

Herald, 1988, oil on copper, diptych (above)
 Out of Line, 1989, oil on copper, polyptych (below)
 Stag Party, 1989, oil on copper (right)

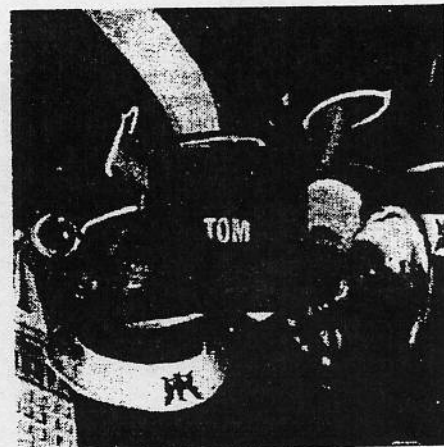
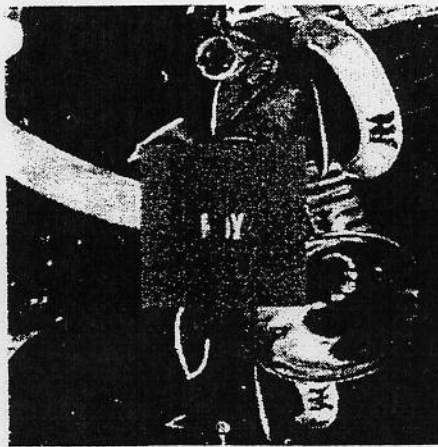
Rethinking Masculinity

KEN APTEKAR

One word that crops up repeatedly in New York painter Ken Apteckar's conversation is *unconventional*. His subject is conventions, both artistic and social, and how they box us in. As he puts it, "I keep looking for images of men that will confound our notions of how men are supposed to appear."

His meticulously detailed oil-on-copper paintings often start off from news photos, celebrity portraits, and other mainstream media images. His witty variations seem to thumb their noses at situations where men are regimented into uniformity, as in marching bands, or at stereotypical social expectations, such as his *Stag Party*, where the stag accompanying the beer-swilling revelers is a cartoon Bambi.

Recently he's been reworking the old masters, especially Antoine Watteau, whose 18th-century French gentlemen symbolize an ideal of manhood now considered effeminate: gracious androgyny, elegant finery, and sensitivity. Apteckar suggests





that "the biographical details on Watteau are intriguing: He never married, and he lived with various male friends."

Apteekar's own biographical details are intriguing too. Married to the feminist critic and histo-

rian Eunice Lipton, he credits his interest in visual gender bending to a study group they attended together on gender in art. In a day when many gays are sorely tempted to write off all straight men as ignorant jocks, here's at least one who wants to explore "the different faces of men—different kinds of masculinity" and who asks, "What can be done to rethink masculinity?"

And he's thinking hard. A panel entitled *Herald* contrasts the impenetrable sheen of a suit of armor with the softness of Apteekar's own facial fur in a pulse-raising close-up. The artist explains, "For men to be sensual has always been seen as possible only for gay men and as a reason to put them down. I'd like to be able to be seen sensually, without regard to sexual orientation."

He has the same idea about emotional softness. *I Had to Get Them* is a filmstrip sequence of three strikingly similar faces: Vincent van Gogh, his brother Theo, and Apteekar himself (whose red beard mirrors Van Gogh's). Apteekar comments,

"We're instructed to think only about Van Gogh's genius, not about his strong relation to and emotional dependence on his brother."

Apteekar also deliberately violates male taboos, like touching, by twisting scenes where men do touch into a new context. *The Marshmallow* depicts a legendary prizefighter who, after knocking out a contender, carried him to the ropes in an uncommon combination of aggression and tenderness. "Who's the marshmallow," asks Apteekar, "the loser or the man who's sweetly helping him?" *From Behind* breaks the rule against looking at men's passive posteriors with close-ups of three Watteau-inspired backsides.

Not content with exploding myths himself, Apteekar will curate a group show in New York next fall, selecting works of other artists, both gay and straight, who play with gender. Watch for "Post-Boys&Girls"—it may add a whole new dimension to the term *crossover potential*.

—James M. Saslow

