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Artist puts meaning between the lines

Well-known paintings, Aptekar's words tell multiple stories

By KATE HACKMAN
Special to The Star

Viewed through eyes that watched the events of Sept. 11 unfold, the images of Ken Aptekar at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art seem poignant, even prescient. By recycling famous masterworks, Aptekar explores issues of faith, judgment and personal and cultural identity.

The major traveling exhibition, "Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990-2000," is a 10-year retrospective of the artist's paintings. Curated by the Kemper's Dana Self, it opened Sept. 15.

In a strategy known as "appropriation," Aptekar repaints famous paintings, including works by Raphael, Boucher, El Greco, Manet and, most frequently, Rembrandt. This practice of borrowing from high art has been adopted by artists from Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol to Carrie Mae Weems, whose "Hampton Project," incorporating historical photographs, opens in mid-October at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Over his versions of well-known paintings, rendered effectively but not exquisitely — perfect replication is not the point — Aptekar bolts sandblasted glass panels bearing text he has composed. These texts, which

range from a single word to several paragraphs, set up what he calls an "elliptical relationship between text and image," whereby each influences the meaning of the other.

As the show's title suggests, there is much to be read "between the lines" in Aptekar's works, which combine text and image to tell multiple stories at once.

On one hand, his textual "interventions" provide a "critique of the authority of Old Master paintings," raising questions about the famous artists and their subjects. At the same time, they provide a means to explore his own identity, as a red-headed Jewish artist from Detroit.

The stories Aptekar tells frequently are anecdotal episodes from his family history and upbringing. At turns funny, poetic and painful, they reflect Aptekar's desire to simultaneously "provoke and entertain."

From describing being fitted for his bar mitzvah suit, with its implications of transition to manhood, to making paper snowflakes at age 6 with his mother ("I have a knack for it, but my mother seems worried. 'Such a surgeon you'll make with those hands, keyna-hora, and on the weekend you can be artistic.'"), Aptekar has a knack for honing in on small but

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APTEKAR: Words tell artist's stories

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symbolic moments, loaded with implications.

For two major projects completed at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Aptekar incorporated the responses of other viewers — from security guards to school children. Placing their words over re-paintings of the specific images to which they were responding, he explored the nature of seeing itself.

One such piece, based on a painting by Walter Gay of a Parisian salon, bears the words of a female guard: "I wouldn't sit in any of the chairs in the painting because they look too pretty — I'd just observe."

Sometimes, Aptekar's painted images feel too much like simply illustrative backdrops for his stories. Most successful are those pieces where text and image seem to engage in a back and forth conversa-

ON EXHIBIT

"Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990-2000"

■ Where: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd.

■ When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. The exhibit continues through Dec. 2.

■ How much: Free.

■ Information: (816) 753-5784.

■ Catalog: Accompanying soft-cover catalog features color plates of all 31 objects, as well as several essays, including one by well-known art historian Linda Nochlin. \$40 for a signed copy, \$25 unsigned.

tion — interrogating, reinforcing, complicating one another.

"Safe" (1990), for example, is a delicately rendered silverpoint

drawing of an armor helmet, its protective hood closed but perforated by a decorative pattern of small holes. The relationship between helmet and a small affixed glass panel reading "safe," is fluid. The combination might be understood as a poke at puffed-up masculinity, or as a comment on the AIDS crisis — the helmet as a surrogate for a condom — or, regarded in the present moment, as a comment on the precarious nature of security, whereby military protection fails to provide the safety it promises.

Whether addressing art history or his own life, Aptekar persistently asks questions. Juxtaposing the painted form and the written word allows him to upset our tendency to fix meanings, see from only one perspective and make judgments based on superficial appearances. As he said, "Being troubled by something provokes you to think and that is my intention."