

Mystery, Mythos, and the Pear in the Art of Samuel Bak

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A mythogem.

A Hindu cosmogonic myth narrates the story of the god Vishnu dreaming the world into existence. A lotus flower grows out of his navel, revealing the creator-god Brahma who causes the world to appear. But just as all things new eventually get old, the world spins toward its dissolution, getting worse and worse in the course of the great period—the *mahayuga*—until Shiva, the Great Destroyer, dances the world into absolute destruction. Vishnu awakens and the world disappears until he goes into his oneiric state again.

Cosmogonic myths of old carry this set of motifs of creation, decay, and destruction. Everything that comes to be, as soon as it comes to be, begins to die. Despite the claimed triumph of *logos* over *mythos* in the ancient times, this mythogem persists to this day. It plays out in life experienced as a series of disintegration, frustrating the inherent desire in us for eternal wholeness. It seems like we and the universe are always at cross-purposes. It may very well be *the one* question that truly and continually drives the philosophical enterprise: Why death?

Witness to the terrors of the Holocaust that irreparably broke the world, Samuel Bak paints the ruins and asks the same question, aligning his work to the old mythogem of the world decaying into nothingness. His art is an incessant inquiry into this puzzle of loss and death, and of life after all that death. The consuming fires, the rubble, and broken pieces of things once loved, once used in daily life, scattered about in the aftermath of a catastrophe, are usual features in his paintings, depicting the world broken and disintegrating. This devolution is also most *symbolically* presented in his drawn and painted images of pears.

Bak's pears are painted in different guises: made of wood, rock, marble, and metal, scattered in pieces, on stilts, in mechanical contraptions, encasing cities in ruins, enveloping people, devouring things, floating, half-buried, winged, on wheels, shot through, blood-stained, strapped, a hole in the ground, gargantuan, small and ordinary, on a table, among human-made things, among elements in nature, in the sky, on the ground, in the foreground, in the background, hidden, peeking out, alone, among other ruins, in varying numbers, encasing other pears, and bursting at the seams with other pears spilling from it. He has replaced the apple as the Biblical "fruit of wisdom" with the pear.¹ He says, "the pear symbolizes for me the fruit of paradise, the fruit of knowledge, it is a metaphor of how we perceive the world..."² This is the *mythos* of Bak's art: the pear as the symbol of the broken world, and yet also the key to understanding its brokenness.

Perhaps unconsciously drawing from the shared universal mythical sphere, Bak has sensed the association of the pear with something metaphysical. The pear is treasured in Eastern lore as the "fruit of immortality." In Indian Ayurvedic medicine, it is known as *amritphale*—ambrosia—because of its

¹Bak, *Illuminations* (video), <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/illuminations-art-samuel-bak>, 17:02-17:53.

² Samuel Bak Donation for UNO, 83 Editors of the Catalogue Raisonné of the Oeuvre by Samuel Bak: © Siegfried B Schäfer & Cecilia A. M. Witteveen, Düsseldorf, Germany, www.art-archives.net.

many healing powers.³ It can only be bestowed by the gods. But in Bak's paintings, where God seems to have abandoned the world devastated by the Holocaust, who will gift us with this fruit? The pear as the fruit of paradise, as the fruit of knowledge, is itself broken, trapped, imperfectly or strangely constructed, half-eaten or inedible. It forever escapes full appropriation.

In *Alone* (BK277), for example, a giant pear is propped against rocks, yellow green skin, with bursts of pink and red here and there, would have made it a luscious fruit. But it, too, is made of rocks, its skin peeling off and cracking where bullets have hit it. This is what has become of paradise. The fruit of wisdom is marred. It is closed off. It cannot be known. Similarly, in *On the Brink* (SJP477) a huge pear is straitjacketed in criss-crossing lengths of leather straps connected by rivets. The straps dig into the pear's skin, making it bulge in different places as if it were not the firm fruit that it is supposed to be. It reminds one of the Venus figurines—huge-bellied and large-breasted fertility symbols in very ancient cultures. Is it, like those figurines, pregnant? With knowledge? A jump-ring near the top connects the fruit to a leather leash that goes up beyond the frame. One cannot tell whether the leash is held by a hand or hooked onto something above. The leash is not taut, and yet, the pear seems to be on the brink of falling from the plank where it sits. Does it hold secrets that must not be revealed because they are dangerous to behold or because whoever has trapped it does not wish to share the knowledge contained within?

In Bak's other works, the fruit of knowledge remains unreachable. In *Keeper of Secrets* (BK281), a giant, pear-shaped, and hinged metal case with a large keyhole stands on top of a rocky hill against a gloomy sky. Giant keys are strewn about, as if they were tried on the keyhole and did not work. The case is impenetrable. The knowledge within is inaccessible, unless the right key is found. But where to find it? Does it even exist? In the same manner, *Armoured* (BK960) portrays another pear-shaped metal container resembling a tarnished teapot, its lid raised, held aloft by metal strips, revealing an edible-looking pear inside. But it does not seem like the pear could be taken out of the contraption. It is welded in. Beyond, smoke billows from what seems to be a burning city. Is the pear being protected from the harmful external elements or is it being confined? In either case, it is beyond acquisition.

The horizontal inside-outside iterations in the portrayals of this fruit of knowledge are replaced by a vertical one in *Archeological Fruit* (SJP480). Here, a pear-shaped ruin lies in a vast but desolate-looking landscape. In the middle are pear-shaped dug up holes that become smaller and smaller as they go deeper into the layers of the earth's crust. Behind the left wall, a "block" of rock shaped like a perfectly cut half of a pear is propped in the corner. The symbol of ancient ruins aptly identifies the pear as the primeval fruit, the *arche*, the first principle. The bottom may hold the prized wisdom. But this may also be a Kafkaesque version of diggings that go nowhere.

The same absurdity is reflected in *Invasion* (SJP506) where another giant pear seems to be growing, swallowing the table and the chair in the room. There is imperfection on its skin, perhaps the beginnings of its decay. On the still exposed part of the table, a regular-sized pear, its skin still smooth and unblemished, leans against the giant one on top of a crumpled cloth. The door to the room is open and light shines through a window beyond the wall. The "ordinary" pear can still nourish the body. The mythical pear of wisdom, on the other hand, ironically devours things. It invades and feeds on the world. Like a vampire, it consumes, but is never consumed. There is no gratification to be had. There is no

³ Milind Parle, "Why is Pear So Dear" in *IJRAP* 7 (Suppl.1), Jan.-Feb. 2015-16.

enlightenment. In Bak's own words, his "reinvented pears" are "metaphors of a world without explanation. My paintings carried no answers, only questions."⁴

Despite the generally bleak atmosphere one sees in Bak's paintings, however, it would be hasty to conclude that they are mere passive reflections of the world that's been marred by the horrors of the past. As a "painter of questions"⁵ Bak actively engages the world, forces us to look critically at the past and seriously consider the present in order to warrant hope for a future where, as the philosopher Gabriel Marcel once said, the broken world might be repaired.⁶ In Bak's art, there is acceptance that the world is wounded, and most likely wounded forever. But there is also a relentlessness that does not give in to despair. Amidst broken pears, a fresh one, edible and with the potential to nourish, is always being birthed. Even the strangely figured inorganic pears, cracked and crumbling, still stand, short stems jutting out, asserting themselves: "We are still here." Through these, Bak's persistence in asking questions teaches us to persevere, to go on and continue the quest for answers even if they are not forthcoming. For maybe, this is the *why* of our existence—itself a question, not an answer. It is, as Marcel discovers, a *mystery*, one we all have to live with, not complacently, but passionately.

Phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur reaffirms the centrality of myths in human life. Myths define a culture and hold it together when it is threatened. They are symbols that infuse life with vitality. It is therefore important that they are interpreted and reinterpreted *critically*, not literally. This, he claims, is what sustains cultures, allowing for their continuity into the future, providing identity and stability.⁷ Bak's art serves as a reinterpreted myth of his generation's culture. It is a culture that has been violated by the Holocaust. But it is a culture that lives on and must live on, for that culture has already been inherited by all of humanity. We all have to confront it. The questions Bak poses in the symbols that he paints are an open encouragement for all to think and reflect on the happenings of the past and to hope for and create a better future. It is, indeed, an act of courage, and Bak leads the way.

In Ancient Eleusis, a Mystery Rite based on the myth of Demeter and Persephone/Kore was held every year, and would-be initiates, the *mystai*, were led by priestesses through the caves for the revelation of the Greater Mysteries. Nobody knows what went on in those caves because it was on pain of death to reveal the Mystery to the uninitiated. Experience is necessary for enlightenment.⁸ Samuel Bak provides this for us who cannot experience the past except in terms of second-hand traces. He is like a rebel *mystes* sneaking us into the caves of the mystery of this cosmic brokenness, despite the prohibitions, because it is a matter of utmost ontological importance. Our existence is at stake. We have to be initiated now lest we forget everything because, in the absence of a direct revelation, remembering may be the only enlightenment that is possible for us.

⁴ Samuel Bak, *Painted in Words* (Boston, Massachusetts: Pucker Gallery in conjunction with Facing History and Ourselves, 2001), 480-81.

⁵ Jon W. Sparks, "Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak" <http://www.commercialappeal.com/lifestyle/samuel-bak-exhibit-painter-of-questions>

⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mastery of Being*, (Southbend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, Ltd., 1950)

⁷ Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney, "Myth as Bearers of Possible Worlds," in *The Crane Bag*, 1978, 114-15.

⁸ Keller, Mara Lynn. "The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries" in *Rosicrucian Digest* (87)2: 28-42, 2009.