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# Review

October 2001, Vol. 3, No. 11

is published monthly at:

1427 W. Ninth Street, Suite 203

Kansas City, Missouri 64101

# OCTOBER



Ken Aptekar

Ken Aptekar, *Pink Frick*



# Ken Aptekar: Real People and Old Masters

Susi Lulaki

Dave Hickey asks, "How do you invade an institutional space these days? How do you transgress and shake it up a bit?" Well, maybe by flooding the main gallery of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art with Ken Aptekar's postmodern rendition of old-fashioned painting. Dana Self, curator of *Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990–2000*, had the curiosity to seek out Aptekar's paintings and their questions — What do paintings mean? Who gives them their meaning? — and the confidence to shift the power dynamic of the gallery, to favor the humans who use the space. Encouraging us to initiate and honor our own responses to art, Aptekar's paintings-with-texts question the authority of institutional viewpoints that, as Hickey writes, "neutralize beauty's subversive, commercial, and democratic potential by prescribing the types and meanings of art that the public sees."

Ken Aptekar, a New York- and Paris-based artist, copies Old Master paintings and puts words on them. The text, etched on glass and bolted over the paintings, satisfies the urge to tell a story — both his own, from a Jewish perspective, and those of real people seeing the

world through their life experiences. What really happens when you put something on the wall? Connections happen. Conversations happen. Aptekar has said, "it's of no great consequence to me whether the voice is my own in relation to the source painting or someone else's. I've always found conversation, especially about paintings, almost erotic. As if the paintings I look at with others are a pretext for conversation that might not otherwise have taken place."

I talked to Aptekar following his recent talk at the Kemper Museum during the opening of his ten-year retrospective, *Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990–2000* (September 16–December 2, 2001).

Susi Lulaki: One thing that interests me is the way you are working with visual images and text. You join together the seemingly unconnected. Their unrelatedness seems to imply that things work in unintended ways.

Ken Aptekar: I'm happy that you even were motivated to think of that question in relation to my work because obviously I am very intentional in the relationships that I make in the work between words and image. They're very carefully considered and planned. So the fact that you would wonder about that unintentional quality, the sort of happenstance connection between an image and a particular text, pleases me because I labor to make it feel that way. In the talk, I may have mentioned that part of the reason I try to do that is to disarm people so that

they more easily give themselves over to the experience of my work. So I try to set up a situation where the text is not the most obvious text you would expect in relationship to the particular painting that I've chosen to use as the source for my painting. We have lots of ideas floating in our head at any given moment, and when you're looking at a painting, there's a rush of ideas or thoughts that have to do with 'Did I pick up the laundry?' Things that wouldn't necessarily, overtly, or obviously have any connection to the painting that you are looking at. I can give you an example. You're looking at a painting of a Dutch landscape and you see off in the distance in the painting, in the glinting sun that's falling on that part of the landscape, a line of white sheets snapping in the wind — which is often the case in those paintings. Those things happen. And you think, "God, did I take in the laundry? It's raining." Maybe that's not the most obvious thing that somebody would think of when they were contemplating a Dutch Old Master painting of a landscape, but that's how real people think in relationship to experiencing art. That has a validity. Maybe they would think, "Wow, look, they used clothes lines back in Holland in the 16th century to take in the laundry. The size of those sheets; they look so big." They might think about something specific in relationship to that painting and be motivated to consider it in a way that no one else maybe had considered it before. It becomes, part and parcel, the experience for them of looking at art. That's what I try to do in putting

together these unintended combinations.

Lulaki: It's about how things happen versus human systems. We're always inventing our way of understanding how everything works, but it doesn't really seem to work that way.

Aptekar: It doesn't work that way. And often our unconscious minds lead us into corners where we didn't expect to go. That's what I try to draw on. I try to draw on my unconscious. I try to draw on memory and tease out some of those kinds of experiences that a painting can spur.

Lulaki: Do you see your work in therapeutic terms?

Aptekar: I don't really see it in therapeutic terms. Oftentimes, I am happy that my work allows me the good fortune of digging into things that trouble me; digging into aspects of life that I find troubling or aspects of my own personal family history that are difficult to deal with; that I have a place in my life where I can contemplate those things and wrestle with them and come to some resolution about them. But I wouldn't say that self-therapy produces any great art or anything like that.

Lulaki: The way you're working is with both images and texts. It's an interesting mix. It could be reversed. It could be new illustrations of old texts.

Aptekar: Well, that's true actually. That is very true. That's an interesting thought. I may try using that idea. You'll have to give me your coordinates so I can thank you when I try something like that.