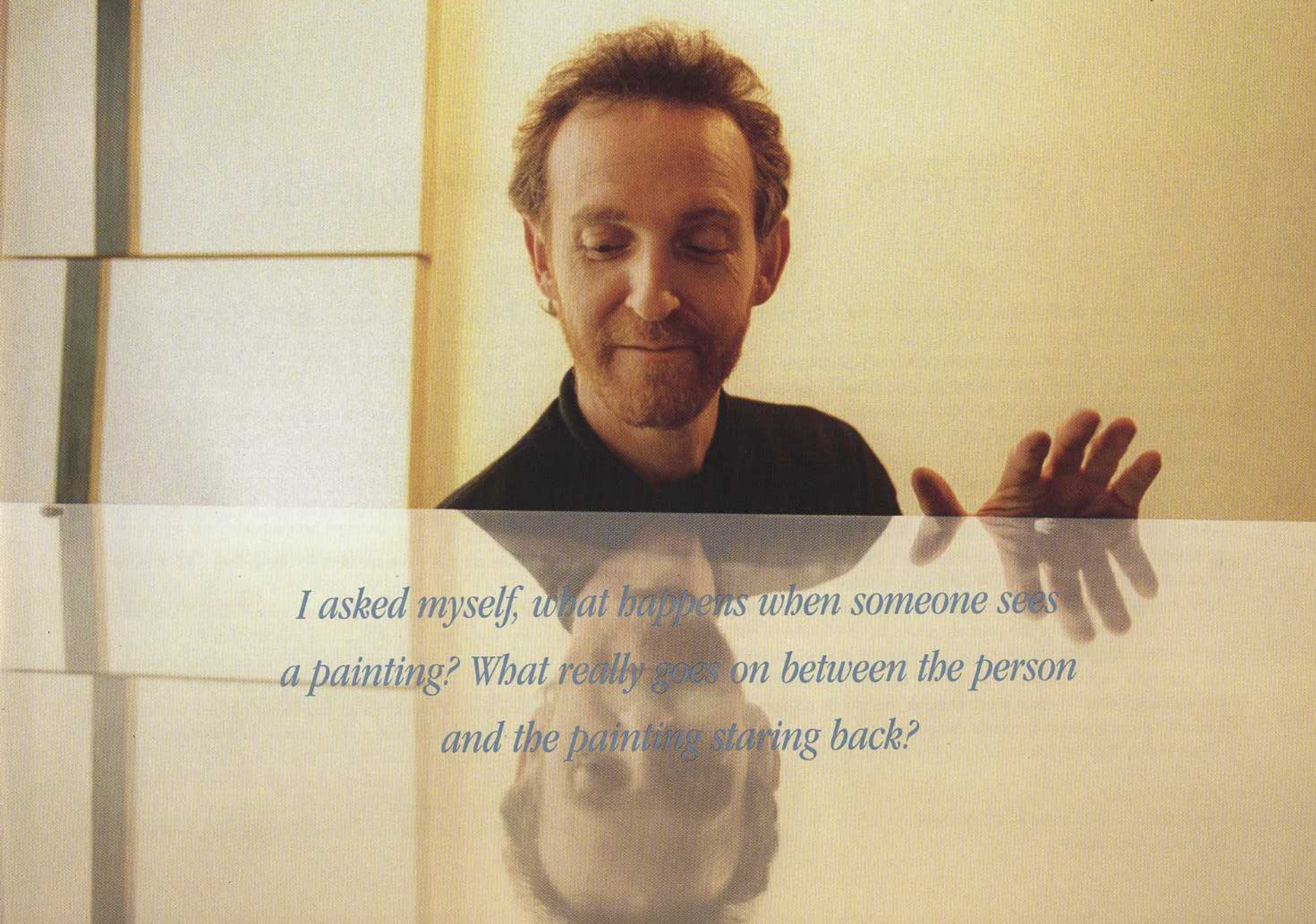

EYE CONTACT
paintings by KEN APTEKAR



I asked myself, what happens when someone sees a painting? What really goes on between the person and the painting staring back?

FOREWORD

from THE DIRECTOR

During a trip to Washington, D.C., in 1997, I visited the Corcoran Gallery of Art in order to see some of the great paintings in the history of American art—work by Bierstadt, Church and Homer, to name but a few. I then discovered, in an adjoining gallery, the contemporary work of Ken Aptekar. The work was fresh and new, conjoining the skills of a master-artist with a postmodern intelligence and creativity.

Equally intriguing was the public response to the work. People lingered in front of the work, they read the text, and, if they were with a friend, they engaged in lively conversations in front of the paintings. Here was an art that respected the past while exploring issues in contemporary art. In doing so, it actively engaged its audience. It was this democratic, inclusive spirit that immediately drew my attention: the art of the past absorbed by the vision of the contemporary artist who, in turn, leaves his studio to work directly with the museum visitor (whoever he or she may be) in order to engage the viewing public. This is work that, in the words of poet Galway Kinnell, "percolates up through the populace" and, as such, a type of exhibition that we felt would challenge and intrigue Rochester.

Grant Holcomb
The Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director
Memorial Art Gallery

INTRODUCTION

by MARIE VIA

Remember Tinkerbell? When we were children, Peter Pan's fairy friend depended on us for her very survival. Only if we believed in her—and, more importantly, clapped our hands to show it—could she continue to exist.

It's not such a leap from Tinkerbell to the postmodernist position that paintings have no inherent meaning, that they depend upon the viewer's participation to become anything more than pigment laid down on canvas. Ken Aptekar's work helps make this idea plausible, even to those of us who find ourselves more loyal to works of art than to theories about them.

Aptekar convinces us that what we believe does matter. He's truly interested in what we see when we look at a painting: what we remember, what we feel, what we like, what makes us feel uncomfortable. His own perceptions are . . . not exactly *shaped,* but . . . *enriched* by our responses. We become partners in meaning-making.

Last winter, we brought the artist together with several "focus groups" to discuss fifteen paintings in the Memorial Art Gallery's collection. He had requested that we assemble a cross-section of people from the cultural mosaic that is Rochester, knowing that each would be looking at these artworks through different lenses of experience. We invited museum staff and security guards, poets, grade school students, members of a men's literary club, and local

birdwatchers ("I want a few people who are trained to look carefully, but not necessarily at art . . .").

He started out by telling members of each group that he had made a special arrangement whereby the Gallery, in gratitude for their participation, would let everyone select a painting to take home. All they had to do was tell him which painting they wanted and why. It is a tribute to Aptekar's genuine curiosity about their answers that everyone willingly suspended disbelief and entered into the ritual of choosing and explaining. Later, as he led them through the galleries and focused on particular paintings, common themes as well as wildly original insights emerged. People were looking, talking, imagining, questioning. And then an exceptional thing happened.

The paintings began to change. Before our very eyes, so to speak. The woman in Douglas Gorsline's *Bar Scene* shape-shifted between a wistful shop girl having a drink with an older man and a frustrated young mother sneaking out to a bar to escape her children. Francesco Solimena's Judith, holding aloft the severed head of Holofernes, gloried in her gruesome trophy one moment and apologized for what she had been forced to do the next. The bundled-up figure in Everett Shinn's *Sullivan Street* either strode toward a group of waiting friends or paused before turning and walking away from them forever. And every version of every story made its own peculiar sense.

Like the stories behind the paintings, Aptekar's own work continues to evolve. His earlier paintings were largely meditations on his own identity—as an artist, a male, a Jew. In the work he has produced for *Eye Contact*, he turns his gaze upon the museum itself—what it is, how it works, where it tries to take us. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out in his accompanying essay, Aptekar's perspective is colored by history, both personal and collective. Mirzoeff's view of Aptekar's view is likewise formed by a different, but equally meaningful, set of personal experiences. Our own reading of both the original source paintings and Aptekar's responses to them help fuel the ongoing chain-reaction that art can produce over decades and centuries.

Making eye contact, like clapping our hands as children, is a powerful act. Prepare to generate some energy.

Marie Via
Curator of Exhibitions
Memorial Art Gallery

EYE GLASSES

by NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF

I see eyes and glasses, good eyes and bad eyes, the glass in front of our eyes, the glass in front of paintings. In front of Ken Aptekar's paintings there is a thick glass that by its very thickness refuses to be ignored. It sets me thinking. My grandmother died last spring and she wore thick glasses. When she was a child in London's Jewish East End around 1910, her eyes were declared to be so bad that she was taken out of school for fear of using them up altogether. Even in her wedding photograph she wore glasses, the round black, heavy rimmed kind that Kate Winslett has in the film *Enigma*. But in her ninth decade she would stay up late watching snooker on television, easily discerning the small colored balls in their rapid trajectories across the smooth green baize. The eyes, it seems, had it after all.

Was the diagnosis a simple medical failure or did some long-forgotten doctor in a Bethnal Green office recall the common modern fallacy that Jews had weak eyes? This modern addition to the long list of Jewish failings had been "proven" by the anthropological research of one Joseph Jacobs in the same East End only twenty years before. Jacobs, of course, was Jewish himself. What was he thinking about when he set up his eye tests in the crowded streets on the "wrong" side of town? That history is embedded in Aptekar's thick glass, even if it is visible only to me.

Aptekar's paintings are a mirror to the eye. Paintings have long been called "windows on the world" and the eyes were held to be "the glass of the soul." That belief lingers in the name given to the clear liquid between the lens and the retina: the vitreous, or glassy, humor. Aptekar puts a glassy humor in front of the picture, the eye in reverse as if in a mirror. There is much humor on his glass in the witty texts sandblasted onto the surface. It's a painful thought, to have words etched onto the very surface of the glassy eye.

Rochester, New York, lives by its eyes, peering through lenses, pressed to viewfinders or scanning a photocopy. In the gallery, there are different eyes, more calculating perhaps than in most places. Aptekar finds the picture of Colonel Rochester and homes in on the eyes and their peculiar glasses. I look again, harder, at the glasses that I passed by on an earlier visit. That's what Ken Aptekar does. He makes you look at things you only noticed out of the corner of your eye.

The glasses have a hinged second lens on them, allowing the Colonel to have two different kinds of sight with one apparatus. This was not a man who expected small children, always fascinated by glasses, to reach their hands toward him, or for people to push past him on a busy street. These eyes operated in their own personal exclusion zone. For all his weakness of vision, the Colonel's gaze was not

accustomed to being refused. His glasses tell you that.

In the quieter world of art, eyes are busily at work. A person can be judged by their eye, as in the expression "he has a good eye." It means that they can tell good art from bad and it is sometimes used of a student, a curator or a collector to mitigate their failings. The "good eye" cannot be acquired. It is as innate as the bad Jewish eyes and is in some places and at some times in opposition to Jewish eyes. Art critic Irit Rogoff asks us instead to develop a "curious" eye. Ken Aptekar has one already.

When Miss Isabel Herdle went to New York City in 1931 to find a "gem" of a painting to bring back upstate, she relied on her good eye for art. What she found was a *Madonna and Child with Angel* by Raffaellino del Garbo from around 1500. She might have chosen it because the faces recall other, more expensive paintings by Raphael himself. Aptekar squares the circle by making the story of her purchasing trip the subject of his text. Underneath, Raffaellino's circular tondo becomes a more conventional square.

One of the aspects of postmodern art and visual culture that has annoyed its critics so much was precisely its curious eye. A curious eye scans a gallery looking for interesting details, rather than waiting to be bathed in glory from incandescent objects. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that the most highly regarded art today is that of the Impressionists, which leaps off the wall to our eye. It's a painterly trick: the artists put their colors onto a white ground (a dense substance used to make the canvas smooth and capable of supporting oil paint) rather than the traditional red or grey. So the colors are bright and vibrant in a way that our eyes have come to like, but were simply vulgar to trained eyes in the nineteenth century. Some postmodern artists wanted to make audiences think about the way in which certain images jump off the wall by appropriating the already famous images of other people. It was supposed to make people curious, questioning what art did and why. Mostly people were just furious. It seemed like cheating.

By repainting in oils a detail from a painting that his curious eye has selected, Ken Aptekar makes it clear that the question is not one of artistic skill. Long years of training and practice lie behind the surface. In a sense Aptekar is a postmodern Impressionist. The Impressionists took one part of classical art training—the sketch or impression—and claimed it as their finished work, to the fury of the establishment of their day. Aptekar takes the copy of old masters, another recognized aspect of traditional art training, and turns it into one aspect of his work. But he doesn't just copy. The details are reversed, enlarged or changed in color.

Let's look at what's happened to Douglas Gorsline's *Bar Scene* (1942) in Aptekar's eyes. Now there are two images instead of one, as if on a stereoscopic card, waiting to be inserted into some giant viewer for all the perspectives to become clear. And then we see that the woman has come a little closer to us and the man is a little further away, emphasizing the tenuous connection made by his hand on her shoulder. The colors are muted, as if to suggest that the scene has passed into memory.

When *Bar Scene* was painted, the Second World War was at its

height, the outcome still uncertain. Life seemed tentative, the rules were relaxed. As women joined the workforce in vital war industries, perhaps a woman could go to a bar and not be thought of as a prostitute. The association rings the visual bell with Edouard Manet's famous *Bar at the Folies-Bergères* (1880). Here the woman is in front of the bar, though, not serving behind it, and the mirror in Aptekar's painting runs not behind the bar but to her right at a 90-degree angle to the canvas. She is looking the wrong way to see it.

But the mirror, invisible though it is to the spectator, creates a space in which things can happen unseen. In his discussion with the artist, Michael sees his own mother in the mirror, hiding another drink but concealing it from no one, least of all him. He wants to use a camcorder to make her see herself, not seeing as the art theory cliché goes, but drinking. On the glass Aptekar inscribes: "Though we're standing in front of a single painting, we see two very different ones. I can't stand the one nine-year-old Michael sees."

The tripled combination of painting, text and glass makes it clear that the artist wants us to see how "art works," to use a phrase coined by African art historian Henry Drewal. Art works in all senses, in the artist's life and by extension in ours. There is a certain sense in which Ken Aptekar tries to see from the point of view of an African. To be Jewish in America is to be interwoven with African diaspora history in complicated ways, so that each group has visualized itself in terms of the other. Art works in people's lives to give them a place from which to see themselves. To be Jewish, you may need to see yourself from an African-American perspective from time to time, and vice versa.

Looking at the most complex work in this exhibition, the three-panel *I'm a relentless optimist . . .*, it becomes clear that the glass is not simply a mirror in which personal experience is revealed. Here the thickness of the glass suggests a disconnect between the words and the images. The text seems at first sight a whimsical meditation on the paradox of being an optimistic artist: "I'm a relentless optimist, a fact I find discouraging. Must everything always turn out for the best? Is it too much to ask for a few words of hopelessness?" These are unlikely words to hover over the image of the Biblical Judith carrying the head of Holofernes that she has just herself cut off. They are unimaginable from a Jewish artist for whom guilt and pessimism in these post-Holocaust times are all but indispensable.

Let's read on. "I worry that with such an inclination, making profound art is out of the question. Forget about ever being a realist painter who sees life as it really is!" So now he's guilty, a properly Jewish emotion. But the connections are elusive: is there a necessary link between realism and profundity? Who knew Ken Aptekar was a realist anyway? The central image shows a woman crying, perhaps from the onions she's cutting, perhaps for some invisible failure. Is she mourning the failure of the artist to be a profound realist in her monochrome world? The last segment revisits Gorsline's *Bar Scene*. A woman visiting the museum tells the artist: "the only way she's going to get out of it is if he kills her when she tries to leave." Then she doesn't really get out of it, does she, except into a kind of *film noir* stardom? But the picture is back in full color now. It doesn't quite add up.

Perhaps this way of approaching the picture is wrong. Rather than

read it from left to right, one could look at it as a triptych. The central panel in a triptych is the most important and the wings add to it. In the middle, then, is a woman crying in a kitchen. The domestic situation suggests maternity, reinforced by the format, so often used to show the Madonna. Her alternatives to domestic maternity on either side are not very promising. The choice is butch aggression or passive barfly, both under threat of death: no wonder she's crying. But this is after all a Jewish mother: how real are those tears, or are we witnessing another consummate performance by the matriarch?

In this skeptical (male) view, the Judith—a Jewish woman after all—becomes the doubled sign of castration and/or circumcision. In this view, Freud's suggestion that the male fear of castration is represented as decapitation might itself be a displacement of the cut of circumcision—the first cut that separates the male Jew from others. In other words, we cannot be sure what Judith is really cutting in this realistic painting, any more than we know why the "mother" is crying. And is the woman in the bar a good woman in hard times, or the fallen woman that Freud thought was the masculine other to the Madonna/mother?

But another way of reading is possible, the Hebrew, Islamic or Aboriginal way from right to left. Now the woman goes from quiet submission to heroic action, even as she moves back in time from the twentieth century to Biblical times. These thoughts lead to another question: what happened to the men, the father figures? All the women in the triptych are looking away and down to their left (our right) as if to the bottom corner of the room. Is that where dad is? In a recent work, Aptekar notes: "I ask questions, it's a Jewish thing."

For more than ten years, Ken Aptekar has been fixing glass to his paintings. He does so using bolts. The choice is, as he has remarked, aggressive, but it is also defensive. It keeps the demons of the painting behind glass so they cannot get out. Once you stir up the spirits, they will come back, as ghosts, specters and revenants. Aptekar, who has painted ghosts, knows this very well and so do his viewers. John Shoy, who worked on an installation with Aptekar in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, feared the "noise" of a painted shipwreck behind the glass, the same instability of art that Everett Shinn described to Isabel Herdle as "these coils of delirium."

In fifteenth-century English, glass meant a "resounding noise," from the French *glas*, a knell, that is, the bell sounded to mark the coming of death. The glass is then the limit, the boundary between life and death and the place of ghosts—Jewish ghosts. In his curious book *Glas,* the Jewish deconstructionist Jacques Derrida observed that for the German philosopher Hegel, the Jews lacked imagination and "the spirit of beauty," making their freedom impossible. Parsing Hegel, Derrida writes: "Such is the insensibility of the Jews. It catches, as in ice or glass, all their history, their political practice, their juridical and family organization, their ritual and religious procedures, their very language and their rhetoric."

These Jewish glasses are how Ken Aptekar looks at the world and they demand questions. Try them on for size.

Nick Mirzoeff is Associate Professor of Art and Comparative Literature at SUNY Stony Brook, and the author of An Introduction to Visual Culture *(Routledge, 1999).*

A PAINLESS POSTMODERNIST EXERCISE

A special component of the *Eye Contact* exhibition is an interactive computer station that allows everyone to make pictures-with-text, the term Ken Aptekar uses to describe his work. By clicking on one of fifteen thumbnails of paintings from the Memorial Art Gallery's permanent collection, visitors can select an image and superimpose their own commentary. Each new picture-with-text can be printed out and added to the evolving display of personal responses to works of art.

Of course, the real point is that responses don't have to be written down, just as questions don't have to be asked out loud. But the next time you visit a museum, whether you're looking at something new or enjoying an old favorite, take a moment to listen to what the painting is saying to you. And don't be afraid to talk back.

Let's practice with a painting from the Gallery's collection. Look at it carefully and explore details that might be missed at first glance. Does it evoke a particular feeling or memory for you? Have you visited a shop like this? What time of year do you think it is? Is the printseller happy? Successful? Honest? How long has he worn glasses? If you could buy just one object displayed in his window, what would it be? What would be a fair price? Who do you suppose owned the strand of pearls and why did she sell them? What is the significance of the magnifying glass propped against the picture stand? Has the painting changed since you started this exercise?

WALTER GOODMAN
BRITISH, 1838–AFTER 1906
THE PRINTSELLER'S WINDOW, LATE 1800s
OIL ON CANVAS
MARION STRATTON GOULD FUND, 98.75