

KEN ABTEKAR

TALKING TO PICTURES

Introduction by Terrie Sultan

Larger than Life: Reading the Corcoran Collection by Mieke Bal

Aptekar's Family Album by Albert Boime

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

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KEN APTEKAR: TALKING TO PICTURES

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Throughout his career, Ken Aptekar has scrutinized painting from a singular vantage point. Reinterpreting historical paintings in order to encourage viewers to explore their presumptions about the nature of conferred and perceived value, he first creatively repaints details of acknowledged masterworks, and then places glass panels over his painted interpretations; upon these panels are etched narratives that either directly refer to the artworks depicted or express ideas and stories that are associated thematically with the selected images. In Aptekar's work, the conjunction of word and image creates a hybrid discourse that poses elusive questions and forges mysterious connections between what is depicted and what is necessarily left out. Creating an intersection of language and visual image, his work asks us to reevaluate some of our most potent beliefs about the nature of intrinsic, temporal, and conferred value in the aesthetic experience. Like any good story, Aptekar's paintings first confuse and then clarify the attributes of identity. He is well aware of the impact of history on the choices we make and the values we follow. By juxtaposing recognized images with his highly personal narratives, he compresses our long lineage of accumulated knowledge into the pinpoint focus of individual perception, and then uses this sense of individual awareness to bridge the gap between historical presumptions and contemporary thinking.

I first met Ken in 1990, when I invited him to participate in the Corcoran's *43rd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*. His work during that period explored the ideal of maleness; to do this, he juxtaposed painted interpretations of masterworks by Rembrandt and Raphael with biographical and autobiographical texts. As Aptekar continued to mine the territory of representation, figuration, and the intersection of history and the present day, he further distilled his statements about societal and cultural systems of thought. In November 1996 I saw Aptekar's most recent body of work, a series of paintings that even more emphatically intertwined familial biography with historical art. In this series he employed such diverse artists as the relatively unknown nineteenth-century Viennese painter Isidore Kaufmann and the more popularly acknowledged eighteenth-century French court painter François Boucher. A stunning ten-foot square painting, *I'm six years old and hiding behind my hands*, paired the Boucher source painting with an original text that read like a succinct short story. This represented a major leap in both scale and content for Ken. More importantly, it signaled a significant change in the poet-

ry of his narrative language and his technical skills as a painter. His project for the Corcoran is an outgrowth of the ideas initially developed in these paintings.

In *Talking To Pictures*, Aptekar created a series of paintings based specifically on works in the Gallery's collection. Grounded in months of research with the objects and interviews with Corcoran curators, students of the Corcoran School, and museum visitors, this body of work departs from Aptekar's past practice of representing renowned masterworks. Instead, he selected a series of paintings by lesser-known (occasionally unknown) artists from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Over the course of several months, he explored the artworks' subject matter, acquisition and exhibition history, purchase prices, as well as the backgrounds of the original owners and public opinion of each painting. He reviewed hundreds of archival files and spent hours in the permanent collection galleries to complete the preliminary stage of his on-site study. From this initial research, he selected the paintings which comprised the subject matter for the second phase of his project, a series of five discussion groups held with elementary school children, high school students from the School Without Walls, fine arts and critical theory students from the Corcoran School of Art, museum guards, and members of the general public. He posed questions to each group in order to elicit their opinions of the selected paintings, seeking to establish both their aesthetic judgments and their personal responses to the works of art. Combining the results from these discussions with his prior research, Aptekar composed his own narrative texts that form the core of *Talking To Pictures*.

Aptekar's engagement with cultural ideas is greatly enhanced by his knowledge of art, history, and literature in both "high" and "low" cultural formats: he is equally at home with old master paintings and popular forms of music and literature. What he seeks to establish in his paintings is the continuum underlying the disrupted roles and relationships of defined cultural activities and the confusions and intrusions of real life. What he has accomplished in this exhibition is an almost seamless melding of past and present, universal and personal, that makes the process of "talking to pictures" a stimulating and thrilling proposition.