsules in a way, acting as connectors from the distant past, pausing momentarily in the present, and holding the promise of a hopeful future.

The central panel is dominated by a very large worktable on which are laid a range of printmaker's instruments made personal by the coffee cup, a dried potato skin, and some seed pods from local trees. A circular copperplate, front and center on the table, and the only element that glistens, reads not accidentally like a great umbilicus, beckoning us to approach in order to discover the secrets held within. There, engraved on the golden disc likely by the very burins that surround it, is the most stunningly intricate, lush image of an enclosed garden—archetypal symbol of a sacred space where growth takes place out of harm's way. On a personal level, it is emblematic of a decisive moment for the artist during his Fulbright year. His corpus of work to date focused on large-scale, monochromatic charcoal drawings, and, to a lesser degree, printmaking, both distinguished by a masterful draftsmanship rooted in realist traditions. His proposal to the Fulbright commission, which awarded him the grant to do so, was to study northern Renaissance printmaking techniques, and especially the work of Albrecht Dürer. Settling in Germany, his first months were spent in face-to-face encounters with the masterpieces he had studied at a distance, and like E. M. Forster's protagonist Lucy, the Europe that is the repository of great artistic traditions began to work its magic on the artist. Though we know from Simon that the original plan for what became *The Fulbright Triptych* was only the single central panel, his ideas

for the painting continued to evolve over a three-year period during which time he chose the grander tri-panel scheme, a format that provided him greater thematic versatility and scope.

If the reader will allow an art historical aside here, it is worth mentioning that the format which Simon ultimately adopted for *The Fulbright Triptych* (literally, three panels), was popularized by fifteenth-century Netherlandish artists. The subject matter of these triptychs was primarily religious, most often representing themes related to dogma or mystical revelations. The side panels of these triptychs—commonly referred to as wings—were usually hinged to the main or central panel and were typically painted on both sides. In the closed position, these wings functioned like doors, concealing the main panel and its sacred image from view. Whether in the open or closed position, the imagery depicted on the wings related directly to the theme of the central panel and was usually the domain for placement of the donors, who often appeared as participants in the mystery; the human component, the connectors between earthly devotion, faith, and the divine revealed. Jan van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (commonly referred to as the Ghent Altarpiece), and Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1510-15) are universally admired as among the greatest of the northern Renaissance triptychs. Each is distinguished not only by craft, monumental scale, and cinematic vistas, but by their primary subject matter which is dedicated to the archetypal theme of garden—in the case of van Eyck, the Garden of Paradise, and of Bosch, as the title reveals, the Garden of Earthly Delights. As Simon often notes, on a personal level, van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece is one of the most moving and mesmerizing works of art ever created, a tour de force in all aspects, pictorial and theological, given by one of the greatest master painters to have graced this earth.

While Simon's placement of himself, his wife, and daughter in the wings, or side panels of *The Fulbright Triptych*, is clearly a device borrowed from the traditional placement of donors in the wings of Netherlandish triptychs, it is, in his hands, ingeniously reconfigured. One major difference is that *The Fulbright Triptych* "wings" were not given the option to close; not hinged, they were intended to remain open. From their vantage point at either side of the main panel, Renée with Simone and Simon function like ancient guardians of portals, like great hieratic bookends making "sacred" the many

volumes of their own special story. Through the addition of the wings with their living, human component, the impact of the central panel is amplified. Undisturbed by human activity—which is left to be intuited—the central panel assumes the aspect of an iconic distillation retort, its function signaled by its own special garden, imaged in the engraving plate and radiating the smoldering golden tone of alchemical transformation.

The key to the implications held within Simon's *Triptych* is to be found at the back of the worktable. Along the back edge on the right, the worn stubs of colored pencils direct the eye to the sills below the windows, asplash with color. If anyone has ever seen the horizontal support bar of a well-used painter's easel, the analogy is all too evident.

In 1936, the surrealist master René Magritte offered a virtuoso parody of the Albertian pictorial "window" as a means of drawing attention to the relationships between visualization, tantalizingly real imagery, the blank canvas, and pictorial language. In his painting *The Key to the Fields*, Magritte presents the view of a meadow through a broken "window" pane, whose shattered pieces of glass, fallen below the sill, hold images of the broken segments of the "actual" meadow.

In the central panel of *The Fulbright Triptych,* between the "windows" and just above the back of the table, a letter from Renée revealing a peculiar dream about the prospect of childbirth is tacked to the wall:

> Simon—Just woke up from the craziest dream. I was having a baby in our apartment in Germany—Dr. Neff had all this crazy apparatus hooked up—Both our mothers were there arguing with the doctor about how the baby should be delivered—I was scared because I thought there was a dead baby in me, but when the baby was delivered I faked everyone out because it was just a big air bubble!!! Wow, what does this all mean!!!!??*?

The letter, and its noteworthy placement within the dense complex of imagery, signals a fundamental turning point in the lives of Simon and ultimately Renée. Renée had tacked a German coin to the back at the center of the main panel in just about the same location as the image of her letter on the front, reinforcing the magic held by that particular moment. Under the coin she wrote:

> Begun in Good Faith and High Hopes on May 3rd, 1971 Hess Lichtenau Quenteler Weg 31 Germany with the love of Renée.

And on that day in May, Simon flipped the monochromatic-charcoal-drawing-and-printmaking side of his own "art coin" to the color side, launching his career as a distinguished contemporary realist painter. And like the animated runner in the stopwatch, so poignantly placed between Renée's letter and the color-filled windowsill to its right, Simon was off and running, ready to take on the challenge posed by the conundrum on the scrap of paper tacked so purposefully to the left of Renée's letter (and so meaningfully articulated decades earlier in *The Key to the Fields* by Magritte):

> And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in a language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and every particular form of life could be other than it is.
> (This quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps from his text *Philosophical Investigations*, appeared in the *Village Voice*; Simon clipped it and had it among other items with him in Germany.)

A group of diverse images clustered between the windows (above the letter, stopwatch, and Wittgenstein quote) chant Simon's personal litany of inspired creativity and daunting challenge. At the very top is Giovanni Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*, a painting that intrigued not only Simon but captured the attention of none other than Degas to copy it—no doubt drawn to it by the structural perfection of its visionary presentation of pious devotion that imbues the terrestrial realm with an atmosphere of calm silence, as well as for its place in the history of art as a hallmark of the sort of flawless artistic production that flourished in the learned circles of Renaissance humanism, philosophy, and theology.

Below it, to the left, is a painting of a pregnant woman, preparing a meal perhaps, that directs attention to the mysteries of life and birth that are silently at work as we occupy ourselves with daily routines. (Titled *In the Kitchen*, it is a tip of the hat by

Simon to his older brother, the noted artist Harvey Dinnerstein. It is, at the same time, an acknowledgment by Simon of the hard-won realization that although there was already one fine artist in the family, each of us, no matter, must follow our own heart and calling.) To the right is *Self-Portrait,* in which Edwin Dickinson (1891-1978), distinguished member of the National Academy of Design, of which Simon is currently a member, has pictured himself picturing, with another of his images at his back (featuring intersected circles, lozenges, and cubes) the elemental geometries that underpin all created matter.

Below these, the poem "Solitude":

Grey and sweating
And only one I person
Fighting and fretting.

The poem hovers above visualizations of its handwritten, pointed observation: an older, calloused, pregnant woman, seemingly unmoved by the miracle of life in which she is participating, drawn by Käthe Kollwitz; *Models* by Seurat (1887-1888), and *The Art of Painting* by Vermeer (1662-1675). Thus, we are reminded of the private journey that is the creative process. Read from left to right this set of "paintings within paintings within paintings" illuminates the very shift from monochromatic imaging to pointillist dots of color that combine in the eye to the opulent tonalities of Vermeer that is at the heart of Simon's own painting. The center of this particular set is punctuated by the standing nude model at the midpoint of Seurat's painting, within which she and her companions tell the story of transformations that belong to the composing of pictures, a message reinforced by Seurat with his inclusion of a portion of his renowned painting *La Grande Jatte* into the picture to the model's left. The standing model—noteworthy for her neutrality—plays a similar role as a protagonist in Simon's painting, calmly signaling the call to participate in some new depiction to be envisioned in paint.

Further down and strategically positioned, van Eyck's *Eve* and the Persian miniature to its right reverberate the central theme of protected garden and of the dilemma posed by the hubris that is enmeshed in human nature.

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our worlds will then be the world,
there is no answer. For the an-
swer would have to be given in a
language, and a language would
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forms of life, and every particu-
lar form of "life" could be other
than it is.

AEROGRAMME
PAR AVION

Below these, our musings are halted in the purposeful glance at the viewer by Hans Holbein's merchant, *Georg Gisze*. Front and center at the viewer's eye level in the run of items between the "windows," and proudly surrounded by the many various items and inscriptions that tell the story of his enterprising nature and his intellectual bent, the Gisze portrait is the microcosm—the raison d'être of sorts, of the macrocosm that is Simon's *Triptych*.

Each unique image in the array of items on the walls of the side panels, like those we have taken note of as they appear between the "windows" of the central panel, is similarly charged with multiple layers of meaning: from the details of famed Netherlandish paintings by Bouts and van Eyck, taped above the heads of Renée and Simon—springing as if from living plants—of a tearful Virgin, who has witnessed the sacrifice of her son for salvation (and as such is the archetype of every mother, religion aside, who grieves the loss of a child); and of *Baudouin de Lannoy*, ideal male role model, whose stolid expression belies his ambassadorial and courtly successes; to the spontaneous, imaginative color drawings by children; photos of family pastimes and lovers' outings; passports that tell of travel and immigration; to the continuum of postcards and snippets of text that hold private admiration for great art.

Lending a mood of stoic calm as an armature for its flights of fancy and musings about creativity, Simon's stylistic choice of direct, hard-edged structural formality is the perfect foil for the flood of myriad thoughts, imagery, intellect, and emotion that are the driving force of the *Triptych*.

Each item that cumulatively was called on by the artist in the creation of the grand scheme of this kaleidoscopic vision of the phenomenon we know as our humanity has been *re-pictured*—thoughtfully and soul-searchingly processed through mind and hand by Simon—in the replication of the wall of his studio in Germany. The wall is a testimony to the artist as intellectual, in continual study of the curious wonder that is existence. Unquestionably, part of the creative process that culminated in *The Fulbright Triptych* were daily confrontations that are also the subject of this painting—the gauntlet of uncertainty facing every artist as they address the nagging, overarching questions: Who am I?; Where will *my* art fit in the great expanse of what has gone before?; Will I nonetheless have the courage to confront the blank surface before me with the hope that enlightened vision and bright imagination will be my constant guides?

Simon returned to the United States at the end of 1971, with the main panel in tow and well underway. In the three years that belonged to the evolution of *The Fulbright Triptych* (1971 to 1974), Simon and Renée's lives truly filled with color. Chroma brought a new vitality to Simon's pictures, and a baby girl, Simone, colored their world in ways to that point unimaginable—life and art were, like the secret alchemical garden, in full flower.

In this writer's view, *The Fulbright Triptych* is the map of the struggle to become not only a consummate painter but, in its richest sense, a whole human being. Its message sounds the call that art is everywhere; and, that it is to be found in each and every one of us. It holds the proposition that each of us can and should be the artists of our lives—expressing through language, sound, or visual form the pageantry that is our existence in all of its sorrows, adventures, and joys. It speaks to the essence of courage found both in love and in the intimate acquiescence of heart, mind, and will to the profound, higher vibrations of the life force that are the truest threads of the fabric of our existence. As such, the *Triptych* stands as a wondrous symbol of the core elements of true alchemy, of the power to transform base matter into *precious mettle.*