

# Themes of Contemporary Art

VISUAL ART AFTER 1980

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New York Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
2005

Ken Aptekar's paintings are instantly recognizable, even though they share strategies (such as juxtaposing words and visual imagery within one artwork) utilized by many other artists. Aptekar constructs his work in a consistent format. Typically each oil painting starts as a single square wooden panel (thirty inches by thirty inches, or twenty-four inches by twenty-four inches), or multiple square panels combined (such as two thirty inches by thirty inches squares butted together to form a sixty inches by thirty inches artwork). Aptekar paints an image on the panel or panels and bolts a thick pane of glass approximately an inch in front of the image. Typeset words are sandblasted onto the glass. A viewer reads the words hovering in front of the painting and sees the words cast shadows onto the surface of the image.

The artist derives his imagery from other painters' work. Not striving for an exact copy, he translates the source image into a style of painting that combines his own with the original artist's. Colors may change; the most common alteration is a simplification of colors into a monochrome. Scale is manipulated for emotional control. For example, by creating a close-up of a figure's face (done by enlarging and cropping a detail from the original image), Aptekar creates (or exposes) a feeling of intimacy that did not exist (or did not register) in viewing the earlier painting. After creating a digital scan of the source image, Aptekar often employs a computer software program to experiment with alternate layouts for paintings in progress. He can experiment with various combinations of text and details. The computer also facilitates the testing of such options as flipping the image into a mirror reversal of its original format.

Early in his career, Aptekar appropriated details of imagery from famous artists, such as van Gogh, Rembrandt, Watteau, and Raphael. In selecting old master works as his starting point, Aptekar startled and delighted viewers by demonstrating how the meanings of "masterworks" from the history of art can shift dramatically. In *Pink Frick* [6-10], for instance, Aptekar appropriates a well-known self-portrait by Rembrandt, transforming it into a reddish-tinged monochrome (sort of an equivalent to seeing Rembrandt through rose-colored glasses!). Etched onto the panes of glass positioned directly in front of the four-part painting are a series of reincarnations of the words "pink frick." Some of the spellings are nonsense syllables, while others are actual words, such as "fink" and "prick." Aptekar's word play "invites parallel readings about Rembrandt, the current location of the portrait [in] the Frick Museum, and the [Frick's] philanthropic, union-busting benefactor and namesake."<sup>36</sup> Aptekar's painting serves as a complex and witty critique of power. In Aptekar's view, even a sublime work of art (the Rembrandt) inevitably functions within a network of powerful economic and social forces.

More recently, Aptekar has undertaken commissioned installations involving painted details selected from artworks by lesser-known artists. Aptekar's *Dad is showing me how to develop* (1997) [color plate 17], for example, is based on a seascape

