



# Art in America

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# The Viewer Speaks

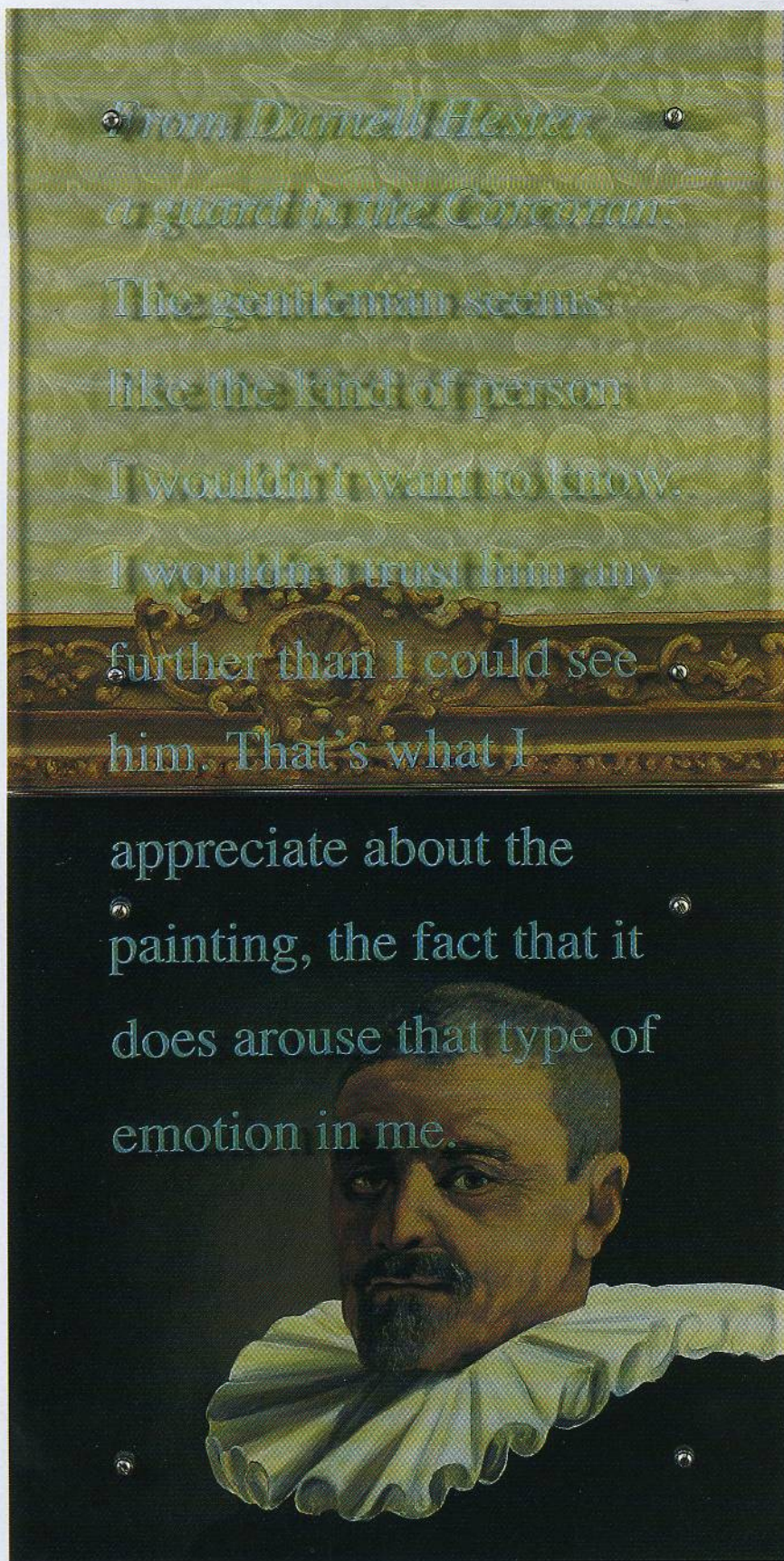
*Ken Aptekar's recent paintings draw on the responses of real-life viewers to museum collections. His exhibition at the Corcoran revealed, the author says, how little we still know about the nature of spectatorship.*

**BY NORMAN BRYSON**

**K**en Aptekar's show at the Corcoran, "Talking to Pictures," took as its starting point a familiar paradigm, one dear to commentators on the art of the past generation: the shift from the production of art to its reception, from work to frame, from the death of the author to the birth of the reader/viewer. Our belief in the existence of this shift has become so ingrained that at first sight "Talking to Pictures" might have been taken as further proof, if any were needed, of the general turn of interest from makers to receivers. Aptekar's move was to take a group of lesser-known works from the Corcoran's permanent collection, copy details from them in his own hand and over the copies place sheets of glass carrying sandblasted texts that recorded individual viewers' responses to the originals. Aptekar's image-and-text panels were then hung adjacent to the paintings which inspired them.

Looking at a school-of-Rembrandt portrait of a particularly self-satisfied patrician, a museum guard is quoted as grumbling that "the gentleman seems like the kind of person I wouldn't want to know. I wouldn't trust him further than I could see him." Contemplating the tight-lipped Victorian couple in Irving Ramsey Wiles's *The Artist's Father and Mother* (1889), a high school student was moved to speculate that "she had an affair and he knows, but they never talked about it." A sixth grader observing the same painting supposed that "they're worried their son isn't making any money and they volunteered to pose for him so he could paint a picture." Sometimes the words were those of Aptekar himself: Henri Regnault's *Head of a Moor* (1870) prompted a story about the black jazz musicians Aptekar's talented brother used to improvise with in Detroit. The comments, not placed adjacent to the images in the manner of wall texts, but superimposed over the picture surface, indicated that reception was no longer a supplement or commentary standing next to the work: what viewers made of the paintings now featured as a constitutive element within the frame.

Yet when "Talking to Pictures" took real-life viewers' responses and projected them right into the heart of the artworks, it proved that reports of the death of the author have in



*Ken Aptekar: From Darnell Hester, 1997, oil on wood, bolts, sandblasted glass, two panels, 48 by 24 inches overall; painting based on Rembrandt van Rijn (circle of), An Elderly Man in an Armchair, ca. 1630, with overlaid quote from a Corcoran guard. Photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York.*



general been greatly exaggerated. We *say* that such a shift took place, but doing so may prevent us from seeing how little of the radical potential of the death-of-the-author idea has, in fact, been historically realized. If the turn from makers to receivers had truly been allowed to develop, surely by now we would have had a generation of studies analyzing how viewers actually go about their business. We would have had investigations of the individuals who spent their lives looking at art and recording what they saw; of how viewers in one period or culture differ from others; of how practices of viewing are shaped by curatorial presentation, or by level of education or wealth. After all, the public has been coming in droves to large-scale exhibitions ever since the Salons were established in France in the 18th century; the breadth of historical material is enormous. But the truth is that we know little more about the nature of spectatorship now than we did a generation ago. The way that art enters into the subjectivity of ordinary viewers remains for the most part terra incognita.

**T**he significance of "Talking to Pictures" is that it returned to the death-of-the-author thesis with born-again zeal, and carried its implications through to the letter. Authorship now appeared as truly a subordinate element. The copies Aptekar painted were executed in a style from which all traces of the artists' original production have been assiduously removed. Color, brushwork, texture, everything was purged to the same degree; Rembrandt, Vigée-Lebrun, Jan van Goyen, Pissarro, all were transcribed with the same ashen impassivity. Aptekar took pains to make no exception in his own case: fair play required that he be given no special privileges. His hand, above all, had to represent the very idea of impartiality. With all signs of authorial presence effectively banished from the scene, the pictures swiftly filled with the discourses of the viewers: the curator who hinted darkly at mysterious deaccessioning practices with the Corcoran collection; the teenager who saw in Regnault's *Head of a Moor* an icon of "Strength, Determination, Power (and that's a little like myself)"; another teen who criticized

John George Brown's 1864 depiction of a cigar-smoking youth as "not sending a good message"; and Aptekar himself, the principal viewer of these works, who took the liberty of free-associating from his own recollections of childhood and adolescence.

Which led to the unexpected paradox of the show: "Talking to Pictures" mounted an all-out attack on personal idiosyncracies, a massive cleansing and purging of the self-expressive resources of art; at the same time

breakdown in medical school. A half-buried story of fraternal rivalry lay at the heart of Aptekar's self-dramatization; like the kernel of a dream in psychoanalysis, its themes of disappointment and guilt seemed to permeate the whole exhibition. In a sense all the works drawn from the Corcoran could be seen as pointing to the turbulent inner life of Aptekar-as-viewer. Yet at the same time an implacable principle of social justice, ruling from above, a principle intent on handing privilege over to



*View of Aptekar's "Talking to Pictures" exhibition, showing his paintings-with-text hung with related works from the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Photo courtesy the artist.*

it performed the exact opposite, insisting on the primacy of autobiography, on the idiosyncracies of personal response as the true ground of viewing practice. The tension between these two impulses—one determined to purge the museum of personal self-expression, the other bent on appropriating every work to the spectator's private self—was immense. From one point of view, Aptekar seemed to be reveling in his own subjectivity, colonizing the whole edifice of the Corcoran in terms of his private history. The texts that represented his point of view revealed a complicated family saga: we learned of his Russian émigré grandmother, his father who taught him photography, and especially Aptekar's brother, who could have been a brilliant physician but suffered a mental

the disenfranchised viewer (in "Talking to Pictures" all viewers speak from an underdog, minority position) cracked down on the incipient hubris of the show's creator and persuaded the imperious ego to abdicate its powers, as systematically and conspicuously as possible.

**W**hat made the exhibition such an extraordinary experience was that Aptekar had found a way to dramatize the contradiction that is triggered the moment the viewer sets foot in the museum. At least officially, contact with works of art is supposed to heighten or exalt the viewer's subjectivity, to let subjectivity dilate and expand beyond the bounds that usually restrict it. But at the same time all of the museum's discipline—





*I'm thirteen years old, 1997, oil on wood, bolts, sandblasted glass, four panels, 60 inches square overall; based on Rembrandt van Rijn (circle of), Man with Sheet of Music, ca. 1630, with text overlay citing Aptekar's own memory of a childhood incident.*

*Strength. Determination. Power., 1997, oil on wood, bolts, sandblasted glass, 24 inches square overall; based on Henri Regnault's Head of a Moor, 1870, with overlaid quote from a young museum visitor. Collection Lucy Daniels Inman.*

the combined force of its art-historical expertise, its need to tell the "story" of art, to educate and instruct the viewer in the values housed in art—works if not to crush subjectivity, then certainly to guide and manage the viewer's heart and mind. Among all the wayward, vagabond, autobiographical responses that arise, only a few are acknowledged by the institution as appropriate.

By projecting into the core of each work a set of responses that would almost certainly be filtered out by the time most viewers reached Art History 101, Aptekar was able to indicate how a viewer might behave who had not yet acquired the final hypocrisies. And by the same token, "Talking to Pictures" showed that, the alleged birth of the viewer notwithstanding, it is still the museum that has the last word in deciding the ways ordinary view-

drills and screwdrivers.

Through the floor I hear the pullchains on each ceiling

light as he makes his

way toward the bench.

My heart is racing. What if he does something to himself. To me.

He's staring at the light over the bench. As I

approach, I see the three-hole

punch, and the sheet music

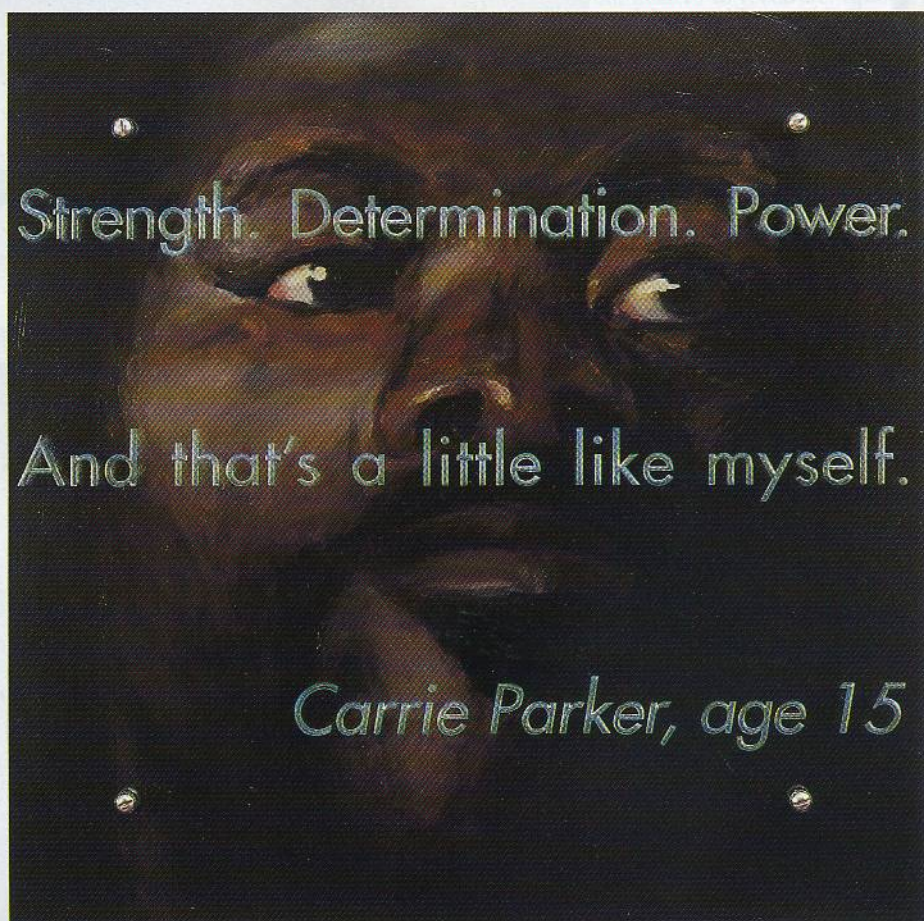
he's preparing to add to his book of songs.

**Aptekar suggests that among all the wayward or autobiographical responses that arise when we visit a museum, only a few are acknowledged by the institution as appropriate.**

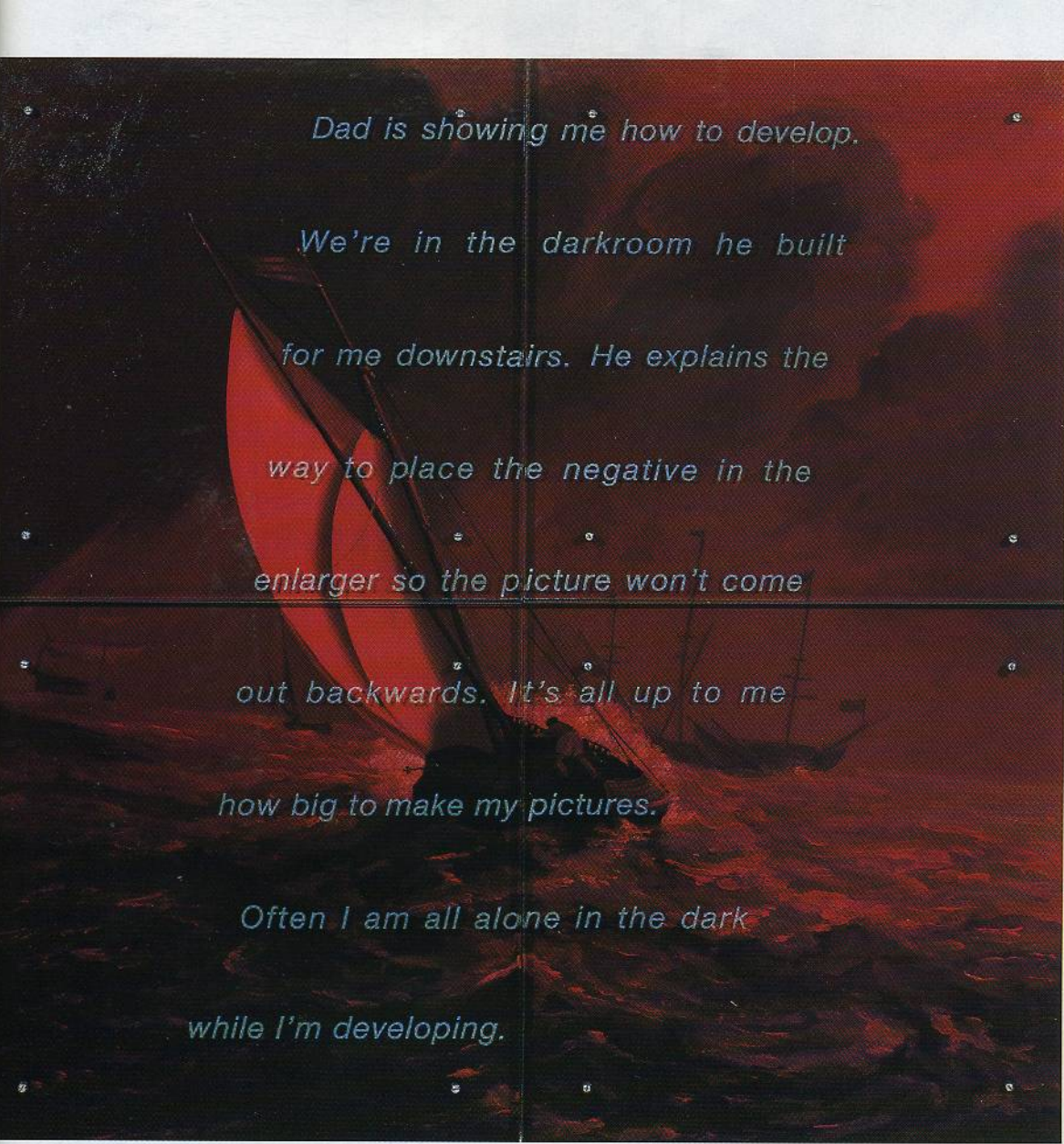
ers are expected voluntarily to repress what may be their truest and deepest responses to art. For as long as the museum continues to muddle along with its old, 19th-century brief—with one hand welcoming viewers in as free agents, while the other hand pummels them into proper disciplinary shape—"Talking to Pictures" will remain one of the sharpest analyses to date of the museum's still undiminished legislative and managerial powers. □

*"Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures" appeared at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [Oct. 18, 1997-Apr. 5, 1998]. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with texts by Terrie Sullan, Mieke Bal and Albert Boime. Aptekar will have a solo show this spring at Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York [Mar. 27-May 1].*

*Author: Norman Bryson is a professor of art history at Harvard University.*







*Dad is showing me how to develop.*

*We're in the darkroom he built*

*for me downstairs. He explains the*

*way to place the negative in the*

*enlarger so the picture won't come*

*out backwards. It's all up to me*

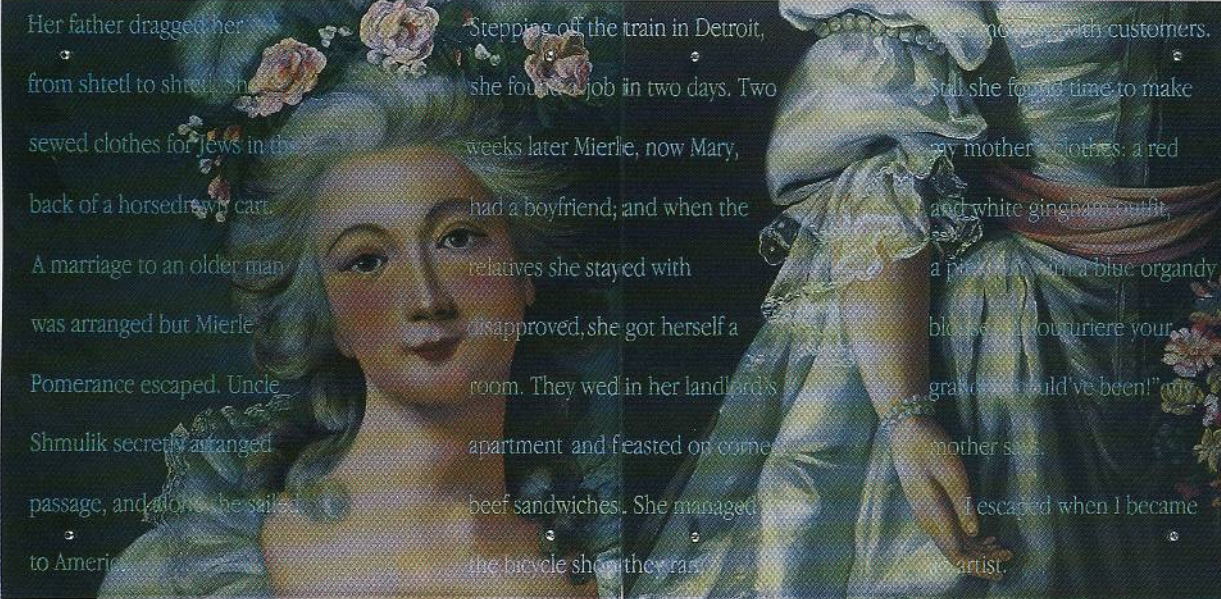
*how big to make my pictures.*

*Often I am all alone in the dark*

*while I'm developing.*

Dad is showing me how to develop, 1997, oil on wood, bolts, sandblasted glass, four panels, 60 inches square overall; based on Willem van de Velde the younger, Before the Storm, ca. 1700, with text overlay about Aptekar's father teaching him photography.

**"A couturière your grandma could've been!"**  
 1997, oil on wood, bolts, sandblasted glass, two panels, 30 by 60 inches overall; based on Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Portrait of Madame du Barry, 1782, with quote overlay about the life of Aptekar's grandmother upon her arrival in America. Collection Marcia Cohen Spiegel.



Her father dragged her from shtetl to shtetl. She sewed clothes for Jews in the back of a horsedrawn cart. A marriage to an older man was arranged but Mierle Pomerance escaped. Uncle Shmulik secretly arranged passage, and alone, he sailed to America.

Stepping off the train in Detroit, she found a job in two days. Two weeks later Mierle, now Mary, had a boyfriend; and when the relatives she stayed with disapproved, she got herself a room. They wed in her landlord's apartment and feasted on corned beef sandwiches. She managed the bicycle shop they ran.

She moved with customers. Still she found time to make my mother's clothes: a red and white gingham outfit, a pair of blue organdy bloomers. "A couturière your grandma could've been!" my mother said.

I escaped when I became an artist.