

NEW THIS WEEK

KEN APTEKAR

Bess Cutler Gallery, 593
Broadway. Through December
16.

History lives in Ken Aptekar's witty and witty brand of appropriation art. Unlike so many artists who scavenge the past to fashion contemporary ruins from their free association, Aptekar puts his borrowing to carefully calibrated purpose. A lushly painted triptych based on details from works by Watteau brings us images of men viewed from the rear, a perspective rare in the history of art. How men have been seen—and how they see—fascinates Aptekar. *I Had to Get Them* features a self-portrait of the artist with portraits of van Gogh and his brother Theo. Rendered in black and white from a photograph, because Vincent never painted him, Theo is the center of this triptych. Next to him we see the painted Aptekar on the phone—calling his brother, perhaps? If there's a problem with his appropriating approach, it's that art historians are more likely to appreciate the reinvigorated source material of these elegant puzzles than are other viewers. Aptekar carries on his painted dialogue with contemporary images and popular culture, too. *The Marshmallow* is a diptych with the eponymous white blob hovering over sequential images of the 1923 Carpentier-Beckett world-light-heavyweight fight. Carpentier (a.k.a. the Orchid Man) was considered a dandy who lacked the killer instinct. Victorious here, he helps his opponent to the ropes, a "female" gesture suspect in all too many "male" arenas. Aptekar's got a message: he's trying to locate a spot on the masculine-feminine continuum that might offer him—and us—some breathing room in our increasingly polarized culture. Happily, he's also blessed with a refreshingly light touch. *Robert Atkins*

7 DAYS

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