

# THE DAILY BREAK

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THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT THE DAILY BREAK THURSDAY, JANUARY 17, 2002

## Aptekar work has stunning presence

BY FRED BAYERSDORFER  
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

**I**NSPIRATION and creativity at times appear to come to us not from within, but from out of nowhere. It's as if art resides fully formed in another realm only to visit us occasionally — like an angel, and only if we are very good.

The angel is a frequent metaphor for creativity and possesses both positive and negative connotations.

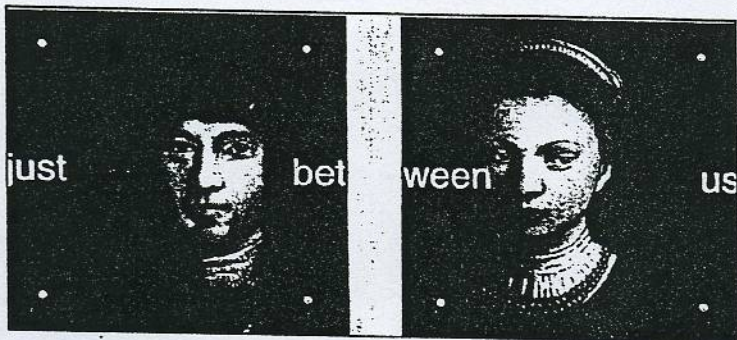
On the surface, the Ken Aptekar exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia seems to be about our relationship to angels. That remains true even in the face of a larger message implied in the work.

His work consists of images over which he bolts heavy sheets of plate glass. And he has sandblasted words onto the glass to form narratives.

The resulting objects have a stunning presence — an elegant combination of utility and modernist beauty. The inscriptions float above and cast shadows on the surface of the painting. They can be interpreted as remarking on the image; the image also can be read as altering the meaning of the words.

It's natural to attach a narrative to images — to make up a story that explains the action. Aptekar's work encourages this and leads the viewer in multiple directions.

His images, however, are not his own. He borrows — or "ap-



"Just Between Us" (2001) is a mixed-media work by Ken Aptekar.

### ART REVIEW

**What:** "Angels? Rembrandt? Recent Skeptical Works by Ken Aptekar"

**Where:** Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, 2200 Parks Ave., Virginia Beach

**When:** through Feb. 10

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, until 4 p.m. Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Sunday

**Cost:** \$3, \$2 seniors and students, free for 3 and younger

**Call:** 425-0000

propriates," as historians dub it — the images of other artists. Then he pairs them with narratives through his choice of quotes.

The suggested story often is clearly related to the activity in the image. In other cases, the narrative seems obscure, perhaps personal.

He also appropriates quotations and attaches these to the images.

The most compelling and revealing of Aptekar's images is "Walter Benjamin is Looking. . . ." The work uses a

greatly altered copy of Paul Klee's watercolor "Angelus Novus" over which a thick sheet of glass reproduces the musings of Walter Benjamin, an important 20th century writer and theorist.

The short text describes an imagined angel of history. "His face turned toward the past," Benjamin wrote, the angel witnesses the destruction and disasters that constitute history. And is unable to stop them, unable to change what has been seen.

This is not Aptekar's image,

these are not Aptekar's words — and we might well ask: Where is Aptekar's creativity?

This work risks much and succeeds on multiple levels. It popularizes the ideas of Benjamin and gives us the source of his inspiration. Beyond that, it questions the nature of meaning. As insightful as Benjamin's thoughts are, they are not the meaning intended by Klee.

Through his pairings of text and image, Aptekar invites us to come up with our own interpretations. Further, he implies we might also give our own meaning to the words of Benjamin.

The title adds even more ambiguity. It's obvious Benjamin is looking at the image, but the title also implies he is looking at us. Before we read the rest of the inscription, we may construe that he watches what we do — as does the angel of history.

We are part of what the angel sees — the present rapidly fading into the past. The work participates in history now. Klee's image, repainted, altered and degraded, is part of the detritus of history as is Walter Benjamin's life.

Even Aptekar's meaning must pale in light of the viewers' imaginations. And that is where Aptekar's creativity lies — in the ability to provoke in the viewer numerous responses which ultimately lead us back to the image.