LARGER THAN LIFE: READING THE CORCORAN COLLECTION

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Ken Aptekar's paintings are defined by two features: they are copies, and they have words on them. Gorgeously painted and visually attractive, they are "simply" copies of old masterpieces. The old masterpiece is wrested from its then-and-there, and planted in the here-and-now. The copy is an after-effect of great painting, belonging to the past and yet available in the present. Once you adjust your expectations and appreciate this postmodern challenge to originality, unreflectively "checking out" the fidelity of the copy, a small, barely perceptible change suddenly and rudely wrenches you out of the past and firmly plants you in the late twentieth century. The emphasis on visuality is broken because the old masterpiece is literally overwritten, overruled by an emphatically autobiographical text. Offering a text that overlays an image, hiding it behind transparent glass, the work's primary effect is an invitation to read.

In *Talking To Pictures* these two defining features converge with a third aspect that highlights the here-and-now of Aptekar's art. He has selected works from the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art for his subjects. And, for the first time in his work, Aptekar has made use not only of his own writing but also of viewers' responses to the source paintings. This innovation in his texts reflects the notion that the actual museum situation in which we now view his works is also the institutional setting in which the history of art can be accessed and pressured for a variety of meanings.

It takes an exceedingly long time to read the few lines inscribed over Hobbema's trees in *My parents take us on trips* (PLATE 12):

> *My parents take us on trips. The four kids pile in the car. Often when we're driving, I press my forehead to the window. Sometimes birds perch on telephone wires along the road, and I fly up and sit quietly beside them. They're just there; they have nothing to figure out, no one to escape.*

As a viewer, I step into this childhood world, become the little boy, fly up with him to sit next to the birds. For I, too, spent many boring hours thinking, figuring out the mysteries of life, escaping from the cruelty of other children, the bossiness of well-meaning parents, the increasing sense of powerlessness. The work's intimacy challenges everything we think we know about the difference between visual and verbal domains. Aptekar's painting challenges the common assumptions that these media are different, but it also questions *how* they differ. *My parents take*

Meyndert Hobbema
A Wooded Landscape with Figures, c. 1663

us on trips contains a tiny element that connects visual and verbal, past to present: the birds on the telephone wire that Aptekar has inserted into his copy of Hobbema's *Wooded Landscape with Figures* link Aptekar to Hobbema, child to adult. The birds stand for the world outside the subject. But one of them is the child; didn't he just say that he flew up to sit quietly beside them? The child flew up from the text into the image. Flying up, fantasizing, is the child's primary means of escape. The glass plate overlayering the painting suggests the car window, the anachronistic window-on-the-world that painting cannot be, but can appear to be as we are taken in by a persuasive fiction.

Talking To Pictures, the title of this exhibition, suggests many meanings, from the literal quotation of audience responses, to the words addressing the images from their proximate but separate layer of glass, to the child flying up to sit in the picture, to the people here and now, walking through the room of the Corcoran to talk about Aptekar's paintings. Any visual or textual expression is a patchwork of fragments taken from different sources. The fragments have a memory. At the same time, every reuse of preexisting material changes it. The telephone wire carries Hobbema along with it, the long tradition of landscape painting, the competition between human effort and nature that is larger than life. No wonder that, in the journey from past to present, Aptekar's representation of Hobbema has doubled in size.

Compare *My parents take us on trips* with *It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi* (PLATE 13). The portrait by Charles Loring Elliott from 1856 stands firmly in the tradition of portraiture, which is defined by its ability to bestow authority upon its subject. Its history is bound up with that of capitalism, individualism, and bourgeois culture. This somewhat pompous portrait from the Corcoran collection fits the bill perfectly. The sitter's chin expresses self-assurance, the eyes look at us from a seat of power that resides deep within the soul. The frame, even more pompous than the painting, confirms what the genre implies: portraits are made to honor power. But Aptekar cannot be trusted. Even as he faithfully copies it, he pokes fun at the authority that inheres in portraiture. He reverses the painting, making it slightly darker by toning it brown, as if it has faded with time, depriving the frame of its golden luster and decorative pomp. Through the artist's barely perceptible interventions, the sitter's gaze has turned inward, casting doubt on the certainty and self-confidence that the sitter originally expressed in Elliott's painting.

Charles Loring Elliott
Thomas Loraine McKenney, 1856

Furthermore, the frame is cropped, the painting pushed to one side. The authority figure is still present, but he has become stilted, so to speak. Rendering the eyes of authority in the original into those of hurt and anxiety in the copy, Aptekar endows the bourgeois power broker with the hint of a history that makes him more human and understandable. The eyes, like the telephone wire, are an intervention that hinges different genres, worlds, and times.

Set to the lower left of the painted portrait, the text appears contiguous with the sitter, as if it could be coming out of his mouth, if only his mouth were not so firmly closed.

> *It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi to death before a packed synagogue in a wealthy suburb of Detroit. The killer was some other kid's mentally ill older brother. He strode up to the front of the sanctuary on a spring day in 1966, and announced over the mike, "This synagogue is an abomination and a travesty," then faced Rabbi Morris Adler and pulled out his gun. The beloved rabbi fell to the floor, his prayer shawl still draped around him. The boy turned the gun on himself, and a family secret became a public tragedy.*

Irresistibly, the prayer shawl—the moving detail that connects the deceased private person with the public function for which he was killed—rhymes with the blanket draped around the man in the picture. Information in the Corcoran archives tells us that the sitter was a Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who apparently received this blanket from his constituents as a symbol of respect.

From many of the works in this exhibition the visitor learns that Aptekar is Jewish and that this identity is inextricably knotted into his subjectivity. So, it *could have been* his older brother. One kid, another kid, a tragedy in a synagogue. Tragedy: the oldest literary genre in Western culture, from the Greeks, who staged the overwhelming power of the gods, destiny, and history over human heroism and goodness. Tragedy: the genre beyond good and evil, human-sized morality, individual effort. The autobiographical, understated, very short stories that Aptekar writes over his paintings become larger than life through this bold appropriation of this most prestigious of literary genres. Thus, the emptiness of public authority is filled with the private grief of the eyes. This painting's critique of institutional and familial authority diagnoses our culture but does not lay blame. Although Aptekar takes the portrait genre to task for allowing itself to become a cultural instrument, he does not, as one might expect, deindividualize the sitter. His very act of painting, of copying, asserts his awareness that you cannot reject painting and continue to paint.

Walter Shirlaw
Self-Portrait, n.d.

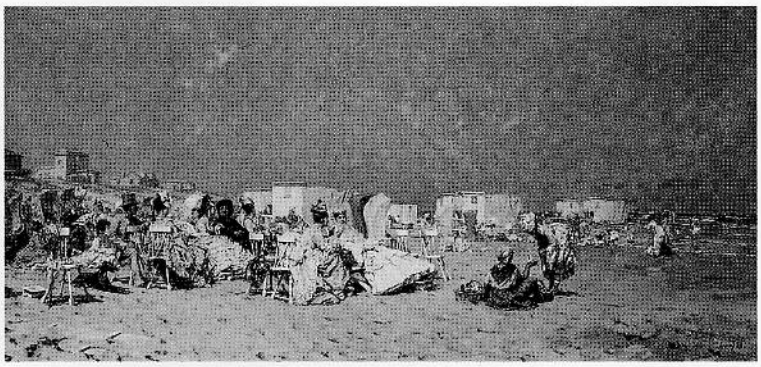
Aptekar challenges an image's authority in three ways. First, he inserts a sense of time through the tiny changes he makes in what initially appear to be "faithful" copies. More strongly, he makes our gaze stumble or fall over his words, which slow us down, and by forcing us to slow down, stimulates the act of looking. Finally, the competition between text and image enforces a backtracking and moving forward; occluding our sense of purpose from start to finish, this shifting focus reinforces our "being" in time. From the rabbi's prayer shawl we move back to the portrayed man's blanket, and are trapped in questions of identity in relation to power. Forced to compare the rabbi's own prayer shawl with the sitter's blanket, given to him by the Indians he represented, we cannot help noticing the sitter's use of the blanket to demonstrate his definitive position of power. By enforcing the constant interruption of one medium with another, Aptekar's art simultaneously acknowledges and challenges our preoccupation with the fixity of the visual image. He ties the experience of looking to an awareness of looking-and-reading in "real" time. The problem of "memory" and the perpetual transformation of signs and meanings lies in the tension between the power of the present social world—for Aptekar, this includes his family as well as institutions—and the past, which keeps creeping in yet eludes any attempt to grasp it firmly.

Faith, being, reality, and memory are central to many of the works in this exhibition. In "*Is that you?*" (PLATE 16), Walter Shirlaw's self-portrait is pulled forward, made greener, and overwritten with the casual remark of an art student, one of the people whom Aptekar invited to "talk to these pictures."

> *"Is that you?" the art student asks. I tell him it's a self-portrait by Walter Shirlaw from around 1880. The art student tells me to forget about the Shirlaw. "Boring," he says.*

The text takes us away from the intimacy of autobiography, toward the casual, not-so-profound conversation between artist and art student, from tragedy and deep emotion to babble and boredom. But look what happens in the process. Aptekar's version of Shirlaw's portrait does look like the artist. The closed lips refuse to talk; the eyes are squarely turned toward the viewer yet refuse to specify an expression; intense yet still, they peer out yet appear also to stare inward. The greenish, pale complexion, the shade of hair, all suggest a redhead. The face comes forward to fill more of the picture, the contrived pose of the bust has been cropped away. And whereas the

Frederick Hendrick Kaemmerer
The Beach at Scheveningen, Holland, 1874



autobiographical text yields to the second person, emphasized both by the use of "you" and by the question, Aptekar literally pushes the sitter forward. The self-portrait is the painted image's version of autobiography. But Aptekar's polemic against individualism in *It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi* lingers. Through the temporal displacement between "I" and "you," the self-portrait of another becomes an "other," or alternate, portrait of the self.

What is this eerie resemblance between Aptekar and another man's self-portrait? The sensitivity in the face is kept at bay in the Shirlaw through a traditional pose that creates a double distance. "Boring" is the word that gives voice to these subtle features. Again, the art student was right. But when he dismissed the spatial distancing that is part of Shirlaw's history, he had not yet seen what Aptekar did to the traditional work. The contemporary artist understands more of the distant figure, and pulls him closer, literally toward the proximity of a close-up. Once more, Aptekar questions individualism by means of a subtle, inclusive gesture. "*Is that you?*" draws attention to a rarely used genre of narrative which is often perceived as artificial or experimental—narrative in the second person. In painting, this technique is embodied as a shift in the sitter's frontality. This self/other portrait conveys narrative visually through the slight turning of the head in relation to the body, but this is a narrative that, while it happens in the here-and-now, is described in the second person. Did the sitter hear the student ask the question "Is that you?" so that he could not help but respond? Our acknowledgment, or presumption of the viewer as speaker is the key to interpreting this work. In the process, the art student's casual and discontinuous remarks have suddenly lost their superficiality.

Portraiture and self-portraiture, made more complex through temporal delay and exchange between artist and subject, self and other, establish one of Aptekar's persistent themes. Several of the works in this exhibition explicitly address issues of identity; most of them also refer to it implicitly. The very first painting, an empty frame, is a good case of the latter. The frame, especially since it opens the show, functions like a poetic invocation about the art we are about to see. By placing the empty frame of a "ghost painting" at the beginning of his show, the artist encourages the audience to reframe other paintings. The summery blue skies of the beach scene in the next painting—connected to this one by reuse of the same frame—set the tone in coloristic terms: blue and gold. The blue is a bit muted, evoking a hazy summer day. But what does

Charles Frederick Ulrich,
In the Land of Promise, Castle Garden, 1884

Henri Regnault,
Head of a Moor, 1870

the frame do, framing nothing? Well, it's not quite true that it frames nothing. For what is inside the frame may be the same as what is outside of it—just blue, devoid of figures, but referring to a particular kind of summer day. And the frame is not arbitrary. Leaving its shadow both inside itself, at the upper border, and outside itself, below, it asserts the work of framing as the essence of Aptekar's aesthetic.

The second painting (PLATE 2), based on a merry beach scene from 1874 by Frederick Hendrick Kaemmerer (now deaccessioned), is overwritten by Aptekar's childhood memories of summer. Into this nostalgia Aptekar inserts a fragment of the empty frame, emphasizing the act of framing as an act of isolation and aggrandizement. The section of the reversed Kaemmerer that is isolated within the golden frame (and made slightly darker, so as to look less faded, more present) does not represent the closer bourgeois ladies, but the merchant woman sitting at a subtly isolating distance. Dressed in poorer clothes, her skin is browner than that of the lady to whom she is offering her merchandise. This picturesque detail, that makes the original painting more lively, and the scene more revealing of past social mores, is represented by Aptekar to show fragments of modern life as it was, then.

Aptekar isolates the merchant woman doubly; putting her inside the frame and moving her higher, to the left. The social structure within this innocent summer scene has now been reframed to emphasize the one woman who is different from the others. Brown-skinned, faced with the imperative of making a living instead of the consumption of leisure, she is, in Kaemmerer's painting, an isolated object of curiosity, or neglect. She does not benefit from the admiring gaze of the man who appears to be sitting, waiting to take his pick. Here, too, Aptekar writes himself into the frame. Like the ladies, he always had to wear clothes at the beach. In his case, this was not due to social convention, but because of the sensitivity of his lightly colored skin.

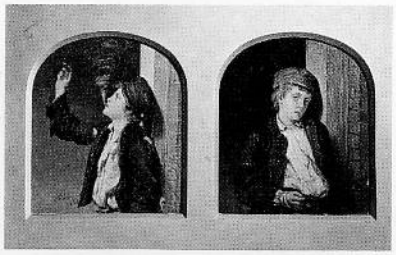
This narratively reduced figure is evoked again later in the show in *I went searching for Jews* (PLATE 9). Unlike Aptekar's other paintings, which infer, this painting explicitly links past to present, other to self. "Russian Jews, like me," he says. He found them in an 1884 painting of an immigration landing depot by Charles Frederick Ulrich. Aptekar's reworked painting is saved from irremediable sentimentality by the authority of the gazes and the arbitrary cropping of the scene. Aptekar is quite specific here: "I found them in the background, huddled, anxious, busy."

At this point, resonances begin to fill the room, and the paintings seem to be talking to one another. The self-portrait after Shirlaw, projecting the individual into the foreground, jostles with the woman at the beach, who has been lifted out of the background, but not to the close-up of individual portraiture.

Henri Regnault's 1870 portrait of a black man, beautiful as it is, is not based on any such spatial dislocation. It is not unsympathetic; its portrait perspective, with the artist viewing the sitter from below, makes the figure look heroic. But the way color is used emphasizes blackness, so that it can only be seen as the opposite of identification. This is done not only by the facial color itself, which is black as black people rarely are, setting off the whites of the eye, but also by the bright yellow on the left, and by the deep crimson garment. Aptekar uses this painting twice, as if to compensate for the scarcity of black subjects in the Corcoran's collection.

Aptekar has reversed this portrait (PLATE 10); he has also cropped the bright colors, and kept only the most essential part of the face. Most importantly, the painting has become monochromatic, to avoid the picturesque coloring of the original. When painted in one color, the face regains its nuances, and the visibility that was taken away by excessive darkness is reinstated. The text written over this painting is neither long nor narrative. It endows the features of the face with positive feedback, and it connects audience to figure through an explicit identification that is based not on skin color but on individual features of identity. As the symmetrical counterpart to the authoritative yet sad sitter in *It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi*, this figure is retrospectively accorded the "Strength. Determination. Power." that Regnault, by overloading his color sense and rendering his facial features invisible, denied. Carrie Parker, young, female, contemporary, endows the figure with these positive features as much as she takes them from him for her own benefit: "And that's a little like myself" is her conclusion.

Identification is also the basis of the other portrait after this Regnault (PLATE 14), which appears in this exhibition after *It wasn't my brother who shot the rabbi*. Here, the burnt umber of *Strength. Determination. Power.* has been replaced with an overall blue that denaturalizes color altogether. This effect is emphasized by the addition of a frame. The story Aptekar tells is about a Jewish boy delving into black culture. The thrill of transgressing is audible—"I tried to be cool"—and the pride the boy felt when his older brother managed to participate in "the best of the be-bop



John George Brown
Allegro, 1864; and *Penseroso,* 1865

Jean Mari Dedeban
Harpsichord (cupid groupings on the side), 1770

bands" conveys the past "feel" of the story, more than it does the simple declarative of the past tense. The musical phrase "the best of the be-bop bands," with its alliteration and short drumming words, leaves an echo of be-bop as if we had been there too. This is identity poetics, not politics. This memory puts the autobiographical subject on the threshold of adulthood, on the threshold of a culture at a time of *de facto* segregation, on the threshold, again, where self and other meet. In any case, the threshold is marked by the frame, which can be seen as a boundary that keeps distinctions in place, or a meeting point where a greeting yields to an embrace.

I have tried, using a number of examples, to suggest how Aptekar has worked to make paintings that move beyond identity politics into the carefully probed realm of potential harmony. As the artist wrote in *When he was twenty* (PLATE 19), "I find myself drawn now to scenes of harmony." This harmony is not sentimental or idealist. Rather, the interpenetration of private and public life, of institutional pressures and familial tragedy, overwrites the rococo sentimentality of gentile cuteness, painted as if to conjure up and then excise what cannot be. To be or not to be: Shakespeare's question of identity is both omnipresent and relativized throughout this installation. Aptekar explores tenaciously yet makes his labors appear easy. As fourteen-year-old Akosua Tyus says in *I know there's lots of kids smoking* (PLATE 23): "But art is art, and all art doesn't send a positive message."

"Good" messages are not always available; often, they are deceptively simple. Aptekar has also introduced a lot of unsettling, worrying, and anxiety-inducing messages here. One way or another, both positive and negative messages relate to the way an individual's voice is erased or undermined by authority, both within the family and within institutions. The diagnosis is sharp, and the analogy between family and institution is inexact, but Aptekar's view is always compassionate instead of complaining. Critical analysis, yes, razor-sharp. But there are no "bad" messages. Aptekar takes us through a body of painting in order to make us think of ourselves. The interaction between public institutional pressures and the private life of the viewer always comes back to haunt public culture: in Aptekar's work, this interaction is scrutinized and projected literally into the space of the viewer. This sense of empowerment makes us all, if only for a short time, larger than life.