

Ken Aptekar

***The Four Questions and Other Pictures*, brochure essay for Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, April 1999**

The recitation of the "Four Questions"--traditionally performed by the youngest boy--child at a Passover *seder*--is the key to the observance commemorating the Jewish escape from slavery in Pharaonic Egypt. If you know Ken Aptekar, it's easy to imagine him, as a child, asking the Four Questions: chanting in a clear, increasingly confident soprano voice, an ingenuously shy smile flashed at his parents upon the completion of his momentous task. For any Jewish child, this occasion is also a symbolic rite of induction into the community; the reply to the fourth question explains why today's observer must consider himself an actual participant in the emancipatory events that took place more than 5000 years ago. Aptekar is surely a product of this culture that so prizes history and discussion.

Long in Aptekar's thoughts, the *Four Questions* suite of paintings was actualized when Aptekar realized that this show would open on the eve of Passover. The first painting simply quotes the first of the four questions, "Why is tonight different from all other nights?" The text is etched on glass panels superimposed on a painted quotation from an early Renaissance portrait of a boy by Piero Della Francesca. The subject is blonde and looks nothing like the familiar dark-haired Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European derivation. (It can hardly be a coincidence that Aptekar is a red head.) The original painting is small, about 17" high, whereas Aptekar's version is more than twice as large. He has monumentalized the child's viewpoint and dramatized it by rendering the painting as an object illuminated by a raking light that makes part of the gold frame and the boy's golden hair sparkle.

Two of the *Four Questions* paintings ask child-like questions (the other is "Why can't the people you love live forever?"), while two offer far more complex, ethical queries--"How accepting can you be without becoming complacent?" and "Who's to say I'm not a good Jew if I don't believe in God?" The latter is especially poignant: It bedevils many of us Jewish-American baby boomers who grew up absorbing the mixed messages of our simultaneously observant and assimilation-minded parents, yet now find ourselves incensed at the ravings of an Israeli rabbinate which pronounces our Conservative and Reform backgrounds *un-Jewish*. Although not an observant Jew, Aptekar is drawn to Jewish culture; he is a devotee of Jewish film festivals and books by such authors as Primo Levi and Giorgio Bassani. For *Four Questions: #4 Who's to say...*, Aptekar has appropriated three portraits of Hasidic Jews by the turn-of-the-century Viennese painter, Isidor Kaufmann, and hauntingly arranged them in a vertical row, their direct gazes interrogating us. Once again tiny originals have been monumentalized in scaled-up versions. That the youngest, unbearded subject seems larger and closer to us than his two *confreres* implies that the future of Judaism itself may be at stake.

The texts of the other seven paintings in the show don't ask questions. Instead they tell stories; about Aptekar's marriage, his childhood, a visit to Spain, an allegorical conversation with a rabbi's daughter. Although the stories are about him, Aptekar's approach is more autobiographical than self-centered. His open-ended narratives playfully twist, turn, and subvert the usual narrative desire to impose wholeness and closure. The text for *When I Announce My Plans* first describes his parents' worried response to his 1983 marriage to a Marxist academic. Superimposed on an early 17th century allegorical figure resembling an undraped Venus rendered in shades of

red, the text, too, plays on the notion of *red*: it ends with *kiddish* cups of vintage Burgundy raised during the marriage ceremony, allowing the happy couple to "share in ecstasy the joys of red." Few viewers could experience such a work without pondering the near-universal impulses of parents to protect and control, and of children to determine their own, sometimes rebellious paths.

Other narratives are both more revealing and less light-hearted. The text for *It Wasn't My Brother* describes the shooting of a rabbi before his suburban Detroit congregation. Overlaying a mid-19th-century portrait of Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Loraine McKenney, Aptekar's narrative transforms McKenney's Indian blanket into a prayer shawl. That Aptekar writes that the killer was "some other kid's mentally ill older brother [my italics]" and that "a family secret became a public tragedy," of course, announces family secrets of his own: a bi-polar, older brother whose difficulties were sometimes a source of concern to the Aptekars.

In our confessional culture, no family closet lacks its skeletons. Refreshingly, Aptekar wants to have a dialogue about them--and virtually everything else of ethical concern to him. (I invoke *ethics* here in the most fundamental sense of how we treat one another.) As a long-time observer of Aptekar's work, I've frequently been struck by his interest in engaging his audience in the most direct ways possible. His recent exhibition-project for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, tellingly called *Talking to Pictures*, includes a videotape of viewers responding to Aptekar and to works in the museum's collection, as well as Aptekar's subsequently produced paintings, for which some of those responses have been etched in glass. Aptekar's text-and-image *modus operandi*, itself a kind of conversation, juxtaposes quotes of other painters' pictures with his own (and occasionally others') informal narratives.

When I posed the subject of inviting dialogue to him, Aptekar noted that "it's of no great consequence to me whether the voice is my own in relation to the source painting or someone else's. I've always found conversation, especially about paintings, almost erotic. As if the paintings I look at with others are a pretext for a conversation that might not otherwise have taken place." How different this is from the classic rationale of many 20th-century artists who claim to paint in order to have "something to look at," suggesting an egotistical drive to make visual what has never been seen before. (Is this even possible?) The urge to tell a story seems as old as our species itself. What's new is that Ken Aptekar generously solicits your stories, too.