

## SAMUEL BAK: *TO THE LEFT*, 2013

Nadine Payn



*To the Left*, 2013  
Oil on linen, signed "BAK" lower left  
12 x 16.25"  
BK2387

Samuel Bak is gifted with the astounding ability to conjure beauty from horror, to employ color, line and texture to create paintings with multiple meanings, and most of all, to pose challenging questions to us — and to himself. Bak offers no easy answers. In encountering his art, we must maintain an attitude of “both/and” rather than “either/or.”

“*To the Left*” depicts two birds cobbled from wood and metal scraps who are trapped inside giant dice with shell-cratered pips. Their beaks, which draw us into the painting’s center, are mere inches apart. The left bird, lime green, is compressed by a vice-like die. Its aquamarine wood-grained wing curves gracefully but uselessly outside this prison. The red-orange bird inside the right die has a bit more leeway, suggested by shadow and a crutch-like leg. Its wing could also be a table representing destroyed domesticity, and possibly a painter’s work stand.

Unlike the songbirds of Bak’s maternal grandfather Khone, these birds cannot fly. They are reminiscent of the bird Sam and his pals fashioned piecemeal from rubbish in the Vilna ghetto. The boys pretended it could fly them to freedom, while bombing Nazis on the way.

Near the red-orange bird a wooden pole pierces a fallen blue-green question mark that serves as a visual link to the green bird but stops short at a gully. Its marble-like ball has rolled down the slope. It cannot function as a bridge. Rather, it compels us to ask questions.

Is Bak’s canvas about separation? Impending death? Chance? Even hope? I conclude: all of the above. The birds, surreal stand-ins for tormented humans, are in anxious conversation that might be a

heartbreaking farewell, an excruciating acknowledgement of the powerlessness of each to rescue the other. I'm aware that Bak chooses his titles carefully. "To the left" implies Selection, an SS man's casual wave towards life or death. My research and Survivors' talks indicate that "to the left" in Auschwitz did not always mean the gas chamber. It depended on which year a victim arrived, on which ramp, on which version of a Mengele.

While the birds appear doomed, Bak, with his dice imagery, presents the notion of Chance. He loves wordplay, so note that the singular of dice is "die." Perhaps our left bird will indeed die and our right bird will live. Perhaps vice versa. Maybe neither will survive. Might both be liberated? Chance plays a terrifying role in who lives or dies in every catastrophe, including our Covid pandemic. In Bak's life, why was his pre-ghetto sidekick, Samek Epstein, dragged out of hiding and riddled with bullets while he, Sam(ek) Bak, is alive at 87?

Bak's pole raises further questions. Is it a cross, a sad grave marker? A signpost? The arrow-shaped crossbar points "to the left" and possible gassing, yet its tip touches the far shore of a tranquil, misty mountain lake. Additionally, dark green leaves cluster on the canvas' upper right. Might there be hope after all? For these "birds?" For humankind? For our planet?

Bak's questions and painterly skills mesmerize me. I cannot avert my gaze. Can you?