



LOOK AGAIN
KEN APTEKAR

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A special and sincere thanks goes to Ken Aptekar, whose work and spirit are generous, witty and full of life; both have awakened wonderful things in me, and it has been a pleasure and a gift to work with Ken throughout the planning and execution of this exhibition.

—Michele L'Heureux

on the cover:

***Portrait of the Artist*, 2010**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York

oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

60 x 60 inches

after (clockwise from upper left):

Charles Demuth, *Love Love Love [Homage to Gertrude Stein (?)]*, 1929,

Fundacion Coleccion Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Charles Demuth, *Poster Portrait: O'Keeffe*, 1923-24, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

Charles Demuth, *I saw the figure five in gold* (Poster Portrait: William Carlos Williams), 1928, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Francois Boucher, *Young woman with a bouquet of roses*, Private collection

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February 6-April 14, 2012

BEARD AND WEIL GALLERIES, WATSON FINE ARTS
WHEATON COLLEGE, NORTON, MASSACHUSETTS



***Portrait of Nino Alcock-Boselli*, 2010**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
 oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
 30 x 60 inches

after (left) Jacques-Louis David, *General Bonaparte*, ca. 1797-98
 and *Portrait of Gaspar Meyer*, 1795-96, Louvre, Paris

GO AHEAD, LOOK AGAIN

Look: you see a painting of two figures; actually, two paintings side by side, each a portrait of a different man. Are they contemporaries? Likely so, judging from their hairstyles and the collars of their clothes. Do you recognize them? Not really, but you guess eighteenth century. The portrait on the left is unfinished, the figure's head and neck painted in detail, his upper torso and arms drawn only in contour, one arm to the hip, the other hand at the chest. The man in the painting stares off into the distance, looking either determined or forlorn. The portrait on the right depicts a more relaxed-looking gentleman leaning back in his chair wearing a red waistcoat, white ruffled collar, and a blue jacket. His look is one of contentment, maybe even happiness. You step in and stare closely at his face, the turned-up curls of his hair. You wonder about the relationship between the two men, imagine them to be politicians.

Look again. This time, you notice the large translucent multicolored shapes painted directly over the figures, like spots on some postmodern giraffe. They make the painting feel contemporary, remind you of a children's book or a puzzle.

Step back, and now you focus on the text etched on glass bolted to the front of the painted panels. Why is it that you didn't read this first? Looking again, it seems impossible to have seen the images without first considering the text. It reads:

"Vague, vague, vague. It's not done. He's ugly, his hair reminds me of a bad teacher. They should give it away or maybe sell it," says Nino, a 7 year-old Parisian. Nino can get to the Louvre in ten minutes on the Metro.

As for Jacques-Louis David's *Portrait of Gaspar Meyer*, he'd take that one home with him. He likes the "funny curls of Gaspar's hair, the blue and the white and the red" of his clothes. " Plus, it's all colored in.

Suddenly, there is a third person in the painting, young Nino, whose observations of the two figures in the painting make you chuckle. It is always magnificent to view art through a child's eyes. You look yet again, as innocently as you can, and notice this time the finials on the man's chair, decorated with stars, like two balls you could juggle or bounce. The text suggests that the two portraits are reproductions of paintings that hang in the Louvre. You imagine a small boy staring up at them and laugh again at his proclamation that the unfinished portrait should be sold. You realize that this is a portrait of the boy, as much as a portrait of two men.

You divert your eyes for a short time, and when you look again, you become aware of the bolts that fasten the glass to the painting. You wonder what it feels like for the artist to drill holes in the glass and straight through his painstakingly recreated paintings—to pierce through the objects of one's creation.

Once more, you take in the whole painting, and there, staring back at you, is your own reflection in the glass. You are looking back at yourself, along with one of the male figures. You are inserted into the work, just as Nino is; now there are four of you. At long last, you look at the caption on the wall to learn that the painting is *Portrait of Nino Alcock-Boselli*, the small boy whose responses to the original paintings in the Louvre prompted their selection for

this painting and determined the accompanying text. The painting has changed, is changing with each minute you spend looking. Later, after viewing other work in the gallery, you return to the painting, and the process begins again, this time from a different starting point and with a different conclusion.

Such is the gift of Ken Aptekar's work: permission to look again and again—at the content of the paintings, at the history they reproduce, at the clever words he writes, at one's own reflection—permission to become part of the work. Norman Bryson, in an *Art in America* review of Aptekar's 1999 exhibition at the Corcoran, reminds us that, in looking at art, "among all the wayward, vagabond, autobiographical responses that arise, only few are acknowledged by the institution as appropriate."¹ In the case of Aptekar's work, all responses, however wayward or vagabond, are welcome and valid, even essential to the completion of the work.

"And what is the role of the beholder, ignorant or learned, puzzled or insightful, who responds, and in responding, gives birth to the multiple meanings of the work?," Linda Nochlin asks.² To Aptekar, the beholder is *everything*; there is no meaning without her. He disrupts the long-held view of art history that great works of art possess a truth that only select, learned viewers can discover and appreciate. Instead, by recreating master works with his own twist—changes in scale, orientation, or hue, for example—and superimposing clever, and often witty, original text over the images, Aptekar prompts fresh readings, ones that acknowledge and affirm the viewer's unique perspective and identity. "And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation," as Walter Benjamin famously posed, "it reactivates the object reproduced."³ With each new viewing, each unique viewer, the original work is activated all over again.

Aptekar's work reveals any number of shifting truths about original artworks, our own identities, spectatorship, the nature of portraiture, and the role of the gallery, to name a few. With Aptekar's work, getting to the answer is not the point, nor is the process of viewing linear; indeed, writes critic Mieke Bal, "the competition between text and image enforces a backtracking and moving forward...occluding our sense of purpose from start to finish."⁴ Each work prompts a conversation with the viewer that never closes but may take odd turns and circle back on itself, revealing something unexpected or new. John Berger ends his seminal book *Ways of Seeing* with a simple quote: "To be continued by the reader..."⁵ Aptekar's paintings elicit the same conclusion, offering a much-needed and oft-missing invitation to create one's own meaning in each work of art.

Go ahead, look. And don't be surprised when you find yourself looking again.

Michele L'Heureux, Wheaton Class of 1988
Gallery Director

¹ Norman Bryson, "The Viewer Speaks," *Art in America* (February 1999), 98-101.

² Linda Nochlin, "Uncertain Identities: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jew," in *Painting Between the Lines, 1990-2000* (Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, 2001), 31.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 223.

⁴ Mieke Bal, "Larger Than Life: Reading the Corcoran Collection," in *Ken Aptekar: Talking to Pictures* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1997), 8.

⁵ John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 166.



DOMINANT, ETC., 1991

Collection Gerald Leader & Lucy Aptekar, Brookline

oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

60 x 60 inches

after Raphael, *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, ca. 1514-15



Obstructed View, 2006

Collection Peter and Julie Cummings, New York

oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

30 x 60 inches

after Jan Weissenbruch, *View of the St. Catharine-Gasthaus in Arnhem*, ca. 1850



My Turn, 2006

Collection Dennis Kardon & Shelley Lewis, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after Claude Monet, *Women in the garden*, 1867



Portrait of Susan Whitehead, 2010
Collection Susan Whitehead, Boston
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
60 x 60 inches

after (left) J. M. W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
and (right) Vincent Van Gogh, *The Ravine*, 1889, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



A Reason to Wake Up, 2005
Collection Allison Holtzman, Boca Raton
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
37 x 37 inches
after Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Chasse au loup*, 1734



Answers Questions, 1992

Collection Gail Postal, New York

oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

30 x 60 inches

after Raphael, *Vision of Ezekiel*, ca. 1518 and Rembrandt,

The angel stopping Abraham from sacrificing Isaac to God, 1635



***This Close*, 2006**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

24 x 48 inches

after details of four drawings by Jean-Antoine Watteau (L-R):

1. Sheet of studies: a standard-bearer standing, seen from the back, two men carrying plates; a head of a man encircled by a harness; three studies of hands, 1714-15
2. Woman standing, turned to the left with face in extreme profile, 1714-15
3. Two men standing, one seen in three-quarter view, the other seen from the back, turned toward the left hands crossed behind his back, 1713-14
4. Five men standing, 1710-11



***I'm Six Years Old and Hiding Behind My Hands*, 1996**

Courtesy of the artist

oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

120 x 120 inches

after Francois Boucher, *Allegory of Painting*, 1765, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Take My Hand, 2010

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts

35 x 35 inches

after Francois Boucher, *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour*, 1759, Wallace Collection, London

EXHIBITED WORKS

***A Reason to Wake Up*, 2005**

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37 x 37 inches
after Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Chasse au loup*, 1734

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***DOMINANT, ETC.*, 1991**

Collection Gerald Leader & Lucy Aptekar, Brookline
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
60 x 60 inches
after Raphael, *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, ca. 1514-15

***I'm Practicing*, 1997**

Collection Gerald Leader & Lucy Aptekar, Brookline
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after Francois-Hubert Drouais, *Portrait of Madame Francois-Hubert Drouais*, 1750, Corcoran Gallery of Art

***I'm Six Years Old and Hiding Behind My Hands*, 1996**

Courtesy of the artist
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
120 x 120 inches
after Francois Boucher, *Allegory of Painting*, 1765, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

***Just Then*, 2006**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after Giorgio di Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914 and Giorgio di Chirico, *Melanconia*, 1912

***Minutes Later*, 2006**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
37 x 74 inches
after Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942

***My Turn*, 2006**

Collection Dennis Kardon & Shelley Lewis, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after Claude Monet, *Women in the garden*, 1867

***Not just about a few words*, 2006**

Courtesy of the artist
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 30 inches
after Gustave Courbet, *L'Immensite*, 1869

***Nothing Happens without the Kind Assistance of Others*, 2005**

Collection Brian Parente New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
37 x 37 inches
after Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Meute de chiens courants qui vont au rendez-vous, au carrefour de l'Embassade, Forêt de Compiègne*, 1743

***Obstructed View*, 2006**

Collection Peter and Julie Cummings, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after Jan Weissenbruch, *View of the St. Catharine-Gasthaus in Arnhem*, ca. 1850

***Portrait of Arlette L'Hopitault*, 2010**

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches
after (right) Jean-Baptiste Chardin, *Saying Grace*, 1740 and (left) *Young Man with a Violin*, or *Portrait of Charles Theodore Godefroy*, ca.1738, Louvre, Paris

Portrait of Nino Alcock-Boselli, 2010

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
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30 x 60 inches

after (left) Jacques-Louis David, *General Bonaparte*, ca. 1797-98 and *Portrait of Gaspar Meyer*, 1795-96, Louvre, Paris

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Charles Demuth, *I saw the figure five in gold* (Poster Portrait: William Carlos Williams), 1928, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Francois Boucher, *Young woman with a bouquet of roses*, Private collection

Possibly Better, 2006

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches

after Stefano di Giovanni, known as "Sassetta," *St. Ranieri delivering the poor from a prison in Florence*, ca. 1437-1444

Take My Hand, 2010

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
35 x 35 inches

after Francois Boucher, *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour*, 1759, Wallace Collection, London

The Whole Picture, 2000-2006

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches

after Clarkson Stanfield, *On the Dogger Bank*, V&A, London

This Close, 2006

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
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Three Acts

© Ken Aptekar 2004

DVD, 12 minutes

Commissioned by the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College

When Someone Asks Me What I Do, 2000

Courtesy of the artist
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches

Wrong Write, 2006

Courtesy Graham Gallery, New York
oil on wood, sandblasted glass, bolts
30 x 60 inches

after Philip Guston, *For M.*, 1955 and Philip Guston, *Paw*, 1968

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Ken Aptekar toys with paintings from the past by using the history of art as his playground. He time-travels masterpieces into the present by his repainting joined to his own texts. Here's the idea: paintings are nothing on their own; they start to mean something only when you start talking back to them. Aptekar's work turns this conviction into paintings on wood panels over which he bolts glass sandblasted with text.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1950, Aptekar received his BFA (University of Michigan, 1973) then moved to Brooklyn (MFA, Pratt Institute 1975). Solo museum exhibitions include Victoria & Albert Museum (London), Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), Memorial Art Gallery (Rochester, NY), New Museum (NY), among others. A survey, *Ken Aptekar: Painting Between the Lines, 1990-2000*, (Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, 2001) completed its tour in 2002. Solo gallery exhibitions include James Graham & Sons, Bernice Steinbaum, Pamela Auchincloss Projects, Jack Shainman, and Bess Cutler (all NYC). The Mint Museum (Charlotte, NC) recently commissioned Aptekar to produce works based on their 1762 portrait of Queen Charlotte. He has received two NEA Painting Fellowships, a Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation Award, a Rockefeller Residency (Bellagio), and a Pollock-Krasner Award.

Beard and Weil Galleries

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