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Ken Aptekar: Real People and Old Masters
Susi Lupaki

Dave Hicks asks, "How do you invade an institutional space these days? How do you transgress and shake it up a bit? Well, maybe by flooding the main gallery of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art with Ken Aptekar's postmodern replication of old-fashioned painting. Dana Self, curator of Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990-2000 (September 16-December 2, 2001), explains: One thing that interests me is the way you are working with visual imagery and text. You join together the seemingly disconnected. Your unrelatedness seems to imply that things work in unintended ways.

Ken Aptekar: I'm happy that you even were motivated to think of that question in connection to my work because obviously I am very intentional in the relationships that I make in the work between words and images. They're very carefully considered and planned. So the fact that you would wonder about that unintentional quality, the sort of happenstance connection between an image and a particular text, pleases me because I labor to make it feel that way. In the talk, I may have mentioned that part of the reason I try to do that is to disarm people so that they can more easily give themselves over to the experience of my work. So I try to set up a situation where the text is not the most obvious thing you would expect in relationship to the particular painting that I've chosen to use as the source for my painting. We have lost of ideas floating in our head at any given moment, and when you're looking at a painting, there's a rush of ideas or thoughts that have to do with "Did I pick up the laundry? Things that wouldn't necessarily, overtly, or obviously have any connection to the painting that you are looking at. I can give you an example. You're looking at a painting of a Dutch landscape and you see off in the distance in the painting, in the glimmer sun that's falling on that part of the landscape, a line of white sheets snatching in the wind — which is often the case in those paintings. Those things happen. And you think, "God, did I take in the laundry? It's raining." Maybe that's the most obvious thing that somebody would think of when they were contemplating a Dutch Old Master painting of a landscape, but that's how real people think in relationship to the experience of art. That has a validity. Maybe they would think, "Wow, how did they do that?" This is something that I think is important in connection to something specific to the painting and be motivated to consider it in a way that no one else might have considered it before. It becomes part of the experience for them of looking at art. That's what I try to do in putting together these unintended combinations.

Lupaki: It's about how things happen versus human systems. We're always inventing our way of understanding how everything works, but it doesn't really seem to work that way.

Aptekar: It doesn't work that way. And often our unconscious minds lead us into corners where we didn't expect to go. That's what I try to draw on. I try to draw on unconsciousness. I try to draw on memory and tease out some of those kinds of experiences that a painting can spur.

Lupaki: Do you see your work in therapeutic terms?

Aptekar: I don't really see it in therapeutic terms. Often times, I am happy that my work allows me the good fortune of digging into aspects of life that trouble me, digging into aspects of life that I find troubling or aspects of my own personal history that are difficult to deal with. I have a place in my life where I can contemplate those things and wrestle with them and come to some resolution about them. But I wouldn't say that self-therapy produces any great art or anything like that.

Lupaki: The way you're working is with both images and text. It's an interesting mix. It could be reversed. It could be new illustrations of old texts.

Aptekar: Well, that's true actually. That's very true. That's an interesting thought. I may try using that idea. You'll have to give me your coordinates so I can think about you when I try something like that.