

**About Sam Bak's 2019 *To the East and West*  
and Surrounding Paintings**  
Christine Arveil



*To the East and West*, 2019  
Oil on linen, signed "BAK 19" lower right  
36 x 48"  
BK2376

***BAK BIRD***

There are no words to be said.

The sky gently descends to the earth, blue glaze brushed over a thick coat of silence —the lost hue of cyan.

Time has stopped, or rather it curled up knees to chin, past and future locked together, petrified. Prey birds watch in the distance, old pals casually chatting. Stone age.

The weathervane jammed and squealed in a sudden arrest. Birds were thrown to the four winds in search of the true North, but their shadows remained trapped in flagstones, branding a new heraldic. Airlifted monuments; ascending avalanches; a neatly folded cloak turning to slab, for there will be no shroud.

Mourning dove,  
Peace dove,  
Birds' melodies that enlightened their days, haunt my nights.

It was hardly a bird flight away, a stone throw, and yet no one was left to be carried home. The *bird* scattered fuselage, hardly earning its wings, flips heads and tails; it was supposed to get us there fast, to be so much fun... but what will we do with the rest of the time?

“Pigeon homing pigeon... You’re the messenger!”  
This mechanical bird, a toy really; why are we so wound up?  
A child plays among rubbles, so sweet, so dangerous.

Always in the center, stands the tall thin house with two innocent eyes, with its narrow street running between collapsing homes. The earth shattered. A bird, walled in, shrieks. The stone carver did not have time to finish the dice: some thug shoots three bullets holes and started gambling.

My mind’s blind fingers run over the stone slabs, shivering, searching their way along the dents, trying to read signs, searching for remains of clarity in memory’s clutter. Letters I can’t read, times I did not live. Stars are made of rocks that weigh tons over my heart.

I was not there, but the splinter pierces my bone marrow, and I stare, immobile, with burnt umber dust scorching my eyes.

He wanted to be a poet, but only few letters were left that he collected, burnished and stapled around, like X securing the old ruins, and clefs on a music score for birds to sing. A tattered prayer shawl stripes served for staff.

He was a poet, but ancient laments were broken beyond repair. When a lark warbled at daybreak, he noticed the purity of the sky, pure like drinking water should be. A strange lake though, turning madder beneath the surface, enough to pull his lips away in fear, before he could take a sip.

We are left at the shore with unquenchable thirst, left to see our face in the mirror of water and the infinite sky, while a bird song carved in stone mends the fabric of the air.

The painter grinds lapis into azure, humming music from the drawing bird:  
*Painting for the End of Time.*

**Looking Through the Bak Door**  
Christine Arveil



*Quartet for the End of Time*, 1995  
Oil on linen  
45.5 x 51”  
BK380 (RG)

**ESSAY 2: Bak Blues**

Sam Bak’s paintings have a musical quality: “Quartet for the End of Time”. Olivier Messiaen comes to mind, birds included, as one visits the present opus at Pucker Gallery. How might blues influence Bak’s *sound*, beyond playful words?

The representation of sky and water, two perfectly transparent substances, gave a robust symbolist framework to most religions and an array of blue nuances to visual arts. It shaped our perception of color.

That is, if color is important.

In 1671, the French Royal Academy sustained a quarrel between the defendants of the superiority of academic drawing versus modernists, arguing after Rubens for the importance of color because it appeals to senses, hence invites a universal conversation. Sam Bak is a learned painter who earned his European mastership from traditional apprenticeship and a life-long study of art history. Along his itinerary, he built a hand that paints in different art languages; he also plays this hand of cards.

A painter’s palette is a road map, with its secrete by-ways and crossroads. Before the first brush stroke, directions are there. Bak uses the Old Masters palette, but with many twists, intriguing us with an intricate interplay of meaning and technique.

Classic painting installs a foundation of earth colors over the charcoal or red chalk sketch. Flemish painting favored a *détrempe* (a water-based egg wash) that dried fast. Bak needs such fast pace, in

urgent need to tell his story. This siccative ground supports the polymerization of upper layers, increasingly saturated with oil. Last, come the glazes that bring an atmospheric dimension.

Modern chemistry has long provided means around the ancient rules, and Bak is a modern painter who has reflected on movements like *Support-Surface*, among others. When he uses foundations in earth colors and stone pigments, we feel the dust and the ground, and he takes us right to his archeological excavation. Bak's canvases take dimensionality through the enactment of their meaning. It seems that techniques are masterfully retained only to embody the representation.

We are presented with a canvas that brings up walls with techniques *a fresco*, construes distant perspectives into oneiric lands in the manner and tones of early religious paintings, or sometimes oriental landscapes, all in continuum with classical representation. We do not know where we are anymore, except exactly where Bak wants us: thinking.

From ground to glaze, blue is present in many different shades, built into the body of paint and washing over it. It brings weight and lightness. Earth merges with sky. Sapphire to cerulean, blue defines a shape, affirms an identity as much as it escapes into dreamlike transparency. Blue tenderly unites all forms, and times.

Expressive painting is an impossible pursuit, doomed from the start, frozen in silence. Yet, lexicons are filled with "images that speak to us," even "scream," implying an emotional communication between the painter and the spectator beyond the materiality of the canvas. Tirelessly canvassing, Sam Bak opens meaningful doors.

Even music is often described as the art of silence...