

Still Life of a Green Bird 2015 (BK2379): Samuel Bak
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Still Life of a Green Bird, 2015
Oil on linen, signed "BAK 15" lower left
36 x 36"
BK2379

Religious scholars, art historians, and many others who appreciate art will continue to study and marvel at the paintings of Samuel Bak, along with the life of the man himself, for generations to come. Even those viewers unfamiliar with Bak, whose extraordinary body of work never fails to captivate and inspire, or the history and emotions that guide his brush, understand from his works that he is portraying a deeply profound set of life experiences. As a survivor of the Holocaust, Bak renders through complex narratives of religious symbols and images a landscape of unfathomable human pain and suffering; he also cautiously offers the earnest viewer a path out of darkness. Enigmatic and ambiguous, his paintings always demand a great deal of the viewer, but they give back in even greater measure.

Can an observer with little or no knowledge of Jewish history or of Samuel Bak's own history have a fully satisfying encounter with any of the artist's works? Must one be familiar with the meaning of his numerous recurrent images to appreciate his art? Not at all. Those viewers can simply dive into Bak's mesmerizing world on canvas to explore his tantalizing visual gifts and seek meaning of their own.

Even to the casual observer, *Still Life of a Green Bird* begs to be analyzed. A first look reveals an overall sense of clutter, chaos, and damage—an eyeful of a flea market assemblage of seemingly disparate items crowded atop broken furniture. The viewer at once wonders what the objects represent, what the relationship is among them, and why these particular items have been brought together: do they, in fact, represent a random order of things, a world out of control? Are they fragments of memory from the artist's past? Or might they symbolize a culled group rescued from destruction, an ark survival?

Although no one image dominates the disordered scene, two birds catch the viewer's eye, bringing to mind the vast range of human notions and experiences that birds have symbolized throughout the history of civilization. Freedom, peace, renewal, mourning, joy, death, innocence, are but a few that abound

across cultures, religions, and fantasy lore. Here, the possible meanings are as broad as one's imagination. The larger of the two appears to be constructed of metal, a light green-blue, as if oxidized, perhaps a sign of neglect and exposure. The bird has in its beak two wheat-colored ribbons, which, like the wings strewn across the scene, seem wind-whipped. Not necessarily referring to olive branches of peace or Jewish ribbons of mourning, they might instead represent life-affirming nest-building, or abundance and optimism against all odds. The bird has a two-dimensional, sculptured look; no melodic birdsong here, but rather a sense of discordance incompatible with nature.

The second, smaller, bird appears to be a patchwork construction of wood or stone, earthen in color, with detached wings that don't seem flight-worthy—grounded. More fragmented than the larger bird, this one rests securely on furniture, near a pear, a fruit also rich in religious and cultural symbolism, whose meaning ranges from birth to immortality to the fear of separation to suffering. This pear is blue, perhaps metal, which cannot sustain life, but will endure. Another pear, more realistic in appearance, emerges out of the cracked belly of the bird, perhaps symbolizing the possibility of life breaking forth from confinement. There is room for optimism here.

Looking stunned, as if paralyzed in mid-flight, both birds are tethered to rusted wires that tie them to nearby objects. The birds appear to be either restrained by the wires, which are held by an unknown agent, perhaps fate, and manipulated as puppets, or supported by them, guided by God, the tenets of faith, permitting them the chance for survival. Could they have once been atop weathervanes as harbingers of changing winds, ill or life-sustaining?

The birds and other objects sit atop what seems to be a damaged chest. Closed by a rusted hinge, the chest might include articles hidden for some time. The furniture itself evokes an altar of religious or other historic significance, and the clustered items perhaps an offering. The pears, along with the dry foliage that frames the printing, remind the viewer that, despite ruin and destruction, the potential for renewal exists even in the midst of despair. The dice? Some appear vaguely intact, while others not. Chance does play a meaningful part in life; will the birds and other objects be salvaged or sacrificed?

This isn't your usual still life—still only in certain respects. Despite an overall sense of stillness, paralysis—not to be confused with serenity—just beneath the surface is great movement. History seethes, the reverberations of unspeakable human acts persist, and human forces of heartbreak, understanding, and redemption struggle. Either fury or the persistence of faith could be responsible for the implied movement of wings attached to a variety of objects, aflutter, as if hope and desperation are vying for dominance—or, as if life is still present.

The darkest lessons of history will never be stilled, nor should they be, and although the ravages of human suffering will never be silenced, hope can bring wings to our souls. As has been said, life itself is optimistic; perhaps these birds will indeed fly again.