

Companion Portraits

A collaborative project by Rembrandt van Rijn & Ken Aptekar

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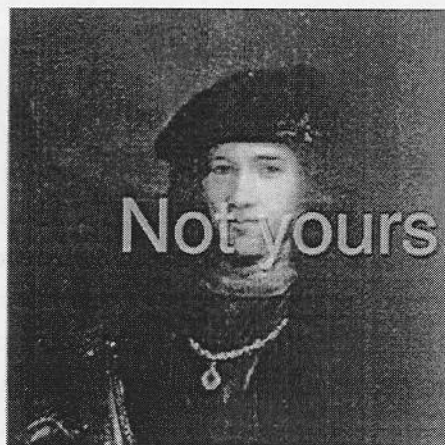
Pamela Auchincloss Project Space
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Paintings "R" Us

Mieke Bal

What's a painting called a "Rembrandt" doing in a Chelsea gallery? Showing its hand, that's what. Forced by contemporary artist Ken Aptekar into a collaborative project, our Old Master had no choice but to throw his glove into the ring, hand and all; yield his authority to the relentless pressure of change, leave his sheltered place in museums and art historical expertise, and go out into the world as it is today. He stands to gain some and lose some in the process. Aptekar's new attack on everything we cherish in the humanistic values that hold the reigns of Culture, has dragged that Dutch icon of eternal beauty into the embattled intersection between high art and real culture – that of everyone, everyday. There, the Master's hand recedes before the constant production of the tenuous subjectivity of ordinary men and women, with the humble help of images and words shown and addressing whomever happens to be there to see and hear, believe or doubt.

The polemic is as penetrating and comprehensive as it is gentle and humorous. The show is a duel, a meeting of two men and two moments. On one wall, the old masterpiece: *Man with a sword* from 1644-46. Opposite this dark, brooding face of a man is its merciless



decomposition. The enigmatic face of the man whose identity we will never know, receding more and more into the dark background as time goes on, is rejuvenated by the many strategies deployed by the contemporary artist in his response to the riddle posed by the art from the past. Man holding a sword is that kind of old master painting we love all the more for its resistance to project onto it concerns

that are not "proper" to it. Yet we constantly overrule those concerns by considerations of value alien to its historical being. The multiple ways the old painting is worked over in this show are profoundly worrying, and exhilaratingly funny. They liberate looking at art from the stronghold of an institutional power that we don't even question because it is so pervasive we can only take it for granted.

There is a lot of fussing – anxiety, interests – about the hand who painted this Rembrandt and other works like it. Aptekar, like his opponent in this confrontation, has his own signature mode of working, although it is not an individualized "hand." On the contrary. By repainting Old Masters,

modifying them ever so slightly except for massively eliminating the hand art-historical expertise deems unmistakable, he de-individualizes painting itself. Moreover, he mounts plates of glass over the hand-painted panels, glass that reflects the viewer. On the glass words are sandblasted, so that reading runs interference in the pure experience of visual pleasure. And the choice of words, mainly personal pronouns and other small, empty words, leads individuality still farther afield. The three pairs of portraits facing the "original" – a word that loses all meaning here – take painting at the letter, taking seriously what painting is – or at its word, probing what it promises. By being so deadpan serious about painting's promises, Aptekar's works denounce the ways we are constantly being deceived, and our own complicity in that deception.

Mine. Not yours. says the first pair. These words come first, before the painting. An aggressive "Mine." questions your right to even look at this painting. For a response to a privately owned Rembrandt, this is pretty nasty. But who is the "I" who can say "mine" so boldly? Rembrandt? He surely did not put words over his paintings. Or did he, by not leaving enough words behind, thus generating all those words spilled to question this painting: the identity of the man, of the hand. This is Aptekar's show, his work, although "R", the quintessential old master, is present. What Aptekar – "A" – made, his work, is an installation that includes the "R", hence, cannot be confined to an object for sale. Yes you may buy it, but it is still an "A", belonging to him who says "mine." The tone of these words impel grumbling, even revolt. Who the hell is he to say.... Thus the visitor's mind is in the right spirit to see this installation.

There is so much to question here. For example, changing the hand that painted the portrait, our contemporary artist questions the fuss about "hands" that informs much art-historical knowledge. What you see is what you see. Like it or not, visual art should not be divested of its stated priority of visual experience. If we worry about the "hand" we forget to look, really. Yet, if we do look, we see words first. At best, we see words working with painting. We notice that the period that turns the word "mine" into the bossy expression of ownership "Mine." sits on the shadow of the man's cheek, to the left of the face itself. Is ownership a shady business? The whole idea of belonging – to the artist's work, to the owner's collection, to the viewer's visual experience – is shot through with queries. But as these troubling questions arise, humanistic values such as eternal art and true beauty lose their anchoring in the individual hand they have been invested in for so long. By taking the image at its word, the response to the "R" of our great master and to the bossiness of those who speak for him, instills a sense of loss, of broken promises and deception. The artificial coloring that changes the characteristic dark brown and yellow that signifies "Rembrandt" for us, into electric and night blue, orange, sickly yellow, and rosy tints, foregrounds the deceptiveness of painting as such.

Along with painting, language is equally mobilized to be a site of loss, of unmooring. We tend to consider language an instrument to convey meaning anchored in social reality. Language refers to what lies outside it. There is a category of small words that don't have a fixed, reliable referent, and those are the ones given priority here: derivatives of "I" and "you" that change place as the conversation goes on. You say "I" and while you speak, you are "I". You have or "own" subjectivity. But when I answer you, you become you and I become I. In order to be a subject, to "have" subjectivity, I must acknowledge you as I – as entitled to say I and be heard. This linguistic basis for the production of subjectivity by the other



and in interchange, unfixes the possible meanings of *Mine. Not yours.*

At first, one tends to assume that the speaker of these words is the man in the picture. It is his representation that we see, his subjectivity that is on the line. But Aptekar has painted the face twice, reversing the source. Facing – now not only wall against wall, but on this wall of response, one "I" facing another – becomes the visual equivalent of language's systematic undermining of individual egomania. "I" has no identity, no face that owns identity. Between the source – its "hand" –, the sitter – left of right side? – the responding artist, the viewer, subjectivity goes around, turning in circles.

With this shimmering ambiguity in mind – or in the corner of our eye – what does the speech act of apology mean? *I'm sorry. You're sorry?* If we cannot determine who is sorry, nor if he is really sorry, the reason for apologizing is just as unclear. Is he sorry for something he did with his sword? But the hand holding the sword has been cropped away – this "A" appears to have his way with hands. So, whatever was done with it remains forever unclear, but so does the agent of that act. Visually, the words 'sorry' belong to the man's face, but you can also say that, visually, they nibble at it. The man on the right doesn't seem to take the apology at face value. Somehow, reversing the enigmatic face makes it appear more accusatory, harsher. Or is it the skeptical reversal of the language, of "I'm sorry" into "You're sorry?" that undermines the reliability of the apology? What belongs to vision and what to speech falls prey to the generalized questioning of ownership.

For, not only does the installation take both images and words at their word. It also probes the inextricable knot of images-and-words that makes up contemporary culture. Both images and words produce subjectivity; both make up stories. Far removed from the individualistic craze that



reduces painting to the hand that made it, the spacing of words and the tinkering with images in these three facing pairs of portraits collaborate in the production of signs. In the third couplet the *Young Girl in an Open Half-door* from 1645, at the Chicago Art Institute, is brought in to sustain the narrative of the lost partner. According to art-historical lore, a pair of companion portraits was painted around this time, since two of the same size were in an early sale, the other being described as a man with some armor. In the embattled siting of subjectivity that this duel between "R" and "A" is about, the slight softening of the woman's face by slight changes in the eyes and mouth, a vague, gossipy sense of complicity is produced in this final pair.

While we try, but in vain, to determine between whom this complicity occurs – artist and viewer, husband and wife, art historian and collector – the words collude in an ongoing de-accessing of individual identity. They do this by the internal rhyme of *just between us* that whispers the words. But they also do this, more profoundly, by visualizing the words. Spacing, here, turns "between" into betting and weaning, a bet for separation: after the loss of fixed reference, the bet has to be on some distance, not the cozy unity of the complicit couples about whom the pair is gossiping. Just as, in the first pair, the space between "not" and "yours" makes room for the portrayed man's mouth, allowing him to speak in a forked tongue, giving and denying you subjectivity in the same speech act.

It's better to show your hand, this installation seems to say, than to obsess about hands.

Mieke Bal founded the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, and is professor at the University of Amsterdam. Her books include *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge University Press), *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (Routledge Press), and *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (University of Chicago Press).