

## APTEKAR'S FAMILY ALBUM

Albert Boime

*"I neologize Jewish and goyish. Dig: I'm Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'Nai [sic] Brith is goyish; Hadassah, Jewish. Marine Corps—heavy goyim...."*

— Lenny Bruce<sup>1</sup>

Ken Aptekar stands in relationship to the history of art as a troubled Jewish-American soul, and as a troublemaker who mentally can't stand still. He resembles both the wicked child of the Passover Seder ritual who asks all the pesky questions and the young secular Jewish rebel in Philip Roth's short story "Conversion of the Jews." Of course, "secular Jew" may be the ultimate oxymoron. Judaism has no closure until the Messiah comes, hence the Jewish condition can only be one of endless speculation and self-interrogation. When Aptekar began probing historical masterworks in 1992, he formulated polarities between Rembrandt and Raphael and Jewish-Gentile associations. Rembrandt's work, with its indications of family strife, contradiction, and anxiety, was posed against Raphael's transcendent images of harmony. Aptekar perceived here a contrast between Jewish questioning and Gentile lack of doubt: whereas Rembrandt asks questions, Raphael provides answers. For Aptekar answers are downers, while questions always give him some place to go; from his point of view, it is this seeking that leads to discovery and fulfillment.

This lack of closure constitutes a vital part of Judaism, and it also nurtures secular Jews; without the initial religious component, "secular Judaism" would be a contradiction in terms. The traditions of learning, of *Midrashim*, of commentary, of a political tradition with which many secular Jews identify, all derive from the religious tradition. A Jew is not constructed by either a text or a genetic code, but by a simple declaration of consent. Then the real struggle begins. A belief in a God who needs to be persuaded to do the right thing through argument or prayer amounts to the same thing as a rational social conscience—by choice, the Jew is an essentialist, whether secular or religious. Maintaining ethnic distinctiveness has become part of the multicultural project, but Jewish artists have until recently not represented themselves as Jews. Indeed, the Jewish presence in modern and avant-garde art has been profound but rarely singled out as such; generally speaking, it has been classified under a more amorphous national rubric. In the history of art, Jews as subjects were depicted mainly in biblical contexts, and as artists they hardly ever represented their community. Nevertheless, throughout this century, Jews have actively fought for egalitarian protection in areas such as civil rights, housing, and employment, and to this list Aptekar added the history of art.

Memory and historical continuity are crucial to a sense of Jewishness; when commemorat-

Adolf Ulrich Wertmüller  
*Portrait of Robert Lea, 1797*



ing the Exodus of Egypt at Passover, the order of ritual is organized so that the participant sees him or herself as directly implicated in the narrative, as if among those liberated from bondage. This is what Aptekar does with his art, building on that shared Jewish tradition but universalizing it. In the process of reworking the Old Masters, Aptekar assimilates art history to his Jewish self and himself into that history. By allowing himself this unrestrained romp through the history of Old Master paintings, he gains the mobility he needs to free himself from the straitjacket of ethnic unconnectedness and reimagine an alternative tradition.

Aptekar's fantasies betray a comical impulse, but they implicate him as much as his audience. They are about his relatives, his ability to "pass" for Gentile. His parodies and reverential salutes to earlier masters diminish the aura of the original while affirming the artist's ethnicity—creating a sort of ethnic Dorian Gray. As Rembrandt assumes Jewish characteristics in Aptekar's recreations, so does the history of art and Aptekar's relationship to it. Parodic identification with a world-class celebrity by way of highlighting one's own depressed status is a favorite device of the Jewish humorist. After recalling the suicide of a Jewish kid that has the neighborhood in a turmoil, the protagonist of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* raves on about suffocating Jewish mothers and blurts out that we [the sons] just "can't take any more!" Then, addressing his psychiatrist: "I have read Freud on Leonardo, Doctor, and pardon the hubris, but my fantasies exactly: this big, smothering bird beating frantic wings about my face and mouth *so that I cannot even get my breath*. What do we want, me and Ronald [the suicide] and Leonardo? *To be left alone!*" The implication is that Leonardo's mother was another Jewish mom.<sup>2</sup>

Aptekar's current exhibition, *Talking To Pictures*, applies Jewish self-irony to an unexpected site, the Corcoran Gallery of Art. William Wilson Corcoran, the museum's founder, was the quintessential representative of the power elite. White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and male, Corcoran was a Southern sympathizer with racist and presumed anti-Semitic views reflective of those held by many in his social circle.<sup>3</sup> Instead of eliciting a dialogue between Old Masters, however, this time Aptekar pushes his process of democratizing the history of art by taking on the work of lesser-known artists in the museum's permanent collection. He dramatically engages with the collection on two mutually reinforcing levels: autobiographical and museological. Superimposing his autobiographical commentary over snippets of selected paintings in the form of texts etched

Yao You-Xin  
*Portrait of Dr. Armand Hammer, 1984*

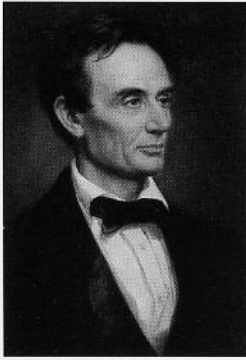


in glass, he also overlays messages concerning the sale, provenance, patronage, and subject matter of other pictures, carrying out a critique of the art market and institutional display mechanisms. These two strands of interest become interwoven as Aptekar worries about the subjectivities of the excluded “others” whose voices often appear as texts on his paintings.

One ingenious example of his museological critique is his mirror imaging of Yao You-Xin’s portrait of Armand Hammer (donated to the Corcoran by Hammer himself) (PLATE 22). Hammer was a major benefactor of the Corcoran in the 1980s, using its proximity to the White House as a platform to ingratiate himself with the Washingtonian elite. Aptekar’s text points out that this portrait was never exhibited, and that it was a replica of the portrait that once hung in the boardroom of Occidental Petroleum Corporation before being installed over the central staircase in what is now the Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center at the University of California-Los Angeles. Both the original and copy have now wound up in the storage room, remnants of a megalomaniac’s reach for glory through the vehicle of the museum. Aptekar’s text nails Hammer, reminding us that before he died, he declared that art was his “ticket to immortality.”

Given Hammer’s intensive involvement with the Corcoran, however, I was astonished that Aptekar did not juxtapose the oil magnate and art collector with the banker and museum founder. If there is a weakness in Aptekar’s approach it is its lack of historical specificity. Granted that we give meaning to everything in creation, if the author-ventriloquist merely imparts his voice to any work in history, history can quickly lose its capacity to inform the present. In this case, Aptekar could have juxtaposed the Hammer portrait with the portrait (at least in reproduction) of Corcoran by Charles Loring Elliott. These two financial geniuses—one Protestant, the other Jewish—were born precisely a century apart (Corcoran in 1798, Hammer in 1898) and could easily have shared equal billing in a compare-and-contrast juxtaposition. Their respective credos are fascinating testimonies to their outsized egos. Here is Corcoran’s dedicatory statement in the privately printed commemorative album presented to his grandchildren:

*As a private individual, inspired by an appreciation of my relations to my fellow man, I have, from early youth to old age, endeavored to be just to all, and generous to the deserving. Blessed by kind Providence with large possessions more than commonly fall to the lot of man, I have regarded them as a sacred trust for the benefit of knowledge, truth, and charity. My reward has*



George Peter Alexander Healy  
*Abraham Lincoln*, 1860

*been an approving conscience, and the gratifying appreciation of many good and great men.*<sup>4</sup>  
 And this is Hammer's autobiographical self-congratulation:

*As a child, I composed a personal creed, which I would repeat to myself at bedtime....I asked God, then, that I might be given the strength to help deserving people as much as I was able. I have never prayed for power or fame or riches, though I have enjoyed them all in abundance. I hope that I have never been greedy. All my life I have given away a large part of my fortune, more money than I could ever count....I have tried to accomplish something of lasting benefit to the world; to add what I can to the riches of the planet and share with all the people the beauty and delight of life.*<sup>5</sup>

Both of these powerful and driven individuals assume the same sanctimonious air in justifying their loot, hoping to bury their complicated, corrupted pasts and buy for their posterity the myth of self-sacrifice and benevolence. It is clear both thought of themselves as embodiments of the American Dream: both were experts at self-promotion, and both avidly sought wealth at an early age. Corcoran built his fortune on Mexican war finance and the business of his pro-slavery constituents; at one time before the Civil War, he was the largest landowner in the District of Columbia. Hammer made his fortune in pharmaceuticals, selling an alcoholic-based ginger tincture during Prohibition. In Soviet Russia, he acted as intermediary for the sale of Czarist art treasures from aristocratic collections to American collectors and museums through his Gallery L'Ermitage in New York City. Neither Corcoran nor Hammer were connoisseurs of art, but both were skilled at first amassing and then exploiting art collections to promote their public image. Corcoran created his gallery dedicated to the "American Genius" to promote his status as a power broker in the nation's capital. He collected portraits of all the presidents and many famous statesmen, including a series of presidential portraits by George Peter Alexander Healy, one of which Aptekar has included in this exhibition. Over a century later, Hammer staged a highly publicized pre-inaugural party at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in honor of president-elect Reagan, exhibiting the Codex Hammer in order "to cultivate some of the richest and most powerful members of Washington society."<sup>6</sup>

What brings us back to Aptekar's exhibition is the surprising fact that when William Wilson Corcoran wanted niche statues for the exterior of the original Corcoran Gallery of Art (now the

Renwick Gallery), he commissioned Moses Ezekiel, a Jew caught up in the issue of Jewish identity in art production. This was the major commission of Ezekiel's career, and he presumably won it as much on the basis of the Southern sympathies he shared with his employer as for his talent. Ezekiel fought for the Confederate cause, and survived. By the close of the nineteenth century, when a Jewish national identity was beginning to be conceptualized, Ezekiel ridiculed the idea of the possibility of a distinctive Jewish art:

*I must acknowledge that the tendency of the Israelites to stamp everything they undertake with such an emphasis is not sympathetic to my tastes. Artists belong to no country and to no sect....Everybody who knows me knows that I am a Jew—I never wanted it otherwise. But I would prefer as an artist to gain first a name and reputation upon an equal footing with all others in art circles. I do not wish to be stamped with the title of "Jewish sculptor."*

Unlike Ezekiel, Aptekar wholeheartedly embraces his Jewishness as fundamental to his visual practice. Aptekar used three sources for his texts—historical information about the Corcoran and its collection, comments on the collection by people who participated in focus groups, and his own response to the works. These are juxtaposed with the artist's autobiographical recollections, creating a family album replete with all the secrets and lies associated with any carefully preserved, highly selective memory. Aptekar personalizes the museum's artifacts to discuss his complex relationships with both his creative immediate family and the larger art world. "Confessing" his family secret, he also establishes an arresting dialogue with artists of the past. The thematic core of *Talking To Pictures* is Aptekar's relationship with his brilliant brother, Stuart. Ken worries that he has usurped his brother's destined place in the world, and the exhibition's context provides him with the first opportunity to openly explore his conflicted feelings about his brother (PLATES 13, 14, 19, 20, 28).

Aptekar's parents were themselves skilled artists—his mother was a painter and art instructor, his father a musician and music teacher. They knew the insecurity of a life exclusively devoted to art practice, but they clearly handed down to their children artistic desires. However, while the parents trained their children artistically, they preferred them to practice as amateurs. Stuart's ambition was to write poetry and play trumpet in a jazz ensemble, but he was encouraged to conform with the stereotypical Jewish dream of "my son, the doctor." Stuart attended medical

school at the University of Michigan on a full scholarship, but suffered a nervous breakdown five days after his arrival. He then spent several years in and out of hospitals.

Stuart suffered from being thwarted in his life's pursuit, and this suffering pointed up the contradictory nature of the American Dream in the postwar period. The gifted Stuart had been Ken's role model, but after his brother's breakdown, Ken could no longer recognize him as the handsome, talented student he had idolized. The trauma of this event was devastating to both, and left lasting repercussions. Stuart's fall from grace reduced his influence from role model to haunting specter, and some projection of this ghostliness can be seen in Ken's subsequent desire to first expunge and then explore his own historical memory. Ken's anxieties about ethnic erasure may very well have originated out of guilt over the possible disappearance of his fraternal "Other."

Aptekar's rollercoaster ride with his brother can be seen in his recuperation of Old Master portraits, specifically in the images of Rembrandt, whom he embraces as another sort of "brother." Aptekar seeks no father figure among Old Master forebears; rather, it is a "brother figure" to whom he appeals for dialogue. When Aptekar appropriates Old Master art, he plays off Stuart's brilliance; in this sense, his brother remains his imaginative enabler. Aptekar literally fraternizes with the Old Masters, questioning their authority, absorbing their talent, and entering into dialogue with them for the sake of affirming his own identity. In this sense, there never has been a disruption in the exchange between the two brothers. Hence, Aptekar's self-effacing approach to his art; it's not about Ken only, but also, by engaging history, about reaching out to Stuart and to Stuart's surrogates beyond time and space.

Ken and Stuart's shell-shocked parents, however, had, from the start, acted out of survivalist rather than materialist or authoritarian motives. Historically, Detroit has been a city rife with racial tension between whites and blacks in the automotive industry. There was also plenty of anti-Semitism to go around: Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent* spewed its anti-Jewish venom in the 1920s, and in the next decade Father Coughlin of Detroit launched his virulent radio diatribes about the international Jewish conspiracy. But despite the general optimism of American Jews in the 1960s, Aptekar's family was taking no chances. A cautious mentality pervaded their strategic moves in the raising of their children—art is fine as a hobby but not as a full-time profession. Perhaps the main source of Ken's guilt has stemmed from the knowledge that Stuart, by

