

**ON GOING CONVERSATION – 2019 by Samuel Bak**  
Rachel Kraft



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

I spent a decade working with a theater company which took its inspiration from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. So, it did not surprise me that I felt a gravitational pull towards Mr. Bak's "On Going Conversation." The teapot stilled in mid-air felt like its own kind of Mad Tea-Party.

Can I tell you a secret? I find certain art forms intimidating. When I worked in dance I fretted that I wouldn't understand a performance and my mentor lightly said "that would be like going to see a comedian and worrying the whole time about getting the joke. Let the experience wash over you. Trust you'll have a reaction."

I lean into that when I visit a gallery. I'm first drawn to the color palette and the title of the piece (it provides an invitation). I have judged this "aesthetic" as shallow and rarely luxuriate with a piece long enough to investigate the story buried within. And honestly, this is not a color scheme that usually moves me. The time of day though, saturated with the burnt orange of sunset, calls to mind a particularly bittersweet moment of contemplation and completion. There are contradictions of invitation and desolation: this scene of dirt and stone with a brush of green draped over a table supported with only one visible leg.

At first, I read the title as "*ongoing*" conversation. There is a gift in returning again and again to a favorite person, place and topic, with a hot cup of tea nestled in your hands. But on closer reflection, I realized Mr. Bak had titled it "on going" as "on going" somewhere. Was it a conversation interrupted or one that

left the parties too agitated to complete? Is a conversation ever complete? Did each walk off continuing the conversation in their heads?

When Alice tries to join their merrymaking at the table, the March Hare and the (Mad) Hatter famously tell her there is “No room! No room!” The single chair with the raven standing guard could be shooin away potential “Alices.” How many times have wanderers heard those words?

The small black bird looks over his shoulder, eyeing the teapot, suspended by a branch. Is he asking what’s there for me? Would he fly off if our seat warmer returned? Did he fancy himself part of the conversation? And who can forget the unanswered riddle asked of Alice, “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

And why is there only one chair? Is this an internal conversation? The setting looks deserted, the cup is tipped over, perhaps just abandoned and rather quickly, as if the subject has been called away in a hurry. Is there danger lurking just beyond this little nook of civility?

Mr. Bak’s work invites a kind of reflection that evolves and deepens as we return again and again. More questions asked than answered but that’s good! It means the story lives on and I will return again and again to Bak’s Mad Tea-Party of my imagination.