

# UNCERTAIN IDENTITIES PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG JEW

*Uncertain Identities: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jew*

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by Linda Nochlin

Image, words, audience. This is the triangulation of Ken Aptekar's unique contribution to contemporary art. And yet there is one other element—perhaps the most important one of all—missing from this assessment, and that is Self. Identity is always the subtext of Aptekar's work, lurking beneath the gorgeous plumage of texture and surface that makes these images a feast for the eyes as well as a text for the mind and heart. Who is this artist? What is his relation to the works he so inventively recycles? How do Rembrandt and Bronzino, Goya or Raphael work for him in this quest for a specifically Jewish genealogy? How do the Old Masters engage his identity, construct the being of Ken Aptekar, fifty-year-old redheaded Jew from Detroit? And what is the role of the beholder, ignorant or learned, puzzled or insightful, who responds, and in responding, gives birth to the multiple meanings of the work?

To answer these questions we have to begin with the visual objects themselves. Or rather, we must explore the single work, for in each the elements work differently together.

*Was für ein Name ist denn eigentlich Aptekar?*, 1994, poses the question in German, "So what kind of name is that, Aptekar?" over the seductive and mysterious recapitulation of Rembrandt's adolescent son, Titus. The boy glances over his shoulder, his pensive face framed by a cascade of golden hair to the left, his father's authoritative signature to the right. Can we think of Titus as a redhead and thus in some way, an alter ego of the artist himself? Being a redhead, a Jewish redhead, was important to Aptekar, as it was to me. In a way, it set him apart, objectified him like a woman. Later he found out, as I did, that red hair in the past

in Europe had been particularly associated with the Jews, with their otherness, devilishness, and ugliness. Gauguin, for instance, gives his Dutch Jewish friend, Meyer de Haan, red hair, rudimentary horns, and a satanic claw in his memorable portrait of 1889. But for us, Ken and me, growing up as redheaded Jewish children in America, it meant we were often considered non-Jewish: Irish, Scottish maybe. Red hair in Jewish American culture at once conferred the status of unique identity—my uncle used to call me “the red menace”—but confused one set of signs of difference with another.

The German language of the overlaid text, however, makes identity moot. A sinister threat shadows the beauty of the boyish face, the elegance of the feature. What kind of name is Aptekar, indeed? It is a Jewish name, and since it is asked in German, the seemingly innocent question raises, right next to youthful beauty, in fact inseparable from it, the specter of the Camps, the obscene piles of naked bodies, the fatal discovery of one's own otherness, secret dread of every Jew, no matter how emancipated. What's in a name? In Aptekar, in a Jewish name—everything: life and death, the death of an entire people, the mundane possibility of getting a job, the life of an image, the reinscription of the Great Tradition in the dilemmas of contemporary representation.

*We went to the tailor together*, 1995, is even more focused on the ambiguity of Jewish identity. Here, two ultimate dandies, *beaux sabros* in Ladino, the language of the Sephardim: one, Bronzino's seductively arrogant *Portrait of a Young Man*, ca. 1530s, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from the mouth down; the other the Spanish Meléndez's *Portrait of the Artist Holding a Life Study*, n.d., looking out at us—both in black, both sensually alluring, macho, as only black-clad young male bodies can be. That is what this picture is about, that and the primal Jewish turning point, the supreme moment of attaining group identity—the bar mitzvah. Inscribed on these models of elegant and self-confident maleness are words shaking the very foundations of traditional Jewish iconoclasm: statements about appearance being more important than being, looking good as superior to being good. On the glass covering the image Aptekar has incised: “I knew that who I was would change more from wearing the suit than from turning 13. *That's when you become a Man*, they said.” Later, “tall and handsome,” he is singing in his perfect suit, reading his portion of the Torah. This is, of course, how it was to be Jewish in Detroit, how to become officially a man in one's traditional culture. But more than that, it is a celebration of the glory of appearances, the birth of

the artist and his unique if ambiguous destiny. But that's the point, isn't it? Identities are never simple. The words on the glass overlay, the borrowed images, our memories and desires, are always part of identity formation; and who we are shifts, sifts, dances with the movement of the gaze on glass, the sideswipe of the glance. It is this shifty recognition, so contemporary in its inflection yet so dependent on a visual past, that Aptekar's work enables in each viewer who confronts its mixed signals.

*Got a call from Nick*, 1999, seems on first encounter more literally focused on the Jewish question itself. The very words incised on the glass overlaying the painting seem to pose, rather brutally, the question of Jewish identity in relation to a putative conference on Jewish culture. Ken Aptekar asks the questions I, or anyone, would ask in such a situation: "I'm thinking about what that means. Pictures of Jews? ... Pictures with Jewish in the title? Pictures about wandering the land? ... Paintings with questions?" It is the pictorial surface on which these questions are posed that refracts the difficulty. Jacob van Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery*, ca. 1655–60, faded to a haunting, ghostly, ephemeral bluish-violet, is the mysterious foil for these rational and up-to-date questions. Even more perplexingly, the image is doubled, its organic verisimilitude and geometric precision, dead branches, brooding ruins, sarcophagi, and clouds strangely doubled or reflected, so what seemed at first a simple landscape becomes something more mysterious, dark and ungraspable, like the notion of "Jewish" culture itself. This is a graveyard we are looking at, after all. Aside from its status as a famous picture from a great tradition, it trails an aura of inbuilt melancholy. Whatever vague thoughts of the brevity of human life it may have implied when it was painted in the seventeenth century, the contemporary viewer cannot look at Jewish graves without a more specific referent—or a more painful one. Jewish culture takes on a darker dye, like the muted colors of the painting, in the shadow of the Holocaust.

Yet some of Ken Aptekar's images are more down-to-earth and frankly autobiographical, more explicitly enmeshed in family history. In *I hate the name Kenneth*, 1996, Aptekar juxtaposes a four-part frieze of European Jewish faces, painted by one of the rare Jewish artists of the *fin de siècle*, Isidor Kaufmann, with a narrative of family names and their changes: Abraham to Al in one case, Chaim to Kenneth in his own. Of course, Chaim existed only as a ghost name, the memory of an unknown dead relative hovering in the background for the American-born Ken Aptekar. (My ghost name is Leah, ancestral antecedent for the classier

Linda.) Beneath the story of assimilation, alteration, and regret, loom the picturesque faces of a lost Jewish past: *Portrait of a Rabbi*, 1900; *Portrait of a Sephardic Jew*, n.d.; *The Son of the Miracle-Working Rabbi of Belz*, ca. 1897. These, one might say, are the “real” Jews, the ones that kept their names and their identities. For Americans, the choices were more complicated.

Still in a genealogical vein, but more intricately so, is the story of his grandmother the seamstress, incised on the rococo splendor of Boucher's *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour*, 1756, in Munich. Even the text incised on the glass here is much denser and more active than usual, as if in response to the decorativeness of the image, and the fall of words is tilted like the sitter. Painted on four separate panels which emphasize its artifice as an art object as well as its grand scale, *Her Father Dragged Her From Shtetl to Shtetl*, 1996, reveals its ironic unity slowly, as we realize that the genealogical narrative in question has to do with a grandmother who sewed clothes for a living. Her skill at her trade is at once supported and traduced by the aristocratic complexity and refinement of La Pompadour's costume and décor. What has Mierle Pomerance from the Old Country got to do with this epitome of 18th-century elegance? Could she have dreamt of stitching up something like the French woman's rose-embroidered, ruffle-bedizened gown? Never! And yet, Aptekar's mother declares: “A couturière your grandma could've been!” If circumstances had been different, who knows? This is the genealogy of an artist—a grandmother who could have been one, but wasn't. He is the one who got away, who escaped into the world of art and its multiple predicaments and satisfactions. Being a Jew, remembering Jewishness is part of being an artist for Aptekar, in the same way that the history of Western art is part of that project.

In previous exhibitions, Aptekar has asked his audience to give their responses to his work and the work of older artists, using their interpretations as part of the project, so that one might say that an exhibition like the recent *Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1997–98, was as much a conceptual experience as a pictorial one. This is an interesting maneuver, in that it at once neutralizes the artist and yet makes him an active player in the game of meaning. In the past, he asked questions of others, but it seems to me that the questions he asks himself are the most interesting and poignant. Ken Aptekar's openly exposed complex visual layering—oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass with writing, bolts—denies the possibility of any simplistic,



unilinear process of interpretation, any key that will unlock a final meaning, tell it like it is. "For me," says the artist, "the texts and the images are equal partners in the work."<sup>1</sup> Although he hastens to add that there is often a pitched battle between them. "If the image becomes merely an illustration of the text, what's the point?" he adds.<sup>2</sup> His paintings are now all designed on a computer, which he uses to scan source images or digital photographs. Then he arranges and rearranges, using Photoshop software until he develops an image that will work as a painting. He uses another program to write the text, select the typeface and where it will go in the image, and then produces a printout. "That's my sketch for the painting," he says, laughing.<sup>3</sup> The scanned image is then projected on gessoed panels and painted in regular old-fashioned oil paint. In a way, one might say that Ken can have his cake and eat it too: the sensuous pleasure of manipulating the pigment to create the image and the conceptual satisfaction of creating ambiguous post-modern meanings. Even the reflective glass panels function in this creation. Usually considered a nuisance, the reflections in the glass automatically insert the viewer's presence into the experience of the picture.

Ken Aptekar's glass-covered, written-over, repainted images exude, above all, an odor of personal memory in this exhibition, the past unrecaptured, as it always must be in the unforgiving present. The dialogue, in the case of the "Jewish" works in *Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990–2000*, may be less with his viewers, more with a part of himself.

## NOTES

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1. Ken Aptekar, interview by author, New York, NY, 4 May 1999.

2. Aptekar, interview.

3. Aptekar, interview.