APTEKAR

Ken Aptekar

Painting Between the Lines, 1990–2000

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COVER:
Ken Aptekar, *I watch him in the mirror* (detail), 1995
oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 60 x 30 inches
Collection of J. Cassese and S. Merenstein, New York, NY

Ken Aptekar, *Years Ago I'd See Red* (detail), 1998
oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 60 x 30 inches
Collection of Esther S. Weissman, Shaker Heights, OH

BACK COVER:
Ken Aptekar, *Was für ein Name ist denn eigentlich Aptekar?*, 1994
oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 30 x 30 inches
Collection of Dr. Jeff Gelblum, Miami, FL

KEN APTEKAR WRITING VOICES

Ken Aptekar: Writing Voices

by Dana Self, Curator

WITHOUT WORDS AS WITNESSES THE INSTANT (WILL NOT HAVE BEEN) IS NOT. I DO NOT WRITE TO KEEP. I WRITE TO FEEL. I WRITE TO TOUCH THE BODY OF THE INSTANT WITH THE TIPS OF THE WORDS.

—Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*

Ken Aptekar's paintings, borrowed from art history's genealogy and amplified by his words and text, are anecdotal analyst to the contested interpretations of identity, masculinity, personal authority, Jewishness, and the slippery history of art. By appropriating paintings from Western art history and combining them with witty and poignant autobiography, Aptekar knits together art history and biography's parallel dialogue. Combining compelling and startling text with sometimes incongruous imagery borrowed from art history's most established and often revered figures, Aptekar sustains emotionally intimate yet broadly accessible narratives. Mining his memories often leaves us breathless. His confessional colloquy with painters El Greco, Manet, Boucher, and especially Rembrandt; his family, museum-goers, and himself provides the paintings' personal and emotional plenitude that expands the dominion of interpretive possibilities. Notwithstanding the visual, intellectual, and emotional impact of the "masterpieces" he repaints, for it is easy to be swept away by the fecund beauty of a Boucher, Aptekar suggests that autobiography is the tsunami that carries us across time, washes the grit from between us, and exposes that which we already suspect; we are more alike than not and our stories, our words are our witnesses.

Over the past ten years Aptekar's text has changed from a single word or short phrases to narratives exploring the myriad guises that constitute a complex individual. He has been incorporating text on glass in his work since 1990, starting with a series of silverpoint drawings of medieval armor with small beveled glass "labels" bolted onto the surface of the drawings. For Aptekar, the armor was a pretext for mocking men's fear of vulnerability. Aptekar's beautifully intricate drawings of armor demonstrate the armor's directive against things soft, vulnerable, and feminine. (Art) history is replete with images of men's fear of and attempts to conquer the feminine. Of a recent exhibition at the Louvre, *Posséder et Détruire (Possess and Destroy)*, Michel Régis discusses Picasso's rendering of the god Paris: "The more [Paris] is armored in metallic machinery, the more lightly dressed are the goddesses. What impels Paris's lavishly complicated and bristling armor is ... the panicked fear of the feminine."[1] While Aptekar unwraps and then mocks men's fears—cleverly, by insinuating they are armored and locked in—his approach is not Picasso's aggressive, self-empowering sexual differencing, but rather one of wicked irony. In *Safe*, 1990, Aptekar has drawn a beautiful but closed armor helmet. The delicate drawing and intricate metalwork play against the helmet's protective purpose, suggesting that the armor is palliative rather than curative—the protection it offers is only temporary and laughingly metaphorical. The text, "Safe," compromises the security the helmet can only imply, and delicately at that. By isolating the beautifully drawn image on the paper, Aptekar highlights the alienating effects of emotional armor, which ultimately produces the opposite effect it intends. Aptekar suggests that the armor is ludicrously gratuitous; while in his work, Picasso reinforces its essentiality against the feminine. Closeting ourselves against emotional vulnerability paradoxically leaves us more exposed than embracing its inherent risks, and we become as alienated as the single helmet Aptekar pictures. By deriding men's fears and respondent masculine measures, Aptekar perhaps calls into question events from his own childhood and the imperfect path along which boys are reared into men.

Formally, Aptekar moved from using small glass fragments to placing an entire sheet of glass over his image. *Oversensitive*, 1990, a single panel painting with the same size sandblasted-text glass covering it may be Aptekar's response to *Safe*. Developing this signature style, Aptekar metaphorically shifts from the sharp irony (irony is often central to Aptekar's commentary) of *Safe* to what may be a less savagely satirical, although ambiguous painting. Here, Aptekar reimages a portrait of a 15th-century bishop whose compassionate expression is either

augmented or scorned by the etched word "Oversensitive." Aptekar's choice—his source for *Oversensitive* is a Tyrolian polychromed 15th-century wood sculpture—capitalizes on the fact that the damaged areas of the face suggest an embattled, humbled, even teary-eyed human figure. Aptekar suggests the polarities embedded in men's emotional lives. Men are often simultaneously valued and disdained for developing their compassion and vulnerability, attesting to masculinity as a site of anxiety and instability. Through *Safe* and especially *Oversensitive*, Aptekar implies the emotional and corporeal fatigue inherent in striving to be a fully integrated human, let alone a fully integrated man.

In *Answers/Questions*, 1992, Aptekar circumscribes an underlying restlessness in many of his paintings: the personal quest for autonomy and self-determination, the restless desire to understand or dispute any relationship between the physical and spiritual and how that shifting relationship may impede our autonomy. Aptekar chose Raphael's *Vision of Ezekiel*, ca. 1518, and Rembrandt's *The Angel Stopping Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac to God*, 1635, for his source paintings. The word "Question" is sandblasted into the glass over the Rembrandt and "Answer" into the glass over the Raphael. Rembrandt and Raphael were both prominent sources for Aptekar's early works, yet Rembrandt remains ambiguous and therefore still challenging for Aptekar, as he also has for Rembrandt scholars and attributors. Of *Answers/Questions* Aptekar has written: "And so the anxiety of ceaseless Jewish questioning is contrasted with the harmonious calm of Christian certainty."[2] And while Aptekar could be taken to task for unilateral assumptions about who is spiritually unruffled and who is not, the idea of Jewish questioning, of his own questioning, vibrates through all his paintings. Jewish questioning may emerge from the Talmud, the fundamental code of Jewish law and practice. Aptekar understands that the foundation of Talmudic study is questions and answers, as the text is built upon question upon question. His own information processing, both personally and artistically, also emerges from this radiating ripple of Jewish questions. The image in Raphael's painting is one of omnipotence and surety, while Rembrandt portrays Abraham's startled visage at the moment the angel arrests the infanticide directed by God as a test of faith. Aptekar's painting choices suggest that the same faith that may comfort some also leaves others with uncertainty. The faith—or dearth of it—that we may look to for answers provides questions only. Aptekar's comments on this piece about ceaseless Jewish questioning thread the needle that stitches this ongoing examination and inquest of his work.

Linked inextricably to the notion of inquiry, questions about Rembrandt percolate within Aptekar's body of work. Rembrandt may embody the essence of Aptekar's work: questions of authenticity, authority, identity, and questions of history's generosity, or not, towards an artist. Aptekar's ongoing and intimate dialogue with Rembrandt surfaces in many of his paintings. In *Was für ein Name ist denn eigentlich Aptekar?*, 1994, Aptekar asks, "So what kind of name is that, Aptekar?," a reference to the not-so-subtle desire to sniff us out, brand us, and identify the "others" among us. (Aptekar's 1995 painting "*Goldfinch. Used to be Goldfarb.*" exposes a painful cultural reality of name-changing to avoid this anti-Semitism.) The source for *Was für ein Name ist denn eigentlich Aptekar?* is a Rembrandt painting of his son Titus. Titus's beautiful red hair may refer to Aptekar's own red hair, which Aptekar discusses in a 1996 painting *Where'd you get the red hair? they ask.* The text continues from there:

> I know they're thinking, "You're not really Jewish. Jews don't have red hair." So am I somebody else's, some Gentile's kid? I'm amazed they even notice the wonderful color, the hair's so short. At the barbershop Dad says "Give him a Princeton, Charlie." Crestfallen, I watch my red hair collect on the floor, get swept up, thrown out. "Came with the head," I reply.

This painful episode—punctuated by the anti-Semitism, the identity confusion, the inability of the child to assert control over his own body, thus the self-protective wisecrack—demonstrates how Aptekar almost never stops theorizing his emotional development and his Jewishness and how they radiate from his body into the social sphere and back again. Aptekar has situated his autobiographical private world into a nonnegotiably public space. In his ongoing private and public dialogue with Rembrandt, Aptekar questions Rembrandt's motives as artist and citizen and how his own life as artist/author overlaps. In a letter to Rembrandt Aptekar questions his relationship to Jews, specifically, why Rembrandt lived in the Jewish quarter:

> That decision has had a lot of meaning for me, and for other Jews over the years. Books have been written about you in relation to Jews. Were you more comfortable living among a marginal group because you felt in some way marginal? Or was it just because you could get a better deal on a big house? ... Did you know, Rembrandt, that you are among the most famous, most respected artists in the world? When

Where'd you get the red hair? they ask.
1996, oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
80 x 20 inches, Collection of the Progressive Corporation
Cleveland, OH

> people think masterpiece painting, it is you who comes to mind. And the thing they value most is how you portrayed people, and yourself, in all those self-portraits, with such insight, empathy, and wisdom.[3]

Autobiography is the covenant between Aptekar and Rembrandt, Rembrandt's painted and Aptekar's written. In fact, Rembrandt depicted himself more than any other artist of his time: "approximately fifty times in paint, twenty in etching, and about ten times in surviving drawings."[4] What did he know that other 17th-century Dutch artists did not? His self-portraits suggest that he knew the value of his own authorship, his own authoritative voice. Aptekar reveals parts of himself through his text, often with a wince-inducing vulnerability, while Rembrandt reveals himself through his many self-portraits. Both artists raise more questions than provide answers.

Aptekar's autobiographical imprimatur cuts an empathetic passage through his work. Histories of vulnerability, loss, love, and anxiety suggest that anecdote is our closest ally in creating community. Aptekar understands that his stories stand in for ours even if the details vary. Stories of his father are poignant reminders of familial connections we may have, lost, desire, or never had. Tied to each other through clothing—Aptekar's often theatrical choices fortify the narrative—Aptekar weaves a story of himself and his father through images of apparel. In *We went to the tailor together*, 1995, Aptekar describes going to the tailor with his father for his bar mitzvah suit. The suit embodies the young boy's desire to be a man like his father and older brothers. An excerpt of the text reads: "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. I couldn't wait to grow as tall as my brothers; I longed for the day my face would look like it did when I sucked in my cheeks." Aptekar's longing to be like his brothers and his father is embedded in the suit, emblem of the loved body. The suit Aptekar has had made for his coming of age ceremony is the suit of a man, not the boy he actually still is, and experience suggests that clothing can reconfigure us, enable us to cross genders and appropriate others' personae by adapting their dress. Aptekar's source paintings for *We went to the tailor together* are Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man*, ca. 1530s, and Meléndez's *Portrait of the Artist Holding a Life Study*, n.d. Each painting emphasizes clothing's luxury and its ability to bestow upon the wearer grace and beauty. The power of dress lies in its contribution "to the making of a self-conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualiza-

tions of the human body."[5] In the two paintings from the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries we find the central characters dressed in black, which was in itself part of a charged sartorial code. According to Anne Hollander in *Seeing through Clothes*, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, black clothing had become a "rich bourgeois fashion rather than the courtly one it had originally been."[6] She continues:

> Showing the edge of the white chemise or the white collar of the shirt was an intrinsic part of the mode in much fifteenth-century costume, and it became an increasingly formalized element of sixteenth-century dress. Thus if a costume was unusual because it was black, but the collar was nevertheless white as usual, the point was sharply made that the wearer was first of all conventionally dressed; and if color was modish, he was also making a subtle antifashion commitment and involving all that black implies. ... The bourgeois or professional flavor that black had acquired ... added the idea of modesty to its basic drama: a recurrent, perverse use of black, which intends to strike a note.[7]

That note has sustained itself. Black clothing retains its polar reputation. It is still worn for mourning and black tie events, by impoverished bohemians and uptown elite, and is always an easy fallback when nothing else makes sense. Bronzino's and Meléndez's elegantly black-clad men suggest the multiple meanings behind dress, masculinity, and their construction just as Aptekar's story suggests his transformative fantasies of clothing. He understands its ability to locate himself in the past and the future simultaneously—the man remembering the boy who dreams of becoming a man—and is jettisoned into perfection.

Aptekar also invokes the remembered presence of the body in *I watch him in the mirror*, 1995. By picturing beautiful ruffled collars from Rembrandt portraits, Aptekar magnifies his compassionate text about a loved embrace.

> I watch him in the mirror.
> Carefully, he drapes
> the tie around
> my neck and folds the
> shirt collar over it.
> *See, this goes here*, he

says, *then under there,*
over and through
and back around.
He wants me to learn
the Windsor Knot.
I am encircled by his arms.

Aptekar's rhythmic prose emulates the rhythm of the knotting lesson. We hear the tender instructive voice of the father/brother/lover and feel his gentle touch on our bodies as we follow his slow and steady example. The collars, fluttering gracefully down the painting's height, encircle the life-sustaining carotid artery—heart to brain—stimulating Aptekar's and my response to the touch, "I am encircled by his arms."

As the foundation underlying all of Aptekar's paintings, autobiography's confessional vulnerability intertwines seamlessly with Aptekar's source paintings. He exercises his authority over the paintings he co-opts and the stories he uses. The performative nature of Aptekar's work—for the paintings and the texts as scrims are inherently theatrical—is enhanced by the inclusion of the strangers-as-actors he gathered from focus groups associated with his two major public projects with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England. The exhibitions also demonstrate Aptekar's ability to absorb the reactions of his viewers so completely that their autobiographies/roles seamlessly mesh with his. Yet the stories still retain the authorial presence from the individual (whom we cannot know like we know Aptekar) who uttered them. The stranger's confessional retains authoritative dominion, and everyone's history seems to resonate from Aptekar's own history. The phenomenon is simultaneously incomprehensible yet natural because the chosen viewers' stories read as emotionally exposed, a circumstance abetted by Aptekar's personality, which feels so grounded in listening that viewers seem to feel confessional with him. It is unsurprising that he elicits such candid responses from viewers when they are asked to respond to paintings. In the 1997 project at the Corcoran, *Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures*, Aptekar made a series of paintings based on works in the Corcoran's permanent collection. Aptekar based his text on discussion groups with elementary school children, high school students, Corcoran School of Art students, museum guards, and visitors to the museum.[8] Some of the most amplifying and forthright prose from this project come from the museum's security staff, who spend their days protecting the art, and who may find those days stretching long into tedium. Museum security officers respect and often

love the works of art that they protect. When queried about an interior scene painting by Walter Gay, *View of a Salon in the Musée Jacquemart André*, 1912, Fatoumata Parris responded:

> "I'd just look around and observe," Fatoumata Parris, a guard at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, tells me. "I wouldn't sit in any of the chairs, because they look too pretty to sit in. No, I wouldn't touch anything," she says. "I'd just observe."

Ms. Parris has collapsed her job duties—observing and protecting—with personal feelings of how she would act outside of her profession and in someone else's space, for instance, the space depicted in the painting she protects. In *Maybe he's coming to the new land*, 1997, another security officer suggests that the beautifully solemn boy in the painting is an immigrant to New York, yearning for a new life; perhaps this is why she, herself, likes the painting so much. Here Aptekar combines two different paintings, William Trost Richards's *Coast of New England*, 1894, and George Yewell's *Brooding Young Boy*, 1867. The boy may represent the seemingly borderless potential not only of youth, but of shedding one's past for a different future. Aptekar's confessional dance with his own immigrant history plays out in the paintings.

In his most recent public project for a collaboration between London's Serpentine Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum (January 30–April 1, 2001), Aptekar worked with six different focus groups including "recent art school graduates, learning-disabled gardeners, Afro-Caribbean elderly women, Spanish immigrants, redheads, and literacy students" to solicit comments on the works of art he had chosen from the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection.[9] He titled his project there, *Q&A, V&A*. In *I ask questions*, 2000, he superimposed text from a conversation with the caretaker of the learning-disabled gardeners about Gustave Courbet's *L'Immensité*, 1869, over the painting of the sea and a stormy sky:

I ask questions
2000, oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 30 inches, Collection of Richard Levy and Dana Asbury, Albuquerque, NM

> I ask questions, it's a Jewish thing. Here's an example: what detail of Gustave Courbet's seascape would you like me to cut out for you to take home? Chris answers, "A little square from the center." He explains, "A bit of sea, a bit of sky. I do like to go to the sea and stare out." What, I continue, is on the other side of the horizon? "Who knows?" Chris answers Jewish-style, a question with a question. "That's the reason I like the painting. It's empty, a place to think about nothing." I wonder, what's that like?

For the artist/performer/writer/storyteller, the idea of thinking of nothing is unimaginable, antithetical, and counterintuitive to the very work on which he has had the text sandblasted, underscoring the painting's newly minted paradoxical tension. Chris's seemingly unconscious comment resonates against the painting and against the verbalizing/textualizing of "think[ing] about nothing," as if this were actually physiologically possible.

Olga rules
2000, oil paint on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts, 120 x 30 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Record

In another work from *Q&A, V&A*, Aptekar turns to the theatricality of dress and its mnemonic powers in *Olga rules*, 2000. Like Aptekar's own immigrant grandparents, Spanish immigrant Olga Sotuela recalls the struggles of her abandoned homeland when pressed into anamnesis by Aptekar. The text over four paintings of beautifully shod, privileged feet reads:

> "Edward VI was crowned at age ten. Think back," I tell Olga Sotuela. "You are around his age and you are about to become King. What's your first decree?" "When I was young during the Spanish Civil War," Olga remembers, "my feet were bleeding from having to walk barefoot." Olga rules. "Shoes for everyone!"

Like his democratic grandmother who married the man who ran the bicycle shop in a freer country, Olga similarly embraces equality and opportunity in the face of the iniquities of her youth. Aptekar elicits autobiographical responses from the members of his focus groups, guiding them through specific questions into confessions that intervene in the paintings' narratives, reconstructing history and ultimately us.

I'm in Madrid, 1999, is allied to Olga's story. Here, over a repainting of El Greco's *The Nobleman with His Hand on His Chest*, n.d., from Madrid's Prado Museum, Aptekar's friend Harry Fisher tells his story of fighting with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the same civil war for which Olga's feet bled. Despite his fear, physical pain, and dreams of desertion, Fisher stayed in the war for over a year, fighting in all the primary battles. Like most of Aptekar's subjects inscribed by text, Fisher's life experience embodies emotional and physical courage. Perhaps Fisher's heroism is more manifest than that of Aptekar's other subjects, but he is no more fearless than Aptekar's grandmother; Olga; Aptekar-the-child struggling to grow up; or the security officers at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Aptekar's painting choices, as we have seen in *Olga rules*, often reveal his privileging of the feminine. Not only does he often choose works that are inherently beautiful, such as those by Boucher, he gives voice to the women in his family. In *Her Father Dragged Her From Shtetl to Shtetl*, 1996, François Boucher's 1756 painting *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour* frames Aptekar's maternal grandmother's story. Like paintings about his father, Aptekar's painting about his grandmother, Mierle Pomerance, is interwoven with textiles and clothing. Aptekar begins the text: "Her father dragged her from shtetl to shtetl with a sewing machine. She fashioned clothes for Jews, sewed them on the spot. A marriage to an older man was arranged but Mierle Pomerance escaped." The story continues through her lone journey to America, her landing in Detroit, her marriage to a man who ran a bicycle shop, and her hand-sewn clothes for Aptekar's mother. It finishes with the tightly drawn reminiscence: "'A couturière your grandma could've been!' my mother says. I escaped when I became an artist." Like his grandmother, Mary, née Mierle, Aptekar escapes, circumscribing his path rather than fulfilling the one preordained for him. Aptekar further refines this idea in the painting *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, 1996, also based on a Boucher painting, *Allegory of Painting*, 1765. In a lively exchange between his sister and him, with his mother—opinionated matër—overseeing, the child Aptekar demonstrates his artistry in handmade Hanukkah decorations. His text on the glass reads:

> I have a knack for it, but my mother seems worried. I see it in her eye. "Keynahora," she says in Yiddish meaning the Evil Eye should only not be watching. "Such a surgeon you'll make with those hands, keynahora, and on the weekend you can be artistic."

Aptekar clarifies his grandmother's and his desire to escape the familial shroud of expectations. Mierle Pomerance's story is Aptekar's story. Their trajectories of longing turn sharply away from tradition to fulfill their own desires. Both family members transgress cultural boundaries: the young, powerless Jewish girl refuses an arranged marriage to an old man and a young boy of middle-class privilege refuses to become a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever profession his mother and father have chosen for him, in their own post-World War II exodus and ascendancy from their immigrant roots. Aptekar's texts are proxy snapshots of family life, as surely as if they were grainy black-and-white photographs. The disruption of the narrative, through the panels of glass and the distraction of the painting underneath, punctuates the historical disruption that Aptekar privileges in his text and through the images. The exquisite

dresses in the Boucher paintings are inextricably related to the garments that Mierle produced (and could have, as a profession, according to Aptekar's mother) and the fulfilled desire of the boy and the man to become a painter. In Boucher's *Allegory of Painting*, the painter paints, her canvas held aloft by putti who stare unabashedly at the subject of their adoration, as does Aptekar, who paints the garments, à la Boucher, that his grandmother could have made, had she wanted to. She enjoyed her emancipation with a young man and a bicycle shop. Aptekar gained his in becoming an artist.

What is the effect of reproducing "masterpiece" paintings? How does Aptekar's interpretation of these paintings shift their meanings over history's distance? Of course, by reimaging them, Aptekar has already blurred the paintings' original readings because they have been shape shifted out of their time into our own. They are changelings. Our viewing is informed by who we are and what we may or may not know (or care) about the paintings' origins. Aptekar's text, then, as a scrim over the works, both distances us from history's narratives and draws us nearer intellectually, emotionally, and physically by our desire to look through the glass to the paintings' surfaces which are alluringly sheltered. Yet, Aptekar notes his desire to "demolish the illusion of a unified whole, the 'window' into reality that historically has been a goal of painting."[10] Aptekar's fragmenting of the paintings he chooses—the separate panels repress the paintings' narratives—effects a stuttering of the image. By disrupting a painting's visual field, the painting loses narrative continuity because it is only a fragment and does not, in fact, stand in for the dematerialized whole. What kind of social energy do these fragmented images from the palaces of Western art engender? And how does Aptekar's text undermine or underline those images and their places in art history's lineage? As Aptekar notes of the segmenting of the paintings, this new context for them cleaves them from art history's servitude, challenging the image's cultural authority. The Rembrandts, Bouchers, and others are reinvested with new purpose. A fragment of a 17th-century Dutch still-life painting by Pieter Claesz suddenly becomes the platform for parents whose mealtime struggles to get their children to eat became dramatic world politics. In "*People all over are starving,*" 1998, Aptekar remembers with vivid clarity his parents' entreaties:

> "People all over are starving," my parents report.
> Africa, China, God knows where. If I leave one
> forkful of brisket on my plate, a solitary green bean,
> some naked child in the Congo will drop dead.

The still-life painting of plenty, fragmented against a beautiful background and designed to embrace life's riches, is inverted to a parental reprimand, a reminder of all we have in the face of the entire world's needs. By recharting their passage over time and knocking the paintings off their center with his stories and ours, Aptekar pockets a new site of resistance and intervention for these paintings.

Questions of authority and authenticity are bound up in Aptekar's reproductions. The effect is multiplied when Aptekar binds himself to Rembrandt. In *CIRCLE OF REMBRANDT*, 1992, Aptekar repaints five authenticated self-portraits executed by Rembrandt between ca. 1628 and 1669, exposing Rembrandt from youth to old age. Identity as a touchstone in the corpus of Aptekar's work is emphasized when folded together with the contested authenticating work by the Rembrandt Research Project enshrouding Rembrandt's body of work. The phrase "Circle of Rembrandt" is nomenclature for works presumed to be by a follower of Rembrandt rather than by Rembrandt himself. Aptekar notes:

> This painting suggests that we might as well, at this point, include even the works *we know to be by Rembrandt* within the circle of Rembrandt. All five of the self-portraits included here are certainly by Rembrandt. But since he's become a phenomenon much larger than himself, why not just put him in the circle as well as the others?[11]

In a brilliant strategic move, Aptekar dematerializes authenticity's authority. Issues of money, power, and prestige that accompany the demarcation of masterpiece and "circle of" slip away. Do I not still love The Frick Collection's Rembrandt painting, *The Polish Rider*, ca.1655, despite the fact that it has been unauthenticated by the Rembrandt project? I do, and apparently The Frick Collection trustees do too, as it is on display in the museum. By thrusting Rembrandt into the fray of his own enormous mythology and telling us that the questions about Rembrandt are part of why we may love his works, be they "circle of" or "his," Aptekar frees us to enjoy the work on its own pictorial excellence, despite what we may know about it. Additionally, the idea of a self-portrait executed by "circle of" is absurd, obliterating self-portrait's authorship entirely. Freeing his viewers to validate their own narrative, emotional responses to paintings underscores all the painting-between-the-lines in which Aptekar has engaged for the past ten years. Aptekar's stories are ours, and the paintings he brings us back to, or newly to, are enriched by their expanded interpretive possibilities.

Our exhibition ends where it metaphorically begins, with Rembrandt and more questions. A prelude piece to Aptekar's latest series on angels is the achingly beautiful *Turn it over*, 2000, whose source painting is *Bleaching Fields at Bloemendael near Haarlem*, ca. 1670, attributed to Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael. The text reads:

> Turn it over and turn it over again, for everything is in it, the Rabbi wrote. Angels even? wondered the Jewish artist who studies old paintings.

According to Aptekar, the rabbi's commentary touches the ethos of Talmudic study, that is, to constantly search for new meaning and therefore ask new questions, by adjusting perspective on that which you examine. Thus Aptekar turns the beautiful and fecund landscape—a stand-in for the whole world of possibilities—over and over, seeking answers to the questions he cannot stop asking. Examination, questioning, these the heart of Aptekar's body of work, lead us into the *Angels* series.

Aptekar appropriately opens the series with a nonpainting: he has temporarily abandoned the corporeality of painting for text-inscribed glass only. The text for "*Angels?*", 2000, reads:

> "Angels? Who's ever seen one!"
> *—Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), French realist painter*

It is the perfect sentence written by the artist who was devoted to a "militantly radical Realism," and a concrete sense of realities of the political, economic, and social world he lived in.[12] "Realism," Courbet declared flatly, "is democracy in art."[13] His dismissive statement about angels—how can you even think of something you cannot see with your own eyes?—sets Aptekar's *Angels* series into motion, gathering up questions and answers he has been puzzling over for the past ten years. And so the skeptical artist tenders a series about the most ethereal—unbelievable—beings in history, angels. They are the perfect foil for the analytic, doubting, yet devout artist who paints and writes beauty as his stock in trade. In *And what if you have a message*, 2000, Aptekar's source painting is one of Rembrandt's biblical paintings, *The Angel Leaving Tobias and His Family*, 1637. Aptekar's text reads:

> And what if you have a message to send back with the angel:
> "A terrible tragedy is in the making! Can't you do something?"
> What use is a divine messenger who will not deliver?

The angel leaves us stranded as we watch, perhaps in dumbstruck awe as the fleeing angel's dress theatrically activates the space of the painting. Helpless, yet stimulated by our own questions, we, like Aptekar, seek answers from these divine beings who will not "deliver" in the concrete, earthbound manner we need, being sentient humans. Both the nonfaithful and the faithful (for we must somehow believe that the angel could deliver or we wouldn't ask the question, would we?) are tested and we struggle with our doubts and our disbelief. As always, we have questions and, like Aptekar, wonder if there are answers or only more questions.

For the past ten years, Ken Aptekar has questioned himself, family, masculinity, Jewishness, art history, Rembrandt, and Rembrandt's place in art history's constantly reevaluated and renegotiated narrative. Aptekar has excavated his private and sometimes painful history and similarly drawn out the stories that others have to tell, introducing the personal and anecdotal as public and heroic. As author, he questions and replaces history's authoritative voice with his own and with our voices and narratives, be they those of his grandmother, Harry Fisher, a museum security officer, a gardener, or a student. As a painter who is also a skilled writer, Aptekar recognizes how language can stimulate memories and evoke empathy. Like Hélène Cixous, he writes to touch the moment, to insist on the presence of that which disappears. Scratching at childhood memories, Aptekar recovers wounds and traumatic events—his own and others'—to resist and redress them. The search for discovered meaning of one's own history radiates into our own, and his family's chronicles of exile mingle with ours. Aptekar compresses the distances between himself and his audience, between us and the history of the paintings he paints, between his family's complexities and ours. By floating text in the fissures between painting and the world outside of painting, Aptekar arrests our narrative's disappearance. The essential qualities of his and our stories, and therefore, of our bodies, elongates us metaphorically and corporeally as our stories entwine with the histories of the paintings Aptekar repaints. He has ensured our continuance within and outside of his text. Like Rembrandt's evolving three-hundred-year history, our narratives will caravan themselves across history's shifting borders. Aptekar's paintings between the lines, which draw from theoretical analysis, art's shifting history, personal anecdote, and public discourse, traverse distances and synthesize the past, present, and future into a filament of interconnected and extraordinary kinship.

NOTES

Notes

1. Michel Régis, "Posséder et Détruire: Stratégies sexuelles dans l'art d'Occident," Exhibition catalogue, 2000, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, p. 22, quoted in Linda Nochlin and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Sins of the Fathers," in *Art in America*, December 2000, p. 95.

2. Ken Aptekar written artist's statement, n.d.

3. Ken Aptekar, "Dear Rembrandt," *Art Journal*, Fall 1995, pp.12–13.

4. Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 120.

5. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. xiv.

6. Hollander, p. 370.

7. Hollander, pp. 369–371.

8. Terrie Sultan, introduction to exhibition catalogue, 1997, *Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, p. 4.

9. Aptekar e-mail to Dana Self, February 2001.

10. Aptekar e-mail to Dana Self, 13 November 2000.

11. Aptekar, written artist's statement, n.d.

12. Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 3.

13. Nochlin, p. 3.