

REINTERPRETATION OF QUEEN CHARLOTTE BY KEN APTEKAR

By Martha Rucker

Ken Aptekar was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1950 and received his BFA at the University of Michigan and an MFA from Pratt Institute (1975). His work has been seen in exhibitions worldwide, and he is the recipient of numerous awards and is in the collections of many museums.

The New York and Paris based artist has been incorporating text on glass in his work since 1990, ranging from a single word to narratives exploring the countless guises that constitute a complex individual. A retrospective of his work, **‘Talking to Pictures’**, was held at the Corcoran Gallery in 1999. The exhibition presented numerous copies of Old Master portraits and had the viewer’s response incorporated into the artwork. A ten-year retrospective, at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001, **“Painting Between the Lines”**, reveals how the artist knits together art history and biographical dialogues by borrowing paintings from western art history and combining them with witty, poignant, and often autobiographical stories.

In 2006 Aptekar’s ninth solo show in New York included over a dozen paintings, all diptychs¹. In this series, the artist continued his dialogue with the history of art, encouraging the viewer to ask questions and to make up their own answers about historical works. He appropriates paintings from history and combines them with text. His paintings are executed freehand in oil on wood. He then has words and phrases etched into thick sheets of glass, which are bolted to the surface of the wood support. The words, which can be clearly read, play off the themes and actions depicted in the painting, which is visible below. In this manner, Mr. Aptekar provokes an inquiry into the messages embedded within the works. Sometimes humorous, sometimes biting, his questions seek to complement the works of art, which they overlay.²

Ken Aptekar draws on art history for much of his imagery, beginning with other people’s paintings, which he crops, colors and copies³. He paints new versions of these paintings, bolting glass with sandblasted words to his painted panels. Aptekar’s work belongs to the tradition of painting, yet he brings to that tradition recognition that paintings produce meaning only through their interaction with viewers. He investigates the nature of spectatorship and promotes viewers’ own narratives prompted by the image-text combinations. Recently, Aptekar has started producing videos in addition to painting. The videos continue his efforts to bring contemporary points of view to the history of art.

¹ A double tablet

² ArtInfo

³ Ask Art Archives

Mr. Aptekar describes his working methods: I would say that I'm an artist who uses painting. By that I mean I'm not a painter because what I do is treat paintings as text that I add my commentary to. I use my own history often and my reactions to the painting that I'm looking at, and I invite other people to do the same. Then I put that interpretation together with the painting that I've made that's based on the source painting and sandblast words on a piece of glass and I drill holes in my painting and bolt the words in the glass over my painted interpretation. I try to make it come alive and be meaningful and relevant in an age when images on the Internet are really much more current than paintings on wood or canvas in a museum.⁴

Ken Aptekar was commissioned by the Mint Museum to do a new series of portraits of Queen Charlotte. It is to honor the 250th anniversary of her coronation. The artist was asked to create a 21st century interpretation of 18th century painter Alan Ramsay's "Portrait of Queen Charlotte." After meeting with diverse groups in the Mint Museum, Ken began to formulate the works he planned to make for the museum. The six oil paintings would depict Charlotte in several formats, including her love of gardening, as an immigrant and her ethnicity. The last has generated the most intense scrutiny. Aptekar is placing more emphasis on his Queen Charlotte's cultural background. Historian, Mario de Valdes y Cocom claims that the queen, though German, was a direct descendant from a black branch of the Portuguese royal family related to Margarita de Castro e Souza, a 15th century noblewoman. Though intriguing, other researchers contend Charlotte wasn't black, due to a gaping generational difference between the monarch and her African forbears.⁵

Mr. Aptekar traveled to Charlotte last year to host focus groups to gauge community reactions to Queen Charlotte. He said "I took my cues from the passionate responses of individuals that I'd asked to help me understand what Queen Charlotte means to them"⁶

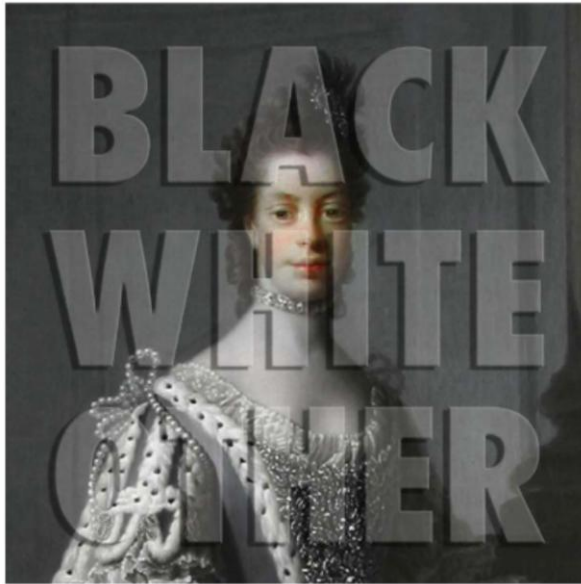
The new interpretations, the series of portraits of Charlotte will be installed in the Mint Museum uptown for its opening in October 2010. Each panel in the series will be one-sixth the size of the original Ramsey painting.

⁴ Ken Aptekar

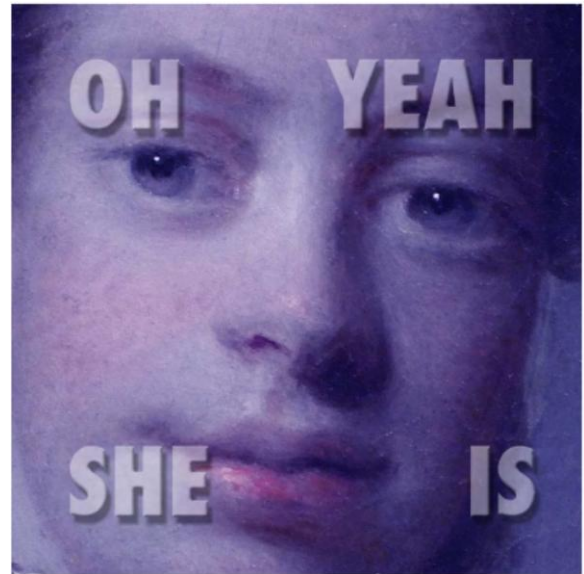
⁵ The Charlotte Post

⁶ Ken Aptekar

The images below are digitally produced from photographs of the Ramsay portrait. They will serve as preliminary sketches for the oil paintings that Ken Aptekar will make for this series. The actual paintings will evolve more or less from these digital renderings. The basic impression that the renderings give is a good indicator of how the finished paintings with the sandblasted glass bolted over them will look.



The most passionate responses to Ramsay's portrait dealt with Charlotte's racial origins. It seems likely that she had African forebears, though the details are sketchy.



Is She or Isn't She? Contrary to those who maintain that she is not, because of the generational gap, if the 'One Drop Rule' applies then, Yes She Is.



Beyond the question of her mixed race ancestry, she was without doubt a stranger in a new land, a German immigrant in England

King George III's mother snatched the 17-year-old Mecklenburg girl from relative obscurity to become the Queen of the British Empire. Overwhelmed by the lavish trappings of power



represented by her crown, the massive stone column, the throne-like chair, not to mention what she's wearing, Charlotte nonetheless conveys authenticity, accessibility, and vulnerability. Aptekar says he tried to capture something of that with "Take My Hand," the second work in the series".⁷

⁷ Carla Hanzal – Source of the digital photos



Apte wanted to express what he viewed as a striking paradox; that the namesake for the city of Charlotte became a symbol for the enemy of the American Revolution



Charlotte's notable humanitarian, botanical, and familial accomplishments have overwhelmed any historical evidence of her quite understandable sympathies for the colonists' enemy in the American Revolution.

Martha Rucker
March 2010

Sources:

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www.kenaptekart.net

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