

# J&E

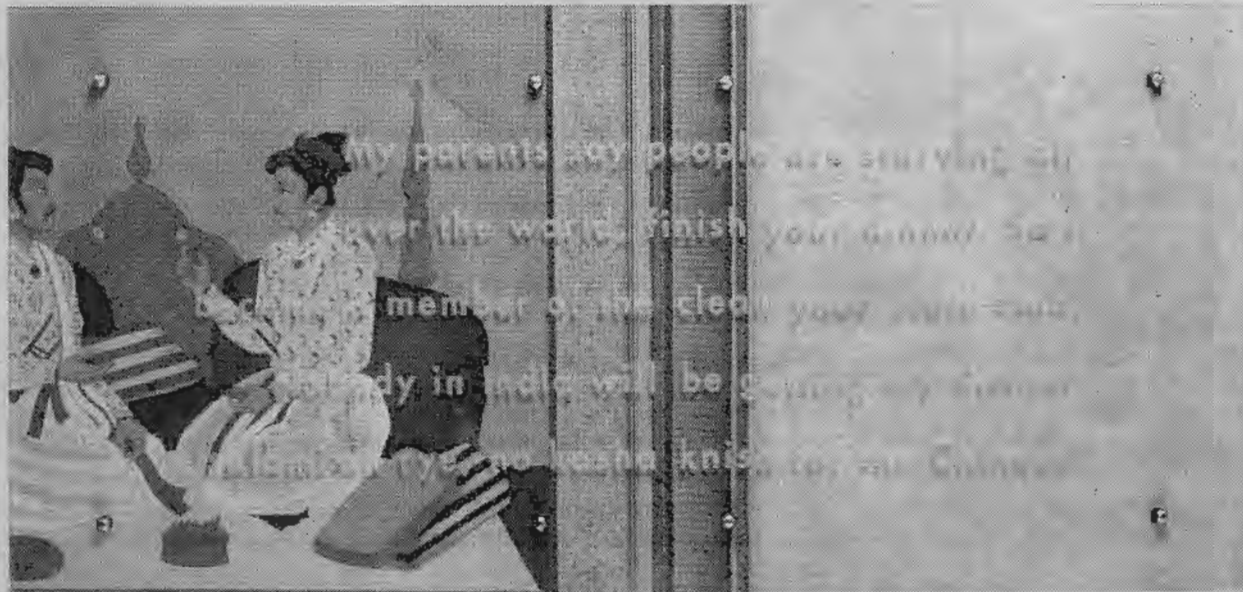
## Arts & Entertainment

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"My Parents Say People Are Starving," 1998 (two panels).

*Native son  
Ken Aptekar  
returns home  
with his  
first Detroit  
exhibition.*

SUZANNE CHESSLER

Special to the Jewish News

**K**en Aptekar used to attend services at Congregation Shaarey Zedek, but the service that had the greatest impact on him is one that he missed.

Aptekar was at the synagogue the week before and the week after Rabbi Morris Adler was gunned down by a young man who then took his own life at the Southfield synagogue.

Memories of that decades-ago incident were jarred a few years ago, when Aptekar saw a 19th-century portrait and used it as the basis of his own work as a conceptual artist. The resulting rendering, *It Wasn't My Brother*, will be part of Aptekar's one-man show, "So What Kind of Name Is That? — Paintings with Text by Ken Aptekar," running Sept. 24-Nov. 19 at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery in Detroit.

"I wouldn't describe myself as a painter," says Aptekar, 49, who spends part of the year in New York and part in Paris. "I kind of adopt paintings. I'm not making paintings that nobody ever made before.

"When you're looking at a painting of mine, you're seeing what is obviously an interpretation of a historic painting. On top of that are words, often short narratives, engraved in glass that covers the painting and is bolted to it. As you look at

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# Painting With Words



"I'm Practicing," 1997.

Artwork courtesy of the Steinbaum Kraus Gallery

the paintings, you are simultaneously invited to read stories. It's a word-image composition."

The painting on which the Rabbi Adler work is based shows a commissioner of Indian affairs for the U.S. Government. In the portrait, the commissioner is seen wearing an Indian blanket that was given to him by a Native American tribal chief.

"The blanket is very suggestive of a tallis, and the man had white hair and was very sage-looking," Aptekar explains about his mind's connecting the historic painting and the violent incident from his past.

"The text reads, 'It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi to death before a packed synagogue in a wealthy suburb of Detroit. The killer was some other kid's mentally ill older brother. He strode up to the front of the sanctuary on that day in 1966 and announced over the mike, 'This synagogue is an abomination and a travesty.' He then faced Rabbi Morris Adler and pulled out his gun. The beloved rabbi fell to the floor, his prayer shawl still draped around him. The boy turned the gun on himself, and a family secret became a public tragedy.'"

Less somber works balance the exhibition, some having to do with the artist's family. During a lecture scheduled for the opening preview,

Aptekar will discuss what it means to be a Jewish American artist.

"That is a subject of urgent importance to me because my work attempts to define what it means to be a secular Jew in America," says Aptekar, whose local exhibit includes examples from collections and pieces from the New York gallery that represents him. "I'm going to talk about my history in Detroit and what effect I think it had on my becoming an artist."

Aptekar's mother, Anne Aptekar, is a retired art teacher who brought her educational interests into the home. His father, Milt Aptekar, is a musician working under the stage name Carr and performing in the Fenby-Carr Orchestra.

"I didn't really envision myself being an artist until I went to the University of

Michigan," Aptekar recalls. "I was always involved in artistic activities, but when I was in my senior year at the university, I transferred into art and went an extra year and a half to get my degree before moving to New York and going to graduate school at the Pratt Institute.

"I did graphic design for a number of years, including the package design for Barton's Bonbonniere, and after I quit Barton's, I never did graphic design again. I began showing my



*Ken Aptekar: "I feel very self-identified as a Jew, and it's at the heart of my work."*

work in New York galleries and museums in 1979.

"The first gallery exhibition was by chance. I was making my living as a locksmith and installed a lock on a gallery director's loft. We got to talking, and she asked to see my slides. A month later, she said she was interested in showing my work."

The style that combines writing with painting came gradually. After New York galleries would not allow wall labels, Aptekar incorporated titles in his paintings. Short phrases came next and were followed by longer narratives.

Aptekar, the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Painting Fellowships, is married to a former art historian who's now a writer, Eunice Lipton. Her research work as a professor at the State University of New York brought them to Paris often, and they decided to buy an apartment.

"Because she's a writer and I'm an artist, we don't have to be in any one place," Aptekar explains. "This next year, I'm going to be doing a fair amount of work in Europe because I'm doing an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I'll prepare that exhibition, in part, in Paris."

Lipton's last book, *Alias Olympia*, is about her search for the woman who posed for Manet's famous painting *Olympia*. It was planned to read like a detective story, although it's a mixture of fiction, nonfiction and art history.

"We share our work with each other a lot," Aptekar, a former Detroiter and Cooley High School graduate, says. "Her work as a writer deals with re-envisioning similar to what I do as a painter."

Reinventing also enters into his favorite pastime — cooking. The two enjoy going to restaurants and try recreating their favorite dishes from those experiences. He also has picked up on his mother's ethnic recipes and especially enjoys preparing and eating crisp potato latkes.

"I feel very self-identified as a Jew, and it's at the heart of my work," Aptekar says. "I've exhibited a lot at the Jewish Museum in New York, and I'm active in the community of that museum. I was in their show 'Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities.'"

The title of the Detroit show — "So What Kind of Name Is That?" — is taken from the text of an Aptekar work built on an image of Rembrandt's son. It comes from questions posed to Aptekar in the '60s, when he believed people with anti-Semitic attitudes were trying to find out if he was Jewish by learning the origin of his last name.

"I hope people in Michigan will find my approach to painting an encouragement to look at painting, enjoy painting and reflect on their own experiences with painting," the artist says. □

The work of Ken Aptekar will be on display Sept. 24-Nov. 19 at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, 480 W. Hancock, Detroit. The opening reception is 5-7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 23, and the artist's lecture follows. (313) 993-7813.