

## LARGER THAN LIFE: READING THE CORCORAN COLLECTION

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Ken Aptekar's paintings are defined by two features: they are copies, and they have words on them. Gorgeously painted and visually attractive, they are "simply" copies of old masterpieces. The old masterpiece is wrested from its then-and-there, and planted in the here-and-now. The copy is an after-effect of great painting, belonging to the past and yet available in the present. Once you adjust your expectations and appreciate this postmodern challenge to originality, unreflectively "checking out" the fidelity of the copy, a small, barely perceptible change suddenly and rudely wrenches you out of the past and firmly plants you in the late twentieth century. The emphasis on visuality is broken because the old masterpiece is literally overwritten, overruled by an emphatically autobiographical text. Offering a text that overlays an image, hiding it behind transparent glass, the work's primary effect is an invitation to read.

In *Talking To Pictures* these two defining features converge with a third aspect that highlights the here-and-now of Aptekar's art. He has selected works from the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art for his subjects. And, for the first time in his work, Aptekar has made use not only of his own writing but also of viewers' responses to the source paintings. This innovation in his texts reflects the notion that the actual museum situation in which we now view his works is also the institutional setting in which the history of art can be accessed and pressured for a variety of meanings.

It takes an exceedingly long time to read the few lines inscribed over Hobbema's trees in *My parents take us on trips* (PLATE 12):

*My parents take us on trips. The four kids pile in the car. Often when we're driving, I press my forehead to the window. Sometimes birds perch on telephone wires along the road, and I fly up and sit quietly beside them. They're just there; they have nothing to figure out, no one to escape.*

As a viewer, I step into this childhood world, become the little boy, fly up with him to sit next to the birds. For I, too, spent many boring hours thinking, figuring out the mysteries of life, escaping from the cruelty of other children, the bossiness of well-meaning parents, the increasing sense of powerlessness. The work's intimacy challenges everything we think we know about the difference between visual and verbal domains. Aptekar's painting challenges the common assumptions that these media are different, but it also questions *how* they differ. *My parents take*

