

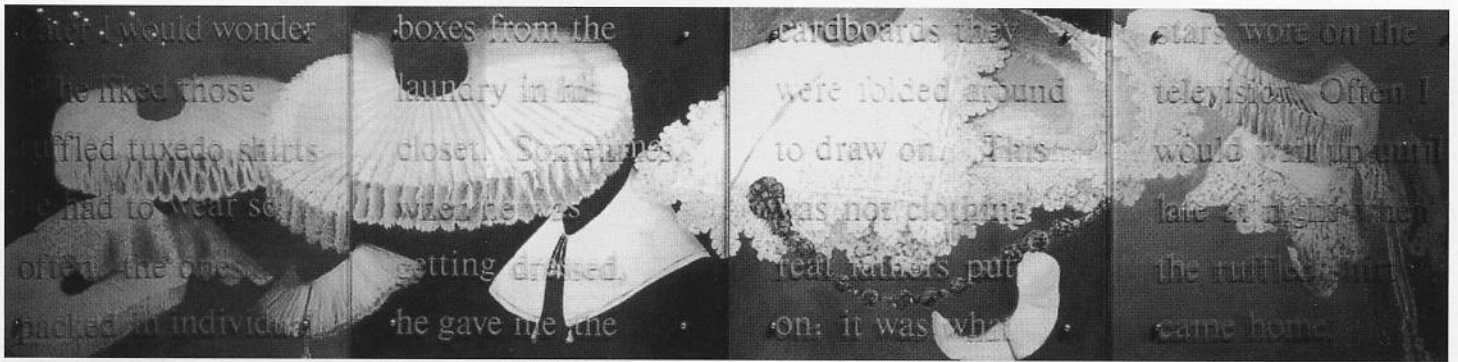
# THE WALTERS

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# Why I Went for Baroque



*Fig. 1 Later I Would Wonder, Ken Aptekar, 1994, Collection of Arlene and Barry Hockfield.  
Photo courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York*

In Lisa Corrin's essay for the catalogue *Going for Baroque*, she writes that museums like The Walters "construct a past that fills our need for an illusion of stability and continuity." You look around in your daily life, and, if you've got your eyes open, much of what you see is chaotic, senseless, dispiriting, and alienated from the past. Luckily, you can escape to the sanctuary of a museum to find solace, some moments to reflect, and a chance to exit off the information highway to a rest stop where you might find an image or object that beckons to you. Maybe it will console you. Or annoy you. Or remind you of an emotion you haven't had the time for. Museums, and the kind of art you find in them are, if nothing else, slow.

When I was an art student at the University of Michigan during the late 60s, Vietnam anti-war demonstrations and Civil Rights Movement sit-ins brought the real world crashing into the cloistered preserve of college. Sometimes I marched; sometimes I just watched. And often I wandered

into the campus Art Museum looking for...what I didn't know. Protection? Love? Beauty? Calm? Assurances that some things would never change?

I would never ask a museum today for those assurances. They're a lie. Because the works in the museums are no less fixed in their meanings than you or I. You talk to your mother one way, your boss another, your friend or lover yet another, and, as a result, they all perceive you differently. Think about who you are to people you meet for the first time today compared to who you were ten, twenty years ago, and you have some tiny idea of how history changes one's perceptions. Then, there's your outward appearances. You look altogether different if you're getting into a Rolls Royce, than if it's a Toyota. You're not the same if you're browsing the European history shelf at a bookstore, or flipping through adult magazines at the corner newsstand.

This is what I try to get into my work. Subjectivity. History. Context. I can't say that I consciously set out to

focus on the baroque as I scavenged the history of art for images. I'll tell you what happened. Years ago I was painting portraits of a group of people I had photographed for a series of paintings I was planning. I joined together, in multiple works, individuals who raised questions about the relationship between them. The idea had to do less with who each person was than with who they were to each other. Of course, everyone wanted to know who these faces belonged to and so couldn't get to what they meant to each other.

People looking at pictures in museum—sold paintings—don't usually care that much about knowing who the subjects are. They're just people in paintings, maybe famous, maybe not. We just accept them as paintings and notice other things about them: the colors used, the brushstrokes, the clothes they're wearing, the time period, the frame, or perhaps we try to identify their personalities. If I recycled images from old paintings, I figured, no one would ask who the

people were, and I could get on to other questions that seem bigger to me.

Like the way men act in the world. I was struck by the comments of a newspaper critic who reviewed *Going for Baroque*. He framed the exhibition as a competition between the contemporary and the baroque works. So driven in his life must he be that he could only see it in terms of one upmanship. He simply couldn't enter the thrilling conversation going on in The Walters' galleries between the past and the present.

To begin my new work, I went looking for images I could pirate from the history of art. But I found myself concerned about even making oil paintings in this day and age. What did old masterpieces by, for example, Rembrandt or Raphael, have to say to people troubled by prejudice, abuse of authority, privilege, sexism, and the ineptitude of men in the realm of emotions? Could paintings satisfy a yearning for pleasure and offer a social critique?

I turned to the beginnings of Old Master painting, and looked for nice guys. I found some in paintings by, among others, Raphael. Here I will make a broad generalization: the work of Raphael and the art of the Renaissance generally could be characterized as cool and rational, compared to the melodramatic emotionalism of the baroque. So, as appealing as Raphael was to me, the harmony and calm of his classical compositions soon gave way to the more turbulent, more emotionally shaded pictures of Rembrandt. I could find images of men

and women whose inner lives seemed to be brushed across canvas in the work of the Amsterdam painter. This heightened emotionalism could compel my audience to care about the participants in the social narratives that interested me. Besides, if you want to say something about authority and men, and you're a white male painter, sooner or later, you're looking at Rembrandt. What I saw was a bumbler, a

that try to bring notions about Rembrandt into the frame. Some use the controversies surrounding attribution as the subtext. One paired a woman painted by Rembrandt with a man painted by an artist formerly thought to be Rembrandt, entitled *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*.

In the painting *Jack and Murray* (fig. 2), I introduced the impact of the market for Rembrandt's paintings and his reputation on the ultimate meaning they have for us. And I called attention to a great rarity in the history of art: a close friendship between men memorialized in paint.

Recently I sent a letter to Rembrandt.

After all, he'd been on my mind for quite some time, and I had more than a few things to say to him. At the end of the letter I wrote,

*You're important to me, even if I know more about your work than I do about you. You have a story to tell, the life of an artist. There are the facts of that life, few of which are known, and then there are the paintings, those sublime, majestic and confusing traces of the long-gone you. Now, it is our pleasure and responsibility to create their meaning. I would appreciate your help, and await your reply!*

Ken Aptekar  
Contributing Artist,

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Lisa Corrin is Curator/Educator for The Contemporary.  
The *Going for Baroque* catalogue is available  
for purchase in the Museum Store



Fig. 2 Jack and Murray, Ken Aptekar, 1994, Private Collection. Photo courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

jerk to women, an empathetic lover, an occasionally successful entrepreneur, an exploiter of students, a painter whose work evolved dramatically over his life, and an enigma. In short, lots of material for me to work with.

Over the last few years I've made quite a few paintings (fig. 1 *Later I Would Wonder*) with paintings by Rembrandt and, in some cases, by others formerly thought to be Rembrandt. Some had to do with clothes, like the one in which I focused on the collars in his paintings, using them to stage recollections about my father and to suggest masculinities other than the one that is standard issue.

You can't really separate Rembrandt the painter from Rembrandt the Greatest Painter Who Ever Lived. In fact, I made a number of paintings