

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 Bruce¹

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-

