

In the Aftermath of the Absurd: Insights from the Art of Samuel Bak

Leni dLR. Garcia
De La Salle University

Abstract: A Holocaust survivor, Samuel Bak paints images of a world devastated by war. However, far from a message of despair, Bak's drawings and paintings offer hope—not the naive hope borne of a belief in “a happy life,” but one that is critically aware that the world has been wounded forever. Although Bak's works are undeniably rooted in his experience of the Holocaust, they are not trapped in it. His artworks are like questions asked of every spectator who cares to look and think about the universal human condition: life will always be plagued by death. Using a cognitivist framework in Applied Aesthetics, this paper draws insights from Bak's art and draws the questions to be asked in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It endeavors to show that although life is often directed at evolution, it is simultaneously pulled in the direction of devolution. Catastrophes are inevitable, and the human spirit cannot always triumph over it. But as Bak's works show, one can always ask the (existential) questions that need to be asked. The quest for answers can continue and that in itself can create a path through which life can flourish through the fog of absurdity.

Keywords: Pandemic; Cognitivist Aesthetics; Samuel Bak; Holocaust Art; Albert Camus

The Return of the Absurd

Going on its third year, the Covid-19 pandemic has wrought havoc in people's lives around the world. With vaccinations and booster shots now available, however, we seem to be more courageous, slowly trying to get back to our “normal” life, eagerly anticipating participation in the “new normal.” There seems to be a (false?) sense of security as the symptoms of newer variants of the virus become milder and milder, with those afflicted asymptotically remaining unaware, except by accident, that they have even contracted the virus. Everything seems to be getting better and better. But, perhaps, not for all. There are those whose lives are never going to be the same again. There are those who have lost their loved ones and who will always feel the sense of absurdity brought about by this pandemic. How do they move forward and welcome the coming of the “new normal?”

Albert Camus (1991a) has painted this world already. In *The Plague*, a similar situation trapped the people in Oran, lost connection with

their loved ones, *lost* their loved ones, because of a rat-borne plague that afflicted many. Although the quarantine was lifted after a while, Camus reminds his readers at the end of the novel,

“...that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.” (p. 268)

Camus' novel, of course, is about connection and compassion in times of desperation. He was alluding to the terrors spread by the Nazi in WWII. But this does not take away his claim that life remains meaningless. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus likens life to Sisyphus' senseless task of rolling a rock up a hill, only to see it roll down the other side. But Sisyphus, condemned to spend eternity in hell, still goes after the rock each time.

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Although life may be absurd, one does not have to give in to despair. In Camus' (1991) words, "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's [sic] heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (p. 123)

These associations bring to mind the art of Samuel Bak. A Holocaust survivor, Bak paints images of a world devastated by war. However, far from a message of despair, Bak's drawings and paintings offer hope—not the naive hope borne of a belief in "a happy life," but one that is critically aware that the world has been wounded forever. Although Bak's works are undeniably rooted in his experience of the Holocaust, they are not trapped in it. His artworks are like questions asked of every spectator who cares to look and think about the universal human condition: life will always be plagued by death. Using a cognitivist framework in Applied Aesthetics, this paper draws insights from Bak's art and draws the questions to be asked in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It endeavors to show that although life is often directed at evolution, it is simultaneously pulled in the direction of devolution. Catastrophes are inevitable, and the human spirit cannot always triumph over it. But as Bak's works show, one can always ask the (existential) questions that need to be asked. In doing so, the quest for answers can continue and that in itself can create a path through which life can flourish through the fog of absurdity. Bak's incessant visual questions are like Sisyphus' act of picking up his rock for the absurd purpose of pushing it up the unrelenting hill, for eternity.

Samuel Bak

Samuel Bak (2001, pp. 3-122) was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933. His family lived a comfortable life before the German occupation in the 1940s when their Jewish community was deported to the Vilna ghetto. He and his mother Mitzi were able to escape the ghetto for a while. His aunt who earlier converted into Christianity was able to get them hidden by the nuns in a Benedictine convent near her house where his father, Jonas, later reunited with them. But when the Gestapo suspected the nuns of hiding Jews, the family left the convent and found their way to the ghetto. Here Samuel's artistic talents, nurtured in the convent, were further developed. In 1943 when he was 9 years old, Samuel had his first exhibit in the ghetto. Jonas was shot in the camp where they were transferred before the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto shortly before the liberation of Vilna in July of 1944.

Mother and son traveled to the Landsberg Displaced Person's camp where they stayed for several years before taking the ship to the newly formed Israel in 1948. Samuel went to Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and later attended Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He exhibited in Rome, in Pittsburg, and in Venice, and in 1966, he returned to Israel. He moved from country to country before finally settling down in Massachusetts in the 1990s.

The Pucker Gallery in Boston continues to exhibit his works regularly. 28 of his works have also been donated by Bak and the Pucker Gallery to Facing History and Ourselves, an educational organization that provides educational resources that foster compassion by learning from the lessons of history to fight hatred and bigotry. (Facing History and Ourselves, *Illuminations, the Art of Samuel Bak*, n.d.) In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in Vilna, and in 2019, his works were exhibited at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), leading to the opening of The Samuel Bak Museum and The Samuel Bak Academic Learning Center at UNO. (Pucker Gallery, *Samuel Bak*, 2021)

Art, Catastrophes, and the Cognitivist Normative Theory of Aesthetics

While it is an old and popular view to hold that art can help in dealing with the psychological effects of catastrophes, it is a more difficult matter *philosophically* to hold that art can depict catastrophes and still be considered art. Art is normally associated with beauty and aesthetic feelings which are supposed to be pleasant. How can art portray devastation and atrocities and still be called a thing of beauty? This is one of the main issues surrounding the category that came to be known as "Holocaust Art." Replete with philosophical—specially moral—issues, Holocaust Art is often an arduous task to deal with. Why would anyone want to immortalize a terrible event in an *artwork*? What does it mean for a spectator to view these scenes from an unspeakable past? Doesn't creating and displaying them in galleries and museums perpetuate the atrocities and condemn the victims to their fate over and over again? (Hirsch

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2001, p. 233)¹ Issues like these often remind us why Adorno (1967) declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” (p. 34)²

But what exactly is Holocaust Art? Despite discussions on what counts as “proper” Holocaust Art, all agree that “Holocaust Art” must have some historical relation to the Jewish Holocaust apart from the aesthetic properties expected of an artwork.³ This historical relation, however, can take many forms. Some are produced second hand by second-generation survivors. Others are produced by witnesses, like those taken by photographers who went to cover the news of the war. But the most paradigmatic are those that are produced by the victims and survivors themselves. Samuel Bak’s art is such. His paintings are firsthand portrayals of his experience in the Holocaust. As Bak himself reflects, “Being a survivor, whatever I painted arose from the sediment of the tragic years of the Shoah.” (Morris 2019, p. 4) What is significant about them, however, is that although they may be rooted in his experience of the Holocaust, they encompass experiences that go beyond it. (Garcia 2017) It is this element in Bak’s works that he so articulately paints that may offer a way to get past the absurd occurrences in life like the Covid-19 pandemic. It is for this purpose that this paper uses the Cognitivist Normative theory of art to examine the works of Samuel Bak. Defined as “the view that art is most valuable when it serves as a source of understanding” (Graham 2005, p. 74), the Cognitivist theory will be most productive in engaging Bak’s works, to draw insights that may be helpful in our current situation. The Hedonist or pleasure theory of art can hardly be applied to works of this sort without insensitively utilizing the suffering of others for one’s pleasure. Expressivist theory, on the other hand, which claims that art is expressive of an emotion (Graham 2005, p. 47) becomes, in this case, tautological and will not be productive. Although Holocaust Art may induce empathy (Hartmann 2001, pp.122-23) and teach us to be compassionate, it may not, within this

framework, allow us to *understand* the situation that remains questionable.

Aesthetic Cognitivism claims that art, *in certain circumstances*, is also a *cognitive pursuit* in the same manner that religion and philosophy are also differing modes of knowledge and understanding. (Gordon 2005, p. 53) As a cognitive activity, artworks may be said to “record, reveal, or otherwise track and transmit truths about the world.” (Gibson 2008, 1) However, Gordon Graham (2005), a staunch proponent of cognitivism in art, instead claims that what is cognitive about some works of art lies not in their transmitting specific truths, but in enabling *understanding* of the world and one’s experiences in the world. He defends cognitivism by showing that a work of art directs the audience’s perception and by doing so, also directs their minds to some abstract thoughts. A painting shows something particular to be seen, say, an aftermath of a catastrophe. It is a selection of forms, colors, and other elements that viewers cannot help seeing when faced with the painting. Viewers are therefore directed to think about what they are confronted with in the painting. By doing so, the artwork is able to prompt insights in the serious viewers such that their awareness of an experience is heightened instead of just dissolving into the ordinariness of everyday life. For example, rubble is just rubble, and one may see it in different contexts in day to day experiences. But the rubble captured in a painting makes viewers focus on them in a particular and significant context defined by the painting, for instance, a catastrophic event. Finally, while artworks that produce this effect in the spectator captures something particular, for example, a singular scenario on canvas, they enable and feed contemplations about universals, thereby allowing *more* understanding of the world for the contemplator. It is not so much, for instance, that the ruins are a particular portrayal of the real universal experience of devastation, but that devastations are true in the specific portrayal of the ruins painted on a canvas. (pp. 64-65, 70)

¹ A more thorough discussion of this has been delivered by the author in “Witnessing Lenses: Aesthetic Issues in Holocaust Photography.” Yang Ing Kuong Professorial Chair in Photography, August 17, 2016, Miguel 315, De La Salle University, Manila.

² Richardson (2005) explains that Adorno refers to the act of “artistic production that reproduces the value of the society that generated the Holocaust.”(p.1) In a similar vein, Pickford (2006) concludes that the only way

to properly engage in artistic production after the Holocaust is to create art that defies its own definition — “[t]oday, the only works that count are those that are no longer works.” (p. 30)

³ See Lang, Berel. 2000. *Holocaust Representation: Art within the limits of history and ethics*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, and Pickford, Henry W. 2013. *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art*. New York: Fordham University Press.

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The principal advantage of a cognitive theory is that it can explain what makes major works of art especially important and why the works of great masters are to be described as lasting *achievements*. Its contention is that though these may indeed be pleasurable or beautiful, this is not where their greatest value lies. An adequate estimation of their significance requires us to use terms like 'illuminating', 'insightful' and 'profound', cognitivist terms that aim to convey their contribution to our understanding of experience. (Graham 2005, p. 58)

Bak's art works, expressly presented as questions, as a way of confronting the senselessness of a horrific experience that he survived, easily and aptly lend themselves to an aesthetic cognitivist analysis. The questions that they pose are in pursuit of answers, desirable for the kind of intellectual comfort they could bring amidst the senselessness of the depicted narratives of war and devastation. They hint at the *knowledge* of how one could eke out a way of surviving. Viewers may definitely find beauty in the paintings' forms, colors, and composition. They may also empathize with the emotions of which each work is expressive. But the artworks' value lies in their ability to traverse history, offering vicarious knowing or some form of intellectual grasping of the kind of terror, hopelessness, and absurdity experienced during the Holocaust, to those fortunate enough to have existed after the atrocities of the war came to pass. Now, even more, they offer a way out of the disorientation brought about by the pandemic.

In the following section, a number of Bak's paintings will be described and analyzed as cognitive endeavors specifically about making sense of a world devastated by catastrophes that seem to offer no rhyme nor reason. In the process, insights will be drawn as to how we may take a lesson from them and apply them in dealing with the similar senseless chaos that was brought about by the pandemic.

The Paintings

Samuel Bak's paintings have been classified as surrealism, but Bak declines the label. He says, "If my paintings seem to evoke a certain kind of surrealism, it is not true surrealism. It is no

dream world, but rather reality experienced and expressed through metaphor. If you look at what happens on my canvases...you will discover what I feel about the de-structured world in which we live, our troubled times, the contradictions and losses that we must face." (Fewell & Phillips 2009, p. 76) In his foreword to *When The Rainbow Breaks: H.O.P.E in the paintings of Samuel Bak*, Bak explains, "[m]y imagination is not surreal, as the paintings demonstrate—it is routed in reality." (Bak in Knight 2015, p. 9)

The paintings discussed in this paper are randomly chosen from different exhibitions. They are clustered into three themes based on the prominent images found in them: war ruins, justice and truth lost, and brokenness and hope.

War Ruins

Bak paints the Holocaust without showing the Holocaust. His images are indirect routes to the catastrophic event and rather portrays the world in its aftermath. But his experience shows through each of his visual metaphors. In *Desire* [1991, oil on linen, 32.3 x 39.2"] (Schäfer & Witteveen 2020, p. 131), for instance, a huge bird made of rock is perched on a pile of rubble from the ruins of what used to be a town. Its wings are a patchwork of flat stones—maybe from the broken walls. Far in the horizon, the skies are bright and clear but dark clouds loom over the nearby rocky mountains. There is a desire to flee from all that has happened, and yet the means to escape is embedded in the situation from which one would want to escape. The bird is a made up one—wishful thinking. It is made of the same material as the ruins. Its wings have no flight. The clear skies give way to looming darkness. It is ominous. One realizes that there is no escape.

The same ruin is portrayed in *Perishable Fortunes* [1991, Oil on paper 17.5 x 12.6"] (Schäfer & Witteveen 2020, p. 129) Against a gloomy sky, a giant dice made of rock is half-buried in the ground. It shows the face with three dots on it. It is cracked and lodged in the crack is a clock face, empty of hands and numbers except for the number "XII" on top. Its hands lie about, bent. The number "9" or "6" lies before it. On the left side, in the foreground is another clock face leaning on the dice, its hands still intact. Behind the dice there is another cube with another flat round object lodged in it. If the dice had been rolled, it did not turn a winning number. It has destroyed everything, perhaps, even time, or the sense of time. Past destruction has no end. It goes

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into the future. It cannot be repaired. One understands that Fate has dealt a bad hand, and it cannot be turned. The dice is stuck. It would not budge. Far away are mountains under clearer skies. But how does one get there? Knowing this would ease the burden of the past.

A similar giant dice, blue, made of rock, and half-buried in the ground, is in *Art of Survival* [oil on canvas, 40 x 36"] (Langer 2019a, p. 67). One of its lower corners has disintegrated into a pile of rubble. Leaning against it are sticks, some nailed together, serving as makeshift candle holders. On each of the sticks, a fallen and drying leaf is nailed. The two longer sticks are topped with lit candles, wax dripping down. On top of the dice, impossibly balancing on its corner, is an even bigger one, also blue, made of metal sheets, ripped and peeling off at the seams. Where the dots are supposed to be are now mostly holes. It is hollow inside. Beyond, there are some trees standing against a blue sky, but they are irrelevant to the brokenness all over. If survival is a game of dice, then the luck of those who survive is a very tenuous one. It disintegrates further and further and will not last. It dawns on one's mind that survival after *survival* does not seem possible.

Justice and Truth Lost

Postponed [crayon and gouache on paper, 10 x 12.75"] (Phillips 2018, p. 54) echoes this disappointment. Against a stormy-looking sky, the scales of justice are being swept away by a strong wind that breaks the tree trunk on which they seem to have hung, although one cannot be sure what holds them together because of the strings that hold them go beyond the frame, while others are shown as having already snapped. One concludes that there is no justice. The catastrophe has made all concepts senseless. The same realization comes upon the viewer of *Nap* [oil on canvas, 48 x 36"] (Phillips 2018, p. 57). Lady Justice has abandoned her scales. She sleeps on the ground under a tree whose trunk is already cut off. It is, however, being held up, incredulously, by thinner tree trunks set up like a lopsided tripod. On these trunks, the scales of justice are carelessly hung, one of them already halfway overturned. Beyond is a landscape of hills and distant mountains, themselves resting under clear skies, unsympathetic to the fact that justice has failed.

In *Open Book* [oil on canvas, 36 x 36"] (Langer 2019a, p. 64), an old and ruined book lies

open with its pages curling at the corners. It is propped by wooden lengths nailed together. Around it are rocks and grass. A tree branch with leaves can be seen on the upper left hand corner of the frame. Underneath the book are two candle holders. The right one holds a lit candle that goes through the book, creating a hole through its pages. The left one holds an unlit candle. Right above it, a lit candle drips wax on the book pages. The pages are blank. How does one read anything? How does one derive any knowledge from it? The candles emit dark smoke mimicking a dark sky that forebodes a storm.

In light of all this, what can we do? What can one *know*? In *Truth* [mixed media, 8.5 x 6.5"] (Langer 2019a, p. 108), an old and very tattered book lies open against a pale orange background, its blank pages torn in many places. A lit candle juts out from its spine. Melted wax drips down in between the page spread. In the foreground, there is what seems to be a pile of three small rocks. There is no guide, there are no instructions. The book, normally a source of knowledge, or insight, lies worn and useless. Truth, seen in the light, is a ragged book with empty pages. There is, in fact, no real enlightenment. It is therefore quite consistent that *Enlightenment* [oil on canvas, 20 x 16"] (Langer 2019a, p. 102) shows three gargantuan keys standing on their handles, lined up from the tallest to the shortest, left to right. The first one on the left is a tree. The upper portion of the trunk is encased in a key shank. The key bit, shaped like an "E" is attached by metal strips wrapped around the tube. The middle key looks like a candle made of metal, melting and dripping, although it has no wick. The third key has a lit candle superimposed on it. Its wax has melted almost to a stub. It emits a dark smoke that dirties an otherwise clear sky. In the background, there are rocky mountains all the way to the horizon. What are the keys for? Where are the keyholes into which they fit? What do they open? If they are keys to knowledge, that knowledge is out of reach because there are no keyholes. Nothing makes sense, and yet, ironically, one understands that this is so. The senselessness depicted is still a piece of knowledge.

Brokenness and Hope

The absurd task of Camus' Sisyphus seems to be quoted in *Adam & Eve: What comes down must come up* [oil on canvas, 24 x 35.8"] (Schäfer & Witteveen 2020, p. 229) where Adam and Eve are each shown to be hauling a giant, half-eaten pear. Eve has hers on her back, going down the rocky hill

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on the right side while Adam is pushing his up the next hill on the left. In between, one can see a mountain far away and beyond that, the bright orange skies of sunset. The canvas does not show where they are going, or where they are coming from, or the origin of the incredibly big, half-eaten pears. Who has taken a bite out of them? It does pose the possibility of more hills beyond the frame, however: a continuous coming down and up, and down again. Where does it end?

More pears are in *Artworks* [oil on canvas 12 x 16"] (Knight 2015, p. 52). Huge pears, made of what seems like discarded construction materials, broken and crumbling, are propped on a kind of scaffolding. Two of them are blue, with scraps of blue and white striped fabric wound around them, among other materials that are hastily wrapped around in an attempt to keep their shape. One had the boards going through it and the other is skewered by one of the poles that prop up the installation. On top of the latter are two regular-sized pears that seem to be edible still. In the foreground is a yellow one that seems to be made of rock, half of it already gone. On one of the boards nailed to the poles on the left of the scaffolding is the word "HOPE." Behind and below it, in smaller letters, is the same word in mirror image. Behind the scaffolding are greenish trees, yellow grass, and some plants growing on rocky hills. The sky is blue with white clouds, but some look like billowing smoke.

The pear, for Bak, is the symbol of "the fruit of paradise, the fruit of knowledge, it is a metaphor of how we perceive the world...." (Schafer and Witteveen 2020, p. 83). Instead of the luscious-looking fruit that was so tempting to Adam and Eve, Bak's pears are often strange. They are mostly huge, to begin with, and made of stone, metal sheets, wood, or space rocks. They are often painted as broken and crumbling or releasing normal edible pears. In *Artworks*, they are displayed, as if on a makeshift easel. If they are knowledge, then knowledge is already destroyed. What is left of it are haphazardly patched up, skewered, and dead. None can partake of those strange fruits. If they are themselves the artwork, then does art serve as hope? Yet the word HOPE is also shown backwards in its mirror image, belying what it offers in its proper orientation.

Similarly, *Trio at Rest* [oil on Canvas, 12 x 16"] (Knight 2015, p. 67) shows three huge pears, made of cracked and crumbling rock, perched on a

hill. Marks of bullet shots show that they have been gunned down. On the left is the rusty-yellow colored pear, chunks on its right side gone. On the right, the rusty yellow green pear lies on its side. In the middle, the skin of the only blue colored pear is eroding, exposing the same warm color underneath. It leans toward the rusty yellow pear on the left. A label is nailed to it, showing half of the letter H, and the letters O, P and E. Behind them are tall trees and a generally clear sky. The title is typically equivocal. The "trio" in the painting are the pears. They are, indeed, "at rest." But their mode of resting is not the relaxing kind. Having been destroyed, there is no meaningful rest for them. If they are seen as the fruit of paradise, or the fruit of knowledge, this piece shows that epistemologically, we are doomed.

The letters H, O, P, and E are again in *Leaning* [oil on canvas, 12 x 9"] (Knight 2015, p. 64). They are piled on top of one another like discarded props, old, and weathered. They are made of stone. E is at the very bottom, with P leaning on it, while O leans on P, and then H, at the very top, leans on O. In front and to the left of the letters are a cup and saucer, the handle of what can be assumed is a spoon can be seen jutting out from inside the cup. The cup seems to be empty. To its right is a teapot, although only part of it with the spout is within the frame. There is a bottle behind E and in between P and the cup and saucer is a pear that has already been bitten into. The cluster sits on the ground. Trees line the horizon. Above, only the blue sky and white clouds. Hope is worn out, discarded and useless, like trash left behind after a picnic where tea, and probably wine, was served.

Contradictions and Absurdities

Although there are no direct or literal references to the Holocaust in these paintings, they nevertheless undeniably represent an aftermath of catastrophes. As Langer (2019b, p. 16) puts it, Bak's art is often filled with "sinister and ominous landscape...but always in an indirect rather than a frontal assault." Similarly, Knight (2015) says of this, "Bak does not paint or directly depict the violence that occurred during the series of events we have come to call the Holocaust. Instead, he offers us images that help us see the aftermath of that time more clearly." (p. 13) Ruins, burning cities, devastating storms, bullet holes, and general destruction are common images in Bak's artwork. There is always a dystopian feel about them that

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could leave the spectator disheartened. Moreover, the contradictions and paradoxes boggle the mind. There are candles that are lit, and yet, there is no enlightenment. The books look worn out and well-read, much depended on for knowledge, but there really is no knowledge. The pages are all blank, torn, and shot full of holes. There are strange keys made of different materials, but they resist use and there are no keyholes. The letters H, O, P and E, spelling the word “hope,” are shown as ruined objects, unable to represent the concept of hope. H, O, P, and E have gotten old, discarded, destroyed. They are useless, ruined things. On the other hand, the pears are painted as inedible statues of rock and ruins, littering the ground of the canvases. If the pear symbolized the fruit of knowledge, then there is no knowledge to be had. There are no answers, there are only questions.

Bak admits that his art stems from his experience of the Holocaust. Such a senseless phenomenon leaves the world broken, and its survivors, in constant state of bewilderment. Why all the death? What now? Going through an experience that presents no rational explanation, Bak is relentless in asking these questions. He asks and asks and although answers are not to be found, he pushes the boundaries of what we normally think about without hope of answers but with a determination to go on, to push that rock up the hill, as Camus’ Sisyphus did, or does, knowing that it will just roll down the other side once we reach the peak—“...a cyclical journey of ruin and renewal that led to no meaningful spiritual goal.” (Langer 2012, p. 28) There is no meaning, but it must not stop us from living.

Questioning as Questing

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2016) relates the conversation between King Midas and the satyr Silenus where the latter, being asked what is “best and most desirable for man,” replied that it is “not be born.” But having already been born, the second best thing is to die quickly. (p. 34) Nietzsche saw the world as a dreadful place. Life is really horrifying. We cannot confront it directly without ruining ourselves. Only art, he says, can save us: “We possess art lest we perish of the truth.” (Ridley 2007, p. 4). In this way, Bak’s paintings serve Nietzschean aesthetics. Referring specifically to the Adam and Eve paintings, Langer (2012) says of them, “they encourage their audience to address candidly the

nature of the world they inhabit and the burdensome legacies they must contend with. There is little doubt that both Camus and Bak would have agreed with Nietzsche’s belief that “We have art in order not to die of the truth.” (p. 29)

Bak is keenly aware that the world we know can easily unravel. Knight (2015) puts it well when he wrote, “With sometimes very playful images Bak helps us see that the world we take for granted can come undone.” (p. 33) Our experience in the past two years is evidence of this. We were living our normal lives when the pandemic hit us. Then, there was no escape. Within that forced imprisonment to save our lives, some still did not make it. Many who willingly or otherwise risked it perished. Others who stayed at home to be safe also perished. While those who disregarded the rules went on spreading the virus and yet deflected its graver effects. It is mere luck? In which case, we too are the lucky ones. So far, at least. For now we understand that there is nothing that can assure us that this will not happen again. As we forge our way into the new normal, we know now that *that*, too, can be undone.

But as Bak has already modeled for us, this is not cause for despair. For him, “The call to create art — and indeed to respond creatively to its power — allows us to find hope even in shattering despair. (Bak in Knight 2015, p. 10) Through his works, he challenges the viewer to *realize* that “the matter of hope is always about what we see and what we do with what we see.” (Knight 2015, p. 19). As a “painter of questions” (see Garcia 2017), Bak enjoins his viewers to ask and contemplate on our condition amidst a world where there are no guarantees. He says,

...these are the same questions that many survivors ask, and not only survivors of the Holocaust but survivors of all the hardships and painful upheavals of life. The mere fact of being born and projected into a world that offers us no guarantees comes to us as a shock. Why am I here, and why is all this happening to me? The big “why” stands for so many things. What meaning does all this have?... (Bak, in Knight 2015, p.75)

As there is no simple nor singular answer to these questions (Langer 2019b, p. 3), the cognitive value of Bak’s art lies here. In this way, they offer a

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way of understanding that the quest can go on and on, always open ended, but always paving the way through which we can bear with the tentativeness of our existence.

Conclusion

As the world begins to recover from all kinds of suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a guide for dealing with the aftermath of our experience is needed. Once again, we look into the role of art in *making sense of things* in order to pave the way for our journey onwards. Samuel Bak's art, rooted in his experience of the Holocaust, provides insights into how we may continue to live, having lost the stability that our life afforded us in pre-pandemic times. Bak's paintings are his attempt to *understand* the senselessness of these experiences. They are questions about loss, about death, and about survivors' life after all that death, showing that each devastation we experience calls into question the meaning of life.

Our contemplation of Bak's works exemplifies the cognitive value of art. Even some of their titles are unequivocally cognition-based: "Truth," and "Enlightenment," are good examples. Some are metaphorically so, like "Open book." The preponderance of pears in Bak's works, his symbolic fruit of knowledge, also puts his works on the cognitive arena, more than in the pleasure or emotive ones. The brave spectator of life engages the stark reality presented in the artworks by questing for answers to the questions posed. The continued questing itself is evidence of understanding that as life evolves, it also devolves. We either muster the will to go on or we, too, perish. The *why* of this matter may be impossible to answer. But it does allow us to confront the world as it is. Its nature cannot give us any assurances. In spite of this, however, we can create a path on which to continue, like Sisyphus, resolved to push his rock up the mountain knowing that as soon as he's done, he'll have to do it all over again. As long as we can pick up that rock, we know that we can deal with the absurdity of it all.

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