



SOME FOR ME, SOME FOR YOU
Paintings by Ken Aptekar

2008 Dr. Roy E. Morgan Exhibition
January 14–March 2, 2008

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Cover: *Some For Me, Some For You*, 2003, oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

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Finally, this exhibition is dedicated to the late Dr. Roy E. Morgan, former arts and drama critic for *The Times Leader*, and longtime friend and supporter of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
Director

Brittany Kramer DeBalko
Coordinator

January 2008

An Introduction and an Invitation

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

This exhibition forms part of a continuing project begun at the Sordoni Art Gallery in 2004, a series of investigations into contemporary painting's recent return to realism and figuration, and in particular, art that self-consciously engages in visual and intellectual dialogue with its own past. That is to say, we set out to consider a kind of painting that, in appropriating, reframing, and recasting Art History's forms, figures and styles, mixes historical allusion with contemporary self-awareness.¹

"In the beginning was the Word," announced the critic Tom McEvilly in 1992, "and since then there's been quotation."² All too often, however, this prophecy has resulted in little more than ironic parody and clever pastiche, wherein the act of quotation is thought to affect a cynical critique of the Modernist cult of originality and authenticity. Yet there are those rare occasions, as in the current exhibition, when the viewer is treated with greater respect. Ken Aptekar's pilfering from painting's past, or more accurately fragments of paintings past—the cribbed details themselves subjected to manipulation in scale, orientation, and color—press these questions about authority and influence, copy and originality, more incisively and to more lasting effect.

In a process that integrates the past into the present through the re-use of art history's forms, patterns, and figures, Aptekar challenges the passivity of *influence* and the burden of Old Master veneration. As if to complicate the anachronism still further, bolted to the front of his paintings are glass panels sandblasted with fragmented text, hovering and casting shadows over the image—sometimes private, autobiographic narratives about his own artistic genealogy, and his gendered, religious, and ethnic identities, as in *When Someone Asks* (2000), *People All Over Are Starving* (1998), and *Circle of Rembrandt* (1992); while elsewhere he elicits the voices of other contemporary viewers as in *I'd Just Look Around* (1997), while in still others the text remains more ambiguous, indirect, or redolent of meaning (*Would You Love Him?*, *And How Did That Make You Feel?*, and *Ordering for Lady at Restaurant*, all 1992).

1. See Sordoni Art Gallery exhibitions and accompanying catalogues: *Wade Schuman*, (2004); *Then As Now*, (2005); *Beyond Recognition: The Art of Alan Magee* (2006).

2. Thomas McEvilly, *Art & Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (1992), quoted in Barbara J. Boemink, Ph.D., *Reality Bites: Realism in Contemporary Art*, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art & Design, 1996, p.8.

It is the combination of word and image in Aptekar's painting that activates a temporal shift in our picture-viewing, just as meaning itself shifts from source to copy, moving us back and forth between the "then and there" and the "here and now." Scholar Mieke Bal has coined the term "preposterous history" to describe this temporal reversal "which puts what came chronically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind its later recycling."³ This is not unlike what literary theorist Harold Bloom had earlier ascribed to poets as the "anxiety of influence," wherein a new poetic style may be achieved "that captures and oddly retains priority over [the] precursors, so that the tyranny of time is almost overturned."⁴

In these pages, the poet and art critic Barry Schwabsky similarly acknowledges how the text in Aptekar's painting at once *distances* us, the viewers, in standing between us and the image, forcing a different modality of attending—reading over viewing; and draws us *closer* by slowing down our lingering gaze, holding us in a time-consuming hesitation and heightening our urge to look through the marked and reflective glass to the paintings' surfaces. Viewer response, then, is no longer an "after" effect—supplementary—to the primacy of authorial meaning; rather, it is the very constituent of meaning at the moment of its making. Thus, Aptekar challenges the tyrannical notion that painting has intrinsic meaning known only to the initiated. In the end, we are left with the presence of multiple voices, compound realities in the single image, and a plenitude—*some for me, some for you*—that depends upon our own behaviors to create meaning, such that meaning itself is not conferred by the work, but performed within the relationship between the text/picture and the reader/viewer. Ken Aptekar, to put it more simply, convinces us that what we see, think, feel, and believe really matters. As one reviewer has recently put it: "Aptekar believes, and his art demonstrates, that interpretation is a creative process, too; each viewer completes a new work of art."⁵ We invite our viewers to add their own interpretive voices.

3. Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999, p.7.

4. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York and Oxford, 1973, p.141.

5. Jean Robertson, "Profile: Ken Aptekar," *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.194.

A Test of Painting

Barry Schwabsky

It's not supposed to be mentioned in the art world, where such practices can go unremarked, but don't forget that a good many people still consider using words in a painting a sort of cheating, as if the artist who indulges in language had simply failed to fulfill his duty of making *images*. And likewise, there are many who feel that a painter who copies his images from other paintings is a cheater, having evaded his duty of *making* images. In their eyes, Ken Aptekar must be a fraud twice over, for his art has been rigorously committed to two basic practices: copying existing paintings, and overlaying them with words. Little do these naïve viewers¹ know that Aptekar is their secret ally within contemporary art, the artist least inclined to patronize them but rather to see their lack of receptiveness, not (or not only) as simple ignorance or even philistinism, but rather as a deep source of the critical and anti-aesthetic attitude that is internal to any contemporary art worthy of the name.

For as Aptekar knows better than most, the postmodern artist is a divided soul, containing within him or herself both the creator of poetry and the one who asserts, "I too dislike it," the aesthete and the anti-aesthete, the hedonist and the moralist, the indulgent and the austere, but above all, the "aristocrat of culture" (in Pierre Bourdieu's pungent phrase) and the one who still feels in his bones the discomfort in what the sociologist John Murray Cuddihy long ago called the "ordeal of civility." Cuddihy saw the incomplete and belated struggle to internalize modernity as a particular burden of nineteenth-century European Jewry—and that's important, given Aptekar's insistence on his Jewish identity, not as a vehicle of "identity politics" but as an aspect of his contingent, irreducible, empirical self-awareness, in contrast to the transcendental subject of aesthetics; yet it is in fact the predicament of nearly everyone who finds his way from the comforts and constraints of a vernacular culture into the arena of consecrated art.

This predicament is vividly illustrated by Aptekar's work of 1998, *People All Over Are Starving*. The image is taken from what is evidently a seventeenth-century Dutch still life. One does not see the whole of the original painting but rather some portion of its right side,

1. As anyone familiar with contemporary art must call them, for both these ploys are not only well attested in art since the 1960s but fundamental to it.

along with part of its frame and the flocked wallpaper on which it hangs; but this is enough to imply that the Old Master painting suggests at once extravagance (the overturned metal goblet is ornate) and frugality (the tray in the foreground holds but a single olive). The ambivalence here is not *only* modern; rather, seventeenth-century Holland, which realized the vanity of the material wealth it so assiduously gathered, was already modern. The viewer to whom all of this is evident will also assume that the monochromy of the painting is the contribution of Aptekar. Only the specialist—or someone who has had occasion to do a little extra research—will be aware that Pieter Claesz., who painted the original of this *Still Life with Wine Glass and Silver Bowl*, now in Berlin, is in fact noted for his sober, nearly monochromatic palette, so that Aptekar has merely exaggerated what is characteristic of this artist; on the other hand, he has flipped the image left-to-right, a curious aesthetic choice one might ponder.

But before this work addresses itself to a viewer, however knowledgeable or otherwise, it calls for a reader. As always with Aptekar's paintings, a glass panel onto which a text has been sandblasted has been bolted to the painting's surface, interposing itself between the image and the viewer—not translating the painting into another medium, the way an artist such as Louise Lawler would by photographing it, but putting the painting at a distance. What first strikes the eye is the text; it's hard to imagine that anyone literate in English could fail to read the words before looking at the picture. It seems to be a sort of interior monologue, the sort of random rumination that might come into a person's mind in the presence of a painting that they are perhaps not terribly interested in, which they might even find dull, yet which they are not entirely ignoring either. "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 single painted olive has been transformed, in this small remembrance of things past, into a bean, but guilt about possessing plenty in a world ruled by poverty echoes through the centuries. And yet the fact remains that this thought is the "wrong" thought to think when looking at a fine painting—an irrelevant personal association, a mere daydream, and surely something that would earn a bad mark were it to crop up in a freshman art history paper: "Not paying attention," the professor might scold. Anyway, man lives not by bread alone—only a philistine thinks about food when looking at paintings, even one that depicts food.

The thought conveyed in this text is hardly that of a qualified art lover but rather of someone who is distracted, inattentive, irresponsible. Yet Aptekar shows that this negligent and immature subject is the one through whom an appreciation of painting can actually be reached, however partially and impurely, not only in the sense that the gaze must negotiate this distracting text in order to appreciate the painting, but also in the sense that its immersion in seemingly irrelevant realities is the potential basis for an ethical reflection on the content and context of painting, a reflection which is internal to the painting itself. "Within Images of Excess, a Glimpse of Moral Theater," as the headline over Holland Cotter's review (*New York Times*, September 30, 2005) of an exhibition of Claesz. still lifes summed it up: This moral theater begins to be comprehended better through thoughts troubled by the recollections of a Detroit boyhood than through the disinterested attentiveness of the pure aesthetic gaze. What some might see as trivializing or vulgarizing painting is the most sincere form of homage, a test of the seriousness of art.