



Louise Glück
Robert Pinsky

POETRY

James Dinerstein
SCULPTURE

POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Studio Visits

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The Poetry Society of America is inaugurating a new series, *Studio Visits*, which aims to connect literature and art with readings by major poets in the studios of accomplished contemporary artists. This catalogue documents the first event in the series: Louise Glück and Robert Pinsky reading in the sculpture studio of James Dinerstein in Greenpoint, Brooklyn November 1, 2008.

COVER: *Newtown Creek Series: Beckoning*,
2008, cement (detail)

“Rhyme” from *Gulf Music* by Robert Pinsky. Published by
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“Moonbeam” from *The Seven Ages* by Louise Glück.
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A Note on Today's *Studio Visit*

Alice Quinn, Executive Director, Poetry Society of America

It is my great good fortune to have a number of close friends who are superb artists, all of them passionate about poetry and exhilarating conversationalists on the subject of the poetry they love. So I have long thought it would be exciting to bring poets and artists together in events that would be meaningful to them and to an audience new to one or the other, or both.

Last season, the Poetry Society presented two successful programs in a series called *New Visions* in collaboration with the Center for the Humanities at CUNY's Graduate Center. These events explored exciting collaborations between artists and poets—the painter Amy Sillman's work with poet Wayne Koestenbaum and the photographer Deborah Luster's work with poet C. D. Wright.

This summer, my visit to James Dinerstein's studio and my introduction to his elegant, majestic work inspired a new series: *Studio Visits*, afternoon or evening events bringing poets into the studios of artists to read poems in the surround of supremely accomplished contemporary art. I was deeply affected by the work I experienced in Dinerstein's studio. As I walked around the sculptures, their shapes shifted. They are abstract and made of concrete, but they are also mobile and from certain perspectives fleetingly figurative.

Upon seeing this work I immediately had the hope that Louise Glück and Robert Pinsky, who are great friends and fellow (American) Cantabrigians, would respond to it as well. When Robert was next in New York, he and I ventured together across the East River to Dinerstein's Greenpoint studio and spent a vivid hour there. Robert shared his response to Dinerstein's work with Louise, et voila! I hope you will enjoy the poems that follow, and the debut of what we hope will prove to be a wonderful and lasting series.

Putting the Voice Back into the Form: James Dinerstein's Hellenized Modernism

Louis Menand

James Dinerstein's sculptures are monumental. They are also intimate. They are silent and imperturbable; they are also witty and expressive. They are anxious and amused, noble and goofy, robust and puckered, bold and secretive, dignified and nonchalant, solemn and chatty, familiar and weird. Formally, they are abstract, but the shapes are vaguely figurative. (Is that a violin head, a tunic, an earlobe?) Materially, they are concrete (in fact, cement), but the contouring is plastic. (The ancient Egyptians treated stone as if it were wood; Dinerstein treats cement as if it were peanut butter.) They seem archaic and modernist at the same time. In other words, they are original. We can account for them, but only so far.

Dinerstein's sculptures have more than one aspect in part because they have more than one face—they generally have four faces—and the faces are stylistically asymmetrical. We are invited to circle the object, as a minor deity might circle a very small planet, and the views surprise us. On the first approach, a piece can seem fairly decorous and elegant (though there is always a little complication of the effect, a jiggling of perception, a pea under the mattress); around the corner, from a different angle of vision, the same work can look convoluted and baroque.

The works pose a modest challenge to our ordinary understanding of sculptural form. We tend to imagine modern sculpture according to two types: blobs and chains. A work by Rodin or Henry Moore is a blob: a volumetric mass that has been chiseled into to produce a single shape. A work by David Smith or Anthony

Caro, on the other hand, is a chain: a series of shapes that have been welded together to form a pattern, an assemblage. It's like the difference between a word and a sentence, or a chord and a melody. The eye reads (or tries to read) a blob synchronically and a chain diachronically.

Dinerstein descends from the school of Smith and Caro. (Caro was his teacher, at St. Martin's Art School in London.) But he has managed something unexpected. He creates chains in the form of blobs. The faces of his pieces are relational—the side presenting nobility and composure is such by virtue of its relation to the side showing quirkiness and irresolution—but the object is



RIGHT: Rodin, *Nude study of Balzac*, 1893–97, bronze

BELOW: Anthony Caro, *Table Piece LXIII*, 1968, painted steel



singular. It is as though Dinerstein has taken the bones of a chain construction and put flesh on them. There are Cubist planes running under the skin of his pieces, but the skin has a very articulate life of its own.

One is tempted to say that there is nothing quite like these sculptures, but there is one thing that is quite like them, a thing that is also elegant and awkward, serene and anxious, firm and irresolute. A human being is like that. And this is one place to begin to account for the strange life in these pieces.

On the second floor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art there are two galleries whose contents, created twenty-five hundred years apart, are not normally imagined as touching hands. On the Fifth Avenue side is a small gallery of Cypriote art, influenced by Hellenic styles and dating back to the sixth century BCE. On the Central Park

side is a large gallery of Abstract Expressionist art, mostly paintings, from the late nineteen-forties through the mid-sixties. Dinerstein's work can be thought of as an effort to find a language that is true to both ends of this historical spectrum.

What would it mean to be true to the art of the ancient Hellenic world? The figures most relevant to Dinerstein's work are the kouroi, freestanding statues of male or female youths. These are not individualized; the form is general. The statues are not portraits; they contain no narratives. They are models. The object stands for youth: legs are solid (the figure, canonically, is stepping forward), the chest is firm, the gaze is outward. Uprightness is the tenor, for uprightness is the attribute of being human. The human being is a being with purpose, and the acceptance of that condition is the marker

LEFT: *Anavrysos Kouros*, 530–20 B.C., National Museum, Athens

MIDDLE AND RIGHT: James Dinerstein, two views of *Still Speech*, 1999, clay for bronze cast



of youth. To stand erect or to stride forward is to assert that being is more than mere existence.

It's impossible to know what sort of affect was associated with these pieces—what their “aura” might have been—twenty-five hundred years ago in a life-world we would hardly recognize. But the kouroi were used as grave markers, and, today, they project, inescapably, the feeling of mortality. An invisible shadow cuts across their sunny forms. Their real-life antecedents have been dust for centuries. Whatever meaning is entailed with being human, death must be part of it. Or, to put it less sentimentously and more appropriately in present context of Dinerstein's new work: whatever can stand up must also lie down.

And what would it mean to be true to the art of Abstract Expressionism? In this case, we are not distant enough. The life-world of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko is, roughly, our life-world—and we have the interventions of art theorists and critics and historians to inflect and correct our own experiences with this work. The name itself suggests a divided nature. Abstract Expressionist art is abstract, and thus analytical: it represents a formal engagement with the properties of the medium. And Abstract Expressionist art is expressionist, and thus personal: this is, after all, a “school” of painters whose styles are radically different from one another. Cubist paintings and Impressionist painting and Surrealist paintings share vocabularies. The artists look like members of the same family. But a Rothko looks

nothing like a Pollock or a Franz Kline. Each artist enters the arena of the medium armed with the same materials, but the encounter produces dramatically different results. These are, roughly, the Greenberg and the Rosenberg accounts of Abstract Expressionist art—the accounts that for many years provided much of the correcting and inflecting of response in this area. Choosing between them was once no small matter, and near to compulsory. We, having rather less at stake than they did, might split their difference by imagining that taking painting seriously as a medium might in itself figure as an act of personal responsibility, since it meant finding a language of abstraction for oneself, making a painting *where there are no models of what a painting should be*. There is something morally heroic about this in the sense represented by the kouros, understood as a representation of the commitment to find a meaning in existence *when no meaning is given*. With Abstract Expressionism, the kouros is the art object itself. Its presentness is the human presentness of being in the world.

It would be oversimplifying (it would be oversimplifying *even more*) to suggest that the Greenbergian demand to push toward higher degrees of self-reflexivity, and to reduce more and more the range of possibilities for what painting as such, or sculpture as such, might constitute, thinned out the vocabulary of abstract art. But there does seem to be less expressiveness, and there is certainly less sheer assertiveness, in a work by Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland than there is in a work by Pollock or Barnett

Newman or Clifford Still. Dinerstein's sculpture descends from the second-generation Abstract Expressionists, but it is an attempt to reanimate that tradition by inflecting abstract form with signs of humanness, acts of gratuitousness. He proposes to enhance the articulateness of abstract construction, to put flesh on the lines and planes of formal composition. Which is perfectly consistent with the program of the Abstract Expressionists themselves, since, for them, formal composition was itself an assertion of meaning. Recovering this impulse is what puts the modernist into contact with the archaic.

The first exhibition of Dinerstein's sculpture I saw was at the Grounds for Sculpture, in New Jersey, and among the things I remember about the work was the prevalence of upright, kouros-like forms. (My sense at the time was that there was something Egyptian about these pieces.) My first reaction to the recent work, which he calls the Newtown Creek series, was that his sculptural language had gone labial, that he had re-gendered his art. But maybe his work has simply detumesced. Detumescence, after all, is a state of wrinkles and folds, curves and planes, too. The pieces are rich with local moments of intense formal patterning; the sculptures are not simply "soft." The postures of the new work are the postures of relaxation, languor, receptiveness, weariness, age—but also a certain coolness of repose, the expression of a latent virility, like the way Frank Sinatra might sit on a stool. (See, for example, the piece entitled "Sudden Inclination.") There is more of SpongeBob SquarePants than Alexander the Great in this



James Dinerstein, *Newtown Creek Series: Sudden Inclination*, 2007, cement

work. The affect is playful, coy, moody, under control but at the same time uninhibited in following out the logic, or illogic, of a shape or vector.

But the intensity is still there. "Sculpture is a proposition about the physical world, about a finite order (completeness), and by implication about our existence in the world," said the sculptor William Tucker, who was also one of Dinerstein's teachers in London. These cement blocks will never stand up. They are frozen in the attitudes that fate has given them. That is part of their pathos. But we are not frozen, at least not yet.



Newtown Creek Series: group view, Physis and Appointed Rounds

Louise Glück *Moonbeam*

The mist rose with a little sound. Like a thud.
Which was the heart beating. And the sun rose, briefly diluted.
And after what seemed years, it sank again
and twilight washed over the shore and deepened there.
And from out of nowhere lovers came,
people who still had bodies and hearts. Who still had
arms, legs, mouths, although by day they might be
housewives and businessmen.

The same night also produced people like ourselves.
You are like me, whether or not you admit it.
Unsatisfied, meticulous. And your hunger is not for experience
but for understanding, as though it could be had in the abstract.

Then it's daylight again and the world goes back to normal.
The lovers smooth their hair; the moon resumes its hollow existence.
And the beach belongs again to mysterious birds
soon to appear on postage stamps.

But what of our memories, the memories of those who depend on
images?
Do they count for nothing?

The mist rose, taking back proof of love.
Without which we have only the mirror, you and I.



Newtown Creek Series: group view, Sudden Inclination, Appointed Rounds and Physis

Robert Pinsky *Rhyme*

Air an instrument of the tongue,
The tongue an instrument
Of the body, the body
An instrument of spirit,
The spirit a being of the air.

A bird the medium of its song.
A song a world, a containment
Like a hotel room, ready
For us guests who inherit
Our compartment of time there.

In the Cornell box, among
Ephemera as its element,
The preserved bird—a study
In spontaneous elegy, the parrot
Art, mortal in its cornered sphere.

The room a stanza rung
In a laddered filament
Clambered by all the unsteady
Chambered voices that share it,
Each reciting *I too was here*—

In a room, a rhyme, a song.
In the box, in books: each element
An instrument, the body
Still straining to parrot
The spirit, a being of air.



Sudden Inclination



Newtown Creek Series: Sudden Inclination, 2007, cement, 23 x 24 x 26 inches



Beckoning



Newtown Creek Series: Beckoning, 2008, cement, 50 x 76 x 62 inches



Appointed Rounds



Newtown Creek Series: Appointed Rounds, 2008, cement, 32 x 46 x 35 inches



Physis



Newtown Creek Series: Physis, 2007, cement, 49 x 60 x 45 inches



Newtown Creek Series: Brief Episode, 2008, cement, 13 x 14 x 16 inches



Newtown Creek Series: group view, Physis, Appointed Rounds and Beckoning

James Dinerstein

Born Brooklyn, New York

Graduated from *Harvard*, studied with art historian, Michael Fried, and philosopher, Stanley Cavell.

Studied in the advanced sculpture program at *St. Martin's Art School* in London with Anthony Caro and William Tucker.

EXHIBITIONS

10th Anniversary Invitational Exhibition, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ, *Sky-gatherer I* exhibited, Spring 2005

Bronze Sculpture, Salander-O'Reilly Gallery, New York City, September 2001

Featured Artist, Fall/Winter exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, October 2000–April, 2001. Three sculptures acquired for permanent collection.

Table Sculptures, William-O'Reilly Galleries, New York City, April 1999

Sculpture Exhibition, William-O'Reilly Gallery, New York City, February 1998

Group Sculpture Exhibition, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York City, March 1996

Featured Artist, Summer/Fall exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ, 1995

Bronze sculpture, Fall/Winter exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ, 1994–95. *Canon* purchased for permanent collection

Recent Sculpture, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York City, January 1994

Connecticut State Commission on the Arts, 1992

Finalist in national competition for sculptural commission for City of Hartford

Sculptural Intimacies: Recent Small Scale Sculpture, Security Pacific Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1989–1990. Bronze sculpture, *Scribe*, purchased by Security Pacific Bank for executive offices in San Francisco.

East Side—West Side, Bruce Helander Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida, November 1989

New Abstraction: Group Painting Exhibition, Acquavella Gallery, New York City, June 1987

Louise Glück is the author of numerous books of poetry, most recently, *Averno* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award in Poetry; *The Seven Ages* (2001); and *Vita Nova* (1999), winner of Boston Book Review's Bingham Poetry Prize and The New Yorker's Book Award in Poetry. She is the winner of the 2008 Wallace Stevens Award. Her other books include *Meadowlands* (1996); *The Wild Iris* (1992), which received the Pulitzer Prize and the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Award; *Ararat* (1990), for which she received the Library of Congress's Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry; and *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Boston Globe Literary Press Award, and the Poetry Society of America's Melville Kane Award. She has also published a collection of essays, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (1994), which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Nonfiction. Her honors include the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, a Sara Teasdale Memorial Prize, the MIT Anniversary Medal and fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1999, Glück was elected a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets. In the fall of 2003, she succeeded Billy Collins as the Library of Congress's twelfth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. In 2003, she was named as the new judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. She is a writer-in-residence at Yale University.

Robert Pinsky is the author of several collections of poetry, most recently *Gulf Music: Poems* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 2007); *Jersey Rain* (2000); *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966–1996* (1996), which received the 1997 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and was a Pulitzer Prize nominee. He is also the author of several prose titles, including *The Life of David* (Schocken, 2006); *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry* (2002); *The Sounds of Poetry* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. From 1997 to 2000, he served as the United States Poet Laureate and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. During that time, he founded the

Favorite Poem Project, a program dedicated to celebrating, documenting and encouraging poetry's role in Americans' lives. His honors include an American Academy of Arts and Letters award, Poetry Magazine's Oscar Blumenthal prize, the Poetry Society of America's William Carlos Williams Award, and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. He is currently poetry editor of the weekly Internet magazine *Slate*. Pinsky has taught at both Wellesley College and the University of California, Berkeley, and currently teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University.

Louis Menand is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of English at Harvard University. *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), his detailed history of American intellectual and philosophical life in the 19th and 20th centuries, received a Pulitzer Prize in history in 2002. It also received the 2002 Francis Parkman Prize. He published *American Studies* in 2002, a collection of essays and articles on themes in American culture. Menand is currently a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine, and was a Contributing Editor of the New York Review of Books from 1994–2001.

Becket Logan photographed the *Newtown Creek Series* reproduced here.

"It was the experience of a slow meditation being in Jim Dinerstein's Greenpoint studio, absorbing and understanding these architectural and monumental works. Although abstract, these sculptures have a striking emotional resonance that mirror another time, civilization or some forgotten zone of the imagination. They don't seem fixed as you move around them, but are changing and knowing. With its shafts of light pointing downward, the studio space suggests a temple interior with its imposing figures awaiting some celebratory ceremony. This meant to me that the photographic representation be only in black and white, with the play of silver and light. In other words, a slight abstraction of an abstract subject."

Mr. Logan's photographic works include art, architecture and portraiture. He lives in New York City.