

A Reading of Bak's *A Nest of One's Own*
David Booker



A Nest of One's Own, 2019
Oil on linen, signed "BAK 19" lower right
20 x 16"
BK2371

In "Ongoing Conversation: Birds in the Art of Samuel Bak," Jeanne Koles writes that "through the myriad and often oppositional associations with the bird . . . Bak narrates a spectrum of experiences and emotions ranging from annihilation and terror to survival and hope. Each work unfolds in a process of discovery, revealing itself to the close observer who recognizes that all is not what it seems" (2). In "A Nest of One's Own," a conventional bird's nest is presented in the form of a man-made tree house. Bak's blue bird does not sit within the safe confines of its nest; instead, a tree house comprises the torso of the bird's body in a way that reveals that the bird cannot fit in its "nest." This is not a nest for birds but a tree house built by and intended for humans. The nest, a place of safety and rebirth, is presented by Bak as a dilapidated tree house that is neither accessible nor functional and is, therefore, unsafe. The meaning of the painting is grounded in contradiction; whereas a nest is a symbol of life in symbiosis with nature, Bak's tree house nest is broken and unable to provide a safe haven that can sustain life.

The blue bird in Bak's painting, artificial in its two-dimensionality, appears to be in flight but cannot fly. While the bird's right wing is upright and gives the appearance of flapping, the metallic left wing is detached and has lost its blue color. It hangs by a string hooked over a nail drilled through the tree house into the trunk of the tree and points down into a deep hole, perhaps a grave.

In the center of the painting rests the nest, or tree house. A tree house is not simply a place to which children can escape; tree houses have been employed by humans as places to escape from danger, as practical instruments from keeping families safe and as ways of living above inhospitable ground. An effective tree house is built in deciduous trees, as is Bak's, but in order to survive, it has to be built in a healthy tree with a solid, intact root structure. Bak's tree house is built atop a rootless tree, part of which is not even connected to the ground. Bak's tree appears dead and its yellowing leaves drop off in the wind. It is not likely to be able to withstand wind, nor does it have a rigid platform. A ladder to access the tree house emerges from a deep hole, but the ladder seems to have broken rungs and ultimately does

not connect to the bottom of the tree house. The black bird in the upper right corner is landing cautiously on a dead branch, as if recognizing that this is not a safe nest.

Like many paintings in this series, "A Nest of One's Own" rewards careful observation. The painting offers an ideal of safety and survival in the form of a nest with a peaceful landscape in the background. But the broken image of the nest in the painting seems to tell us that this nest is no place to escape; it is not a safe haven for humans, or for that matter, birds. As such, it provides no liberation from the horrors of the Holocaust.