

**Dove-Like Eyes**  
Erica Brown



*Still Still*, 2019  
Oil on linen, signed "BAK 19" lower left  
16 x 20"  
BK2367

In Samuel Bak's 2019 oil on linen "Still Still," body parts of the dove enwrap the shapely pear, creating the image of fruit about to be liberated from a still life. The painting challenges the eye with a calm sense of irony and whimsy. After all, if a piece of fruit were to fly away, the painting could no longer be called a still life. Unlike many of Bak's paintings where birds are trapped - their wings wood, tin or stone - or painfully stuck in the crux of a tree, this painting suggests that even inanimate objects can, with the assist of string and two wings, take flight.

The combination of fruit and wings also hearkens to an ancient garden filled with fruit and doves: the love nest in the Song of Songs. Flora and fauna mirror and amplify the love. Doves appear in almost every chapter. "Behold, you are fair, my darling, behold, you are fair, with your dove-like eyes! And you, are beautiful, my beloved, handsome indeed!" (Song of Songs 1:15-16). The reciprocated compliment that begins with dove-like eyes was so striking in the Song that the Talmudic sages regarded it as the mutual adoration of God and the Israelites:

"In all other songs, either He praises them or they praises him...Here, He praises them and they praises him. 'Behold, you are fair, my darling...with your dove-like eyes.' And they praise him. 'And you are beautiful, my beloved, handsome indeed!'" Song of Songs Rabba 1:1

In the dove verses that follow it is the dove's eyes rather than its wings that are its main attraction: "Ah, you are fair, my darling, Ah, you are fair. Your eyes are like doves behind your veil" (4:1). The beloved's eyes may be covered in a diaphanous veil, but the lover can still see them, like the penetrating blackness of the dove's eyes and the sensuous invitation they offer. Chapter five intensifies the bird's stare, its

shining dark pupil: “His eyes are like doves by watercourses, bathed in milk, set by a brimming pool.”  
(5:12)

The dove of the Song of Songs also paradoxically symbolizes both fidelity - “Only one is my dove, My perfect one...”(6:9) and remoteness. In chapter two, the lovers are separate and seek each other’s faces, aware that the bird’s eye is at once close and very far away: “O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, let me see your face. Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is comely” (2:14).

While the pear in “Still Still” may create the illusion of flight, we, the onlooker, know that the bird in Bak’s painting will never fly. One of its wings lies lifeless on the table, reminding us of a verse in another song – this time a modern one – Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem.”

The holy dove

She will be caught again

Bought and sold

And bought again

The dove is never free.