

ANGELS? REMBRANDT?



Recent Skeptical Works by Ken Aptekar

Exhibited Works On View: November 29, 2001 - February 10, 2002

The Angel's Faint Flame 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
105 x 60 inches (6 panels)

Walter Benjamin is looking... 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
60 x 60 inches (4 panels)

When someone asks... 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches (2 panels)

The Jewish artist looks into angels 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
60 x 30 inches (2 panels)

No one is available to... 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
60 x 60 inches (2 panels)

I'm sorry. You're sorry? 2001
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches (2 panels)

Just between us 2001
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches (2 panels)

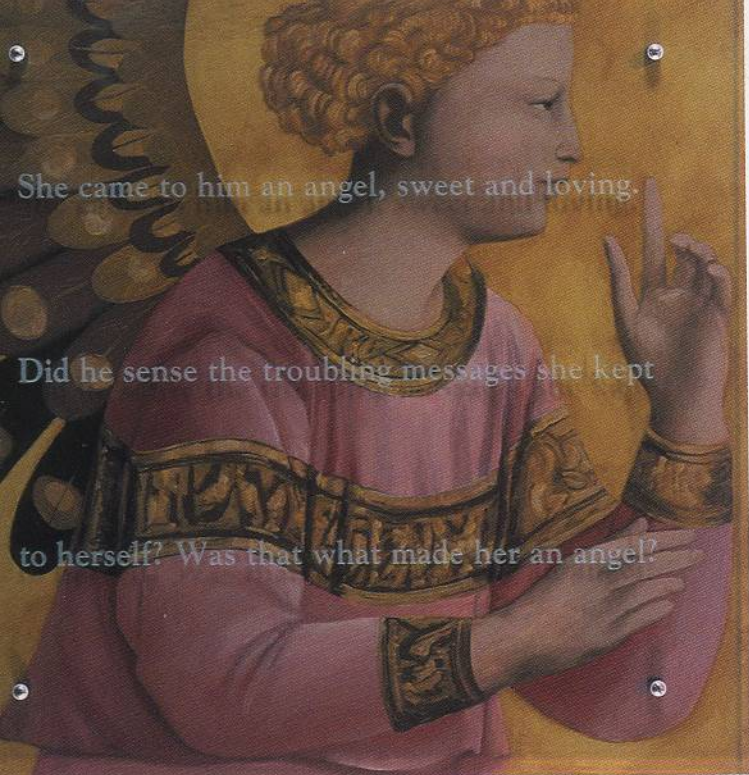
Mine. Not yours. 2001
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches (2 panels)

She came to him an angel 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 30 inches (? panels)

Bearer of glad tidings 2000
Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 30 inches (1 panel)

CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER of VIRGINIA

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ANGELS?

Ken Aptekar's *Angels?* invokes our desire for intervention in the face of trauma or calamity—yet, with this longing comes questioning and doubt. Rather than looking at angels as inspiration for theological, mystical or poetic discussion, Aptekar probes the uses to which we put the “idea” of angels.

Beginning with a masterwork painting as a point of reference, Aptekar appropriates—borrows—imagery to create a new work reinterpreting poignant segments from the original. He then bolts a thick plate of glass that is etched with text onto the painting so that the image is viewed through lines of words. The resulting hybrid of painting and text allows for multiple interpretations and effectively catapults historical imagery into a contemporary context.

In this series Aptekar quotes writers or uses text of his own invention. While these paintings are not intended as commentaries on theological issues, they undeniably provide a forum to ponder issues of hope and the reservation to believe, even fleetingly, in sources of positive intervention.

From a purely formal vantage point, angels as subject have long been sources of inspiration for artists. Transformed by the imagination, these fantastical, winged creatures evoke thoughts of flight and perspective. In the midst of trauma, the quest for understanding offers comfort. The ability to see troubling events from above and afar offers the distance and solace to determine what behavior may lead to the best outcome.

Theological and poetic notions of angels affirm their dynamism: their speed and voice that conveys good news and command individuals to let go of fear or warn of a difficult task ahead. Aptekar draws a wry parallel to the voices we hear on the answering machine or on corporate help lines. To our dismay, however, these sources of guidance found within technology are not always helpful.

Another angel moniker refers to the notion of an idealized woman. In *She came to him an angel...* Aptekar hints that when falling in love, the person inspiring emotional arousal appears to be flawless. In this painting inspired by Fra Angelico's original, the angel with golden hair and rainbow-colored wings gestures gracefully with her hand. Aptekar suggests that this posture may offer a challenge or preclude some sort of dissent and thus the “perfect” woman becomes more human.

Other paintings in the *Angels?* series incorporate text quoted from writers such as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin. Not unlike Aptekar's own text, these authors express a desire to suspend their disbelief in the unknowable, even though they may ultimately feel disappointed.

REMBRANDT?

Along with the *Angels?* series, three additional works are included in this exhibition that were created last summer when Aptekar had access to a Rembrandt painting in a commercial gallery in New York City. For Aptekar, Rembrandt continues to “cycle in and out of consciousness,” as an artist who exemplifies the unbearable burden of being an individual who is considered larger than life.

Because of Rembrandt's success in being commissioned by the burgeoning merchant class of the 16th century Netherlands, he embodies the notion of the artist as hero and one garnering great financial reward. Yet, the course of Rembrandt's life reveals trials as he fell in and out of popular favor. His personal life was complex and difficult as he suffered the death of loved ones and severe financial setbacks. But his intensely psychological renderings of individuals attest to his genius, and for many painters and historians his paintings are icons of beauty and sublimity.

Rembrandt's particular style was copied by several of his students, and recently numerous works attributed to Rembrandt have been discovered to be frauds, rendered by other skilled painters. For Aptekar, an artist who appropriates images, Rembrandt is a source of fascination both in terms of the suggested narrative contained within his paintings, and the complex questions of ownership and authenticity that they inspire in this century.



The painting that is source of inspiration for the three works, Rembrandt's *Man with a Sword*, 1644-46, depicts a stoic soldier. The query painted over the panels “Mine. Not yours.” evokes discussion of ownership: whether the painting belongs to Rembrandt, the source of inspiration; to the collector who owns the painting; to Aptekar, the artist; or to the viewer who upon looking at the painting is reflected in the painting's mirrored surface.

Just Between Us continues this question, as the soldier painting is paired with a painting of a woman: *Young Girl in an Open Half-door*, 1645, a Rembrandt painting of the same size and date as the soldier painting. Aptekar infers that these two paintings may have been companion works. His word-play attests to their separation, that they have been “weaned” from one another, and his careful modeling of their expressions suggest a complicity, that only these subjects know the truth about their origin.

Both the *Angels?* and *Rembrandt?* challenge the notion that a painting has an intrinsic meaning that is only known by the experts. Rather than focusing on the artist's particular style or fame, Aptekar encourages viewers to reconsider the works of the masters in a contemporary context. The addition of translucent text slows the viewing process, instead of the two-second glance, one is inspired to spend more time to glean the artist's intervention, and, in turn, to find one's own interpretation. Ken Aptekar bestows heightened status to the viewer. By encouraging the necessary time to examine a work of art Aptekar facilitates a significant experience: the discovery of meaning through reading between the lines.

Carla M. Hanzal
Curator

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery.

The content for the essay was compiled through an interview with the artist on November 13, 2001. Essays by Mieke Bal and Terrie Sultan contained in *Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1998 and Mieke Bal's essay in *Companion Portraits: A collaborative project by Rembrandt van Rijn and Ken Aptekar*, Pamela Auchincloss Project Space, 2001 were also invaluable research documents.