

BY REBECCA LITTLE

# Personal events merge with Jewish traditions and art history

Jewish traditions and the Mona Lisa usually aren't linked in everyday conversation. But Ken Aptekar's "Four Questions and Other Pictures" exhibition at the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery has brought together art history and Judaism.

"The show coincided with Passover, so I decided to hang it on the idea of the four questions," Aptekar explained. "The four questions are asked by the youngest child at the seder. It's a way for the traditions of

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Judaism to come alive each year anew, between the dialogue of the generations. Depending on who the elders are that respond, the answers are different every year. I use the dynamism of that tradition as a metaphor for the history of painting."

Aptekar recreates masterpieces in panels, and overlays narratives etched into glass atop the work.

"It's not an exact replication of the art," Aptekar said. "I take liberty in focusing on certain parts or flipping an image. I want the picture to have more the feel of a story, or a fable."

His creations make the viewer reconsider the meaning of the original work by weaving in the narrative component.

"Most people go into museums, look briefly, and go on to the next painting. Ken engages the viewer by the dialogue he etches into the glass," said Berneice Steinbaum, the gallery owner.

"A major goal in my work is to break down the barriers between contemporary viewers and old paintings. I think that

many people are intimidated by the authority vested in the paintings in museums. I try to shift the focus to what viewers think and feel by looking at a painting, what it calls

up of their own life experiences," Aptekar said.

"And with the glass, you are physically involved in looking at the paintings because you are aware of yourself in them. You may be reading the narrative, but you also see your reflection in the artwork," he added.

The narratives relate to his personal history and Judaism, with each story illuminating the accompanying artwork, or



Detail from "Four Questions: #4 Who's to say...", by Ken Aptekar, oil on wood, sandblasted glass and bolts, 2 panels, 60 x 30 ins.

vice versa.

"Sometimes I'm drawn to an image, and I'll come up with an idea about why that image means something to me," he said. "In other cases, I have a story to tell, and I have to find an image to go with it."

"Because he shares so much personal material, the viewers become voyeurs to his life, but then interested in the painting as well," Steinbaum said.

In "It Wasn't My Brother," Aptekar has recreated a portrait of Thomas Loraine McKenney, an ambassador to the Native Americans in the 1860s. His portrait is in the upper right panel and looks like an old photograph. The etched story tells of a mentally-ill young man, who shot his rabbi in front of a packed synagogue before killing himself. The last line reads, "A family secret became a public tragedy."

"I put these two together because when I ran across this painting, I was immediately struck by his dress. The original is in the Corcoran in D.C. He's wearing an Indian blanket that was given to him by the chiefs, but it looks exactly like the prayer shawl that rabbis wear, and it called up this old memory immediately," Aptekar said.

The main pieces in the show are the "Four Questions" paintings, three of which Aptekar altered from the traditional Passover questions. Left intact is the first painting, "Why is tonight different from all other nights?" The accompanying painting is of a small blonde boy, originally by Piero Della Francesca.

"The questions are asked by the youngest child, traditionally the youngest boy. Now that is not as strictly observed, and this is a picture of a boy with long hair, so there's some gender confusion. And he's blonde -- and you don't usually think of Jewish boys as being blonde, so it's provocative in that way, too," he said.

The second question Aptekar used is "How accepting can you be without becoming complacent?" The underlying

painting is a scene from one of Theodore Gericault's works, of an officer on a horse.

"He looks ambivalent about his role as a soldier," Aptekar explained. "He has a look of worry and anxiety on his face, and doesn't seem so certain about accepting his role. And I think this is a question that we all have to ask ourselves at some point, even though it has no answer, it's something we all think about."

The third is the most childlike of the questions, asking "Why can't people you love live forever?" The painting, originally by Juane de Flandes, has a young girl staring at the viewer.

"She looks as though she has a doleful wisdom, although youthful. Death rears its head as you get older, but part of you never loses this hope," he said.

The final question is "Who's to say I'm not a good Jew if I don't believe in God?" which is paired with three images of traditional Jews, originally by Isidor Kauffman.

"He painted the community of traditional Jews in Poland and Romania, and then sold them to the Jews who had moved out of the city to become more modern," said Aptekar. "They avidly collected his work, because they were anxious about losing their connection to their history. I thought it was an interesting ground to put this declaration on, because this could be going on in any one of these people's minds."

All of the original paintings are available for reference on file at the gallery.

"A big part of being Jewish for me is making history meaningful, and commenting on the past. It's a Talmudic tradition--given a text, to reinvent it with new meaning. My text is the history of art," Aptekar said.

Ken Aptekar, "Four Questions and Other Pictures," at Steinbaum Krauss, 132 Greene St., through May 1, Tue.-Sat., 10 a.m.-6 p.m. 431-4224