

Art in America

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Ken Aptekar at Bess Cutler

Like Roy Lichtenstein and John Clem Clarke, Aptekar draws on art history for much of his imagery. Unlike Lichtenstein and Clarke, however, he makes a point of hinting at a social as well as aesthetic message.

Aptekar is an explorer of the male mystique, and he gets good mileage out of juxtaposing men's "masculine" notions of themselves—what a group show at SUNY Binghamton featuring Aptekar's work called "gender fictions"—with their actual sexual and existential selves. *Herald*, for instance (a 1988 diptych in oil on copper, 30 by 60 inches), features, in the left panel, a blowup of a man's lips, mustache and beard (and a bit of nose), while the right-hand panel displays the arms, torso and groin areas of a bristling silver suit of armor. The sense of this juxtaposition is obvious: the male's inherent physical sensuality is radically contrasted with his near-paranoiac need to protect himself, from possible friend as well as probable foe—both here incarnated as the viewer.

A group show in which Aptekar exhibited before this first solo show at Cutler was called "The Other Man: Alternative Representations of Masculinity" (curated

by Marcia Tucker for the New Museum). Aptekar's *Divided Gilles*, 1987, at Cutler, was one such "alternative representation." Watteau's hapless Pierrot figure of the title is seen in three oil-on-wood sections. To the left is a close-up of Gilles's feet, in shiny white shoes with ridiculous pink ribbon laces, gray stockings and baggy pantaloons that hang down to somewhere near the ankle. At center is Gilles's torso, loosely wrapped in a white smock, hands hanging to either side in front of him, as if there might be a good deal of excess weight around the hip area.

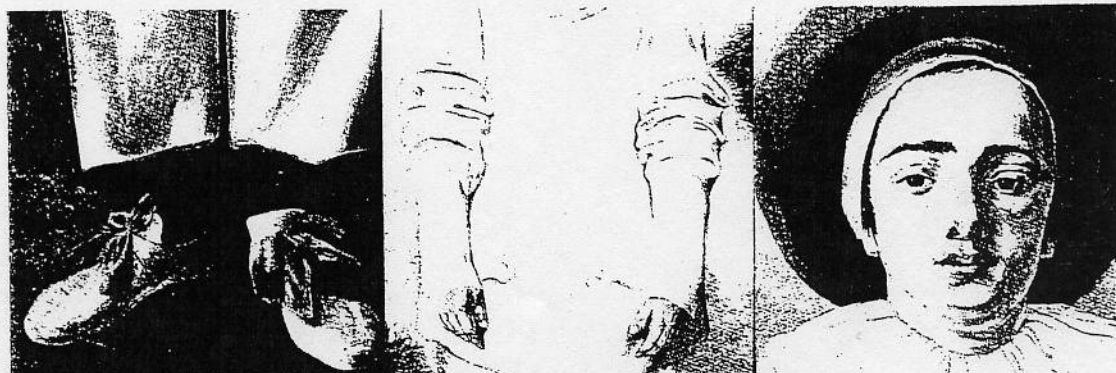
To the right is Gilles's face. It's a study in a kind of excruciated despair: big, sad, vacant eyes give way to fleshy nose and lips, multiple chins, fluted clown collar and, at top, white, forehead-hugging bandana and big brown hat. The difficulty of being an aberrant male—aberrant in visage, dress and, one is invited to imagine, psyche—is heavily played up here, while the Rococo gaiety is but faintly apparent, and then in tones that we can only take to be ironic.

The show's most stunning work was a 1988 oil on wood called *I Had to Get Them*. Here, Aptekar evidences deep artistic—and personal—interest in Vincent van Gogh. The work's left-hand panel is a slightly cam-

py recreation of a van Gogh self-portrait in the off-key creams, blues and greens that we have all come to associate with that artist. Meanwhile, at center, against an orange ground, is a black and white rendering of brother Theo, based on a photograph (art dealer Theo, oddly, never sat for a painted portrait—by his brother or anyone else). The right-hand panel might be taken for an original van Gogh self-portrait—in 1890-style beard, shirt and realist idiom—but in fact it is a self-portrait of Aptekar himself.

I Had to Get Them functions beautifully on many levels. There is the sheer, vital masculinity of all three men, all "being geniuses together" on canvas; there is the erotic undercurrent to this scene of impacted male camaraderie; and there is a commentary on the ways and means of art then and now, as the outspoken passion of the van Gogh brothers is contrasted with the relatively anonymous, if intense, mien of Aptekar (as he has depicted himself) on the phone. Although Aptekar's social commentary seems, at times, a bit blunt, the viewer is continually being reminded—through wit, irony and distancing techniques—that "gender fictions" are great fiction. Aptekar has fun with his subject matter while incidentally piercing a good-sized hole in the male mystique.

—Gerrit Henry



Ken Aptekar: *Divided Gilles*, 1987, oil on wood triptych, 30 by 90 inches overall; at Bess Cutler.