

Gender  
Fiction

**University  
Art  
Museum**

**September 23 -  
October 29, 1989**

**B**y challenging traditional notions of gender, this exhibition aims to unsettle common assumptions about the immutable nature of masculinity and femininity. Each artist grapples with the formation of her or his identity by seeking alternatives to rigid social and historical conventions.

Gender identities are not biologically determined or fixed at birth. Psychoanalytic theorists like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Nancy Chodorow, and Juliet Mitchell demonstrate that our sexual identities in infancy and early childhood embrace both male and female characteristics. As we grow up, our masculinities and femininities are circumscribed. Especially inhibiting are the habits of the conventional nuclear family in which mothers are present and nurturing, while fathers are absent and judgmental. This primary relationship initiates us into the political implications of gender difference. And every aspect of social life reinforces these polarities, perhaps most potently through mass media and movies.

One of the ways Ken Aptekar's paintings question fixed sexual difference is by revealing moments of intimacy and vulnerability in a masculine context. For example, in

*Gilles, Gilles, Gilles* (after the painting by Watteau), the clown's frontal gaze is disarmingly direct. His is a young and vulnerable face, at once pathetic and endearing. In *I Didn't Know What Would Become of It*, we see a boy on the verge of manhood, still smooth-skinned and androgynous (indeed, the image is based on a madonna by Michelangelo). His languor and dreaminess make the perfect critical foil for the stern and unyielding patriarch whom he confronts (this time, a bust of a pope by Bernini). The pair points to the sad and all-too-frequent distance between fathers and sons.

Also using pairing to initiate surprising and conflicting emotions, Aptekar's *Herald* presents a man's sensuous mouth juxtaposed with a lavishly painted suit of armor. The diptych brings together the romantic notion of "knights in shining armor"—so redolent of protective, heroic masculinity—with the vulnerable sexuality of a man's mouth. In *The Big Boys*, the reversal of parental authority is the key to its undermining of conventional masculinity. An alert and knowing baby scrutinizes his world, while a benign-looking man daydreams; how will the Oedipal complex ever function with these players?

Aptekar's pictures question authority on a number of levels, including the historical. His reworking of "masterpieces," for example, urges the viewer to create new meaning from the art of the past, challenging the masculine authority of oil paintings. Aptekar also pulls art spectators out of their habitual passivity by presenting his work—multipaneled and insistently non-narrative—as puzzles for the viewers to decipher.

Greg Drasler's approach is different. His main concern is the construction of an imagined terrain where men do not have to follow the rules. The greatest transgression of those rules is the embracing of "feminine" traits. Drasler is also concerned with the "gendering" of narcissism. His images allow for men to be uncertain, passive, and beautiful. In *Laocoon*, a man gazes into a mirror, as he meticulously dresses. He is physically confined by the wardrobe and culturally confined by the strict requirements that dictate his appearance. But he cannot make up his mind. He stands amidst the disarray of his uncertainties.

*Cromagnon* depicts an idealized view of the all-American boy, dressed in blue jeans and baseball cap. However, festooned with huge roses, he parades a man's right to adorn his body. Issues of femininity are addressed even more directly in *Teapot* and *Vocalist*. In the first, a pathetic looking man, round-shouldered and balding, holds an oversized teapot in front of his stomach, suggesting womanliness and fullness. *Vocalist* depicts a nightclub performer whose aggressive pose dominates the canvas. The large hands, prominent jaw, and muscular shoulders give the impression of a man in drag. A lone man in the audience watches. The painting undermines the common gendered notion of a voyeuristic male spectator observing the sexualized female body. Drasler deconstructs the heterosexuality of the male gaze by substituting a female impersonator.

Margo Machida's paintings offer yet another voice in this discussion of gender fictions. From her vantage point as both an Asian in white America and a woman in sexist society, Machida deconstructs the concept of a single

unified self. Her project challenges the stereotype of the timid Asian woman and seeks to shift the emphasis from object to subject. Since she is automatically positioned outside the dominant culture, she attempts to construct herself anew, drawing on mythology, family history, Japanese culture, and her Hawaiian childhood.

In *Charmed*, Machida paints a woman-and-snake duo posed and ready to strike at the slightest threat. Because the woman's gaze is directed out of the frame of the canvas, her potential attack is understood as defensive and not aggressive. *First Bird* also merges an animal and a human being. The blood-red background and squatting woman suggest giving birth. Characteristic of the traditional geisha, the woman's white face functions as a mask. Again, a protective stance is maintained as the figures confront the trauma of birth or transformation.

... *Like a True Samurai* and *My Guardian Angels* are multi-paneled paintings that combine complicated central figures with sentries positioned at the edges as witnesses and defenders. *My Guardian Angels* features a full-

figure view of a woman painted as if in photographic negative, suggesting a state of becoming. She tentatively emerges from the boundaries that seek to restrict and define her. In contrast, her animal and human companions provide a more solid emotional presence. In ... *Like a True Samurai*, Machida depicts a sexually charged interaction between a man and woman. The woman struggles to free herself from the aggressive embrace of the samurai. Machida, wearing sunglasses and positioned on the edge looking in, registers her disapproval. In identifying with this woman, the artist recognizes oppressive internal and external forces that conspire to objectify her.

All three artists refuse to accept as given the cultural invention and determination of sexuality. Rather, they seek a more expansive view that is informed by feminist and psychoanalytic theory. Their individual imaginations yield a diversity of options that deconstruct rigid attitudes about gender. Recognizing that gender is fiction and that social, cultural, and historical constructions limit us all, these artists aggressively map out alternative territories.

Nancy Gonchar  
Curator



*Herald*, 1988, oil on copper, diptych, 30"x60"

## Ken Aptekar

Ken Aptekar was born in Detroit in 1950 and currently lives in New York City. He attended the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, receiving a BFA in 1973. Aptekar earned his MFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1975. He is represented by Bess Cutler Gallery, New York. Selected exhibitions include *Serious Fun*, *Truthful Lies*, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago (1989); *The Other Man*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1987); *Art In General*, New York (1986); *What I Do for Art*, Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York (1984); *Just Above Midtown*, New York (1982); and *Franklin Furnance*, New York (1978). Aptekar has received a grant from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation (1989), a visual artists' fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (1987), and an Artists' Space grant-in-aid for exhibition (1980).