

A CAPITAL COLLECTION

Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art

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with Corcoran Curators and Contributors

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The lights dim

Ken Aptekar (American, b. 1950)

The lights dim, 1997

Oil on wood, sandblasted glass and bolts, fifteen panels, 72 x 120 in.

Museum Purchase, 1998

Ken Aptekar's recast historical paintings are multivalent objects that synthesize past and present. Aptekar uses appropriated images from art history to examine the impact of conditions of presentation on the experience of viewing art and to raise questions about provenance, context, and reception. These painted revisions of extant works encourage individual rediscovery through their balance of contemporary and historical elements. Autobiographical narratives or fragments from interviews are sandblasted onto glass and then bolted to the surfaces of the paintings. Partially obscuring the images below, these texts interfere and intersect with the adapted source paintings to produce potent juxtapositions of word and image. Conjoining contemporary narratives with transcriptions of historical paintings to produce alternate contexts, Aptekar invites viewers to scrutinize familiar works of art for new meanings.

In 1997, Aptekar selected a number of seventeenth- to early-nineteenth-century paintings from the Corcoran's collection as the basis for an exhibition of thirty works titled *Talking to Pictures*. He explored the works through extensive archival research as well as interviews with Corcoran curators, art students, the general public, and museum guards. Aptekar's interaction with the groups yielded a broad range of responses, which he incorporated into painted revisions of historical works that read as palimpsests of old and new. The comments of contemporary viewers—such as the art student's description of a self-portrait by Walter Shirlaw as “boring”—often appear in the texts overlaying Aptekar's adaptations. These remarks, along with autobiographical narratives, are paired with Aptekar's “copies” of paintings from the museum's collection.

In *The lights dim*, Aptekar combines fifteen “repaintings” of landscapes from the Corcoran's collection into a 72-by-120-inch grid, conjoining paintings by artists such as Albert Bierstadt,

Ralph Albert Blakelock, Charles-François Daubigny, Jan van Goyen, Myndert Hobbema, Camille Pissarro, and Willem the Younger Van de Velde into a series of abutting cloud vignettes. Floating just above the surface of the painted panels, a text recounts the artist's childhood experience of being carried away by the unfolding musical line of Debussy's *Three Nocturnes*. The ten-year-old narrator's reverie is abruptly broken, however, when the orchestral elements begin to fall out of sync. A clarinet is late, a French horn goes flat, and the boy is suddenly “pulled down” out of the clouds.

This narrative account forewarns the viewer of the pictorial collisions in the wall-sized grid of paintings below. Aptekar's incisive recombinations of the excerpted landscapes contain pictorial fissures and faults that visually reenact the orchestral disruption described in the overwritten text. These unsettling reinterpretations and combinations intentionally disrupt the lyrical structures of the original paintings. The sensuously textured moon in Blakelock's *Moonlight*, for example, is given a shrill cast in Aptekar's tightly cropped, vertical reworking of the atmospheric original. Adding details, altering palettes, or reversing compositions, the artist creates intriguingly fresh perspectives on venerable landscape paintings.

Overloaded with clouds and sky, Aptekar's top-heavy landscapes both seduce and disappoint the viewer, who, like the young boy listening to Debussy, longs to be transported by the pictures' lyrical promise. Intended to jar, these appropriative jabs at pictorial virtuoso style belie the spirit of ineluctable naturalism that defines landscape painting. Despite a surfeit of atmospheric detail, the landscape fragments are reduced by Aptekar's freeze-frame treatment to being, as the narrative about Debussy's inspiration reminds us, “some clouds. That is all.”

Paige Turner