

My Ongoing Conversation
Laura Mandel



On Going Conversation, 2019
Oil on linen
20 x 16"
BK2370

The scene in Bak's *On Going Conversation* (2019) feels strangely mundane and simple, despite being completely surreal and absurd. The normalcy of pouring tea at a kitchen table, juxtaposed by the fact that the objects in the scene not only float, but intersect through one another.

The painting initially caught my eye, because of the wonderfully playful *Alice in Wonderland* vibe, as if the Mad Hatter left his tea party floating unattended in space. Like the mouse and the Mad Hatter, the teapot and the bird feel like characters in this story, just waiting for their guests to arrive. And while not alive, the bright white teapot, mid-pour, has merged with the tree to bring a feeling of life and hope to the painting. Contrasted by the black of the bird perched just above, we're reminded of those lives lost in the Holocaust, whom Bak so prolifically paints through a diverse visual lexicon.

Beyond the surreal intrigue of the painting, I realized that I was drawn into this painting because it tells my story.

When I think of my great grandmother, Jenny Lowenstein, I think of the photo of her sitting at her kitchen table in Nienburg, Germany, similar to the table in this painting. Before my Grandmother left her mother, on the last boat out of Nazi Germany in 1939, Nienburg was home to a thriving, educated, and heavily assimilated Jewish community, much like the life I now lead in Brookline.

When I look at this painting, I see my own ongoing conversation across generations and time, the similarities in our lives and how that informs who I am. And while I can't speak to my ancestors directly, I'm reminded that there is an ongoing conversation in my DNA and in my memories.

If you are less familiar with Bak's work, you might simply see a stone like background in the painting. But if you reference other Bak works, the Jewish star in the background will pop out like a magic eye picture. Looking at this yellow star in the background, ironically obscured by its huge presence, it also hits me viscerally that my great grandmother was forced to wear the yellow star to mark herself as a Jew. Almost 100 years later, I have reclaimed this star as I bring Jewish public art to Boston, proclaiming our tradition loudly and proudly.

Bak is not only a master of surrealism and storytelling. Through his masterful layouts and imagery, he enables us each to see our own story in his pieces. This is the power of art.