

DISPLACED PERSONS

By Kiku Adatto

In Samuel Bak's art, the marks of trauma are everywhere – in nature, on human beings, and on the objects of human making. The people who populate Bak's paintings are the displaced, the dismembered, the refugee, and the wanderer. Bak reveals what is often concealed – the inner life of the survivor. Through a rich array of metaphors, Bak makes visible the hidden transcript of trauma; how war, genocide, and terrorism inscribe themselves on the human body – in severed, amputated, and prosthetic limbs; in burned



and hollowed out faces; in embedded bullets and shrapnel; in horrors that haunt the inner life; in shards that sear the soul. He inventively reconfigures the human body in damaged metal, broken stone, discarded wood, and reconstructed debris, sometimes as figures set against a radiant sky and distant landscape, other times as haunting parts of a still life. Even when Bak portrays displaced persons as whole and intact, they are figures in a profoundly broken world.

Bak pulls us into this broken world through a bold and creative use of irony. He disrupts our normal ways of seeing and thinking. He plays with words and puns with paint, but with serious intent. The titles of his paintings – *Creative Process* (BK1288), *Forthcoming Change* (BK1283), *Resurgence* (BK1258) – are seemingly full of affirmation, but are often the reverse of what we see. In *Bird's Eye View* (BK1275), for example, there is no soaring, no aerial view of the landscape. The “bird” is just an imprint, the shape of a bomb blast in a bullet-spattered wall. These reversals of expectations invite us to investigate Bak's paintings, to search for what we might have overlooked, to ask hard questions, and to restrain ourselves from leaping to easy answers.

For Bak, irony is part of a passionate engagement with the world, a way to philosophize with paint. In the wake of trauma, is it possible to fully repair oneself or to rebuild a broken world? What does it mean to be intact rather than broken? Is part of the work of repair accepting, even honoring, the brokenness? Is the plight of the displaced person unique, or does it express the human condition? Bak encourages us to reach into the deepest part of our selves and inscribe his art with our own reflections. He asks us to look hard and not to look away. The willingness to face the brokenness is the only prerequisite for engaging with Bak's art.

Resurgence (BK1258) is a fitting overture to Bak's new work. The painting is in the form of a religious triptych, but the “rising up” that Bak depicts is not a resurrection. The center panel features not religious figures but giant pears in the shape of military bunkers. The reversal of form goes beyond upending the divine order. In *Resurgence*, the natural world is denatured. The yellow skin of the pear looks like a form of camouflage that is peeling away like paint. The sensual curves of the



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pear, so evocative of the female body, assume the form of hard, blue, metallic structures. The blue of the pears is an eerie reflection of the blue sky and the blue sphere of the earth. The pears carry the memory of the natural world, but they are now weapons of war and bearers of war's wounds, scars and debris.

The title of the painting is also a play on the idea of a military "surge." In this abandoned outpost, the guns jutting out from the pillbox pears are silent. There is no surge, no push towards victory. The masters



of war, the perpetrators of the violence, are nowhere to be seen. Their presence is felt only in the destruction they have wrought.

In the wake of war, who rises up? In *Resurgence* (BK1258), the figures in Bak's parable are the dismembered and

displaced. On the right panel, a refugee carries a giant map imprinted with an outsized pear that seems to grow out of a tear. The map and pear are mottled and marred, marked by war's injuries, echoing the crumbling, rusting pillbox pears. The refugee is on the move, but his eyes are cast downward, almost reverentially, at a green, perfectly formed pear he holds in his open palm. Typical of Bak's paintings, unblemished nature is either represented on a small scale – see, for example, the miniature saplings wrapped in their root balls in *Creative Process* (BK1288) – or at a distance, in the luminous skies and pastoral landscapes that form a backdrop to trauma wrought by human hands.

Another motif in *Resurgence* (BK1258), replicated in many of Bak's paintings, is the tension between wholeness and brokenness, moving and being stuck. On the left panel of *Resurgence*, three broken figures provide an ironic counterpoint to the refugee with the map and pear, mirroring and mimicking his gestures. A man obscured behind a tree replicates the hand holding the perfect pear, but with a bare, open palm. Behind him stalks a blue figure made of broken stone. Bolted and roped to the tree, the upper body of a man made of blue metal with a metal mask points his finger in the direction of the refugee, like a woebegone version of Michelangelo's Adam.

In Bak's art, the broken body is reiterated in shattered and broken structures. In *Of Space and Time* (BK1304), a fragmented, faceless clock dominates the landscape. Its surface of rusted, blast-ridden metal resembles the peeling surfaces of the pears in *Resurgence* (BK1258). Like the pears, the clock has a double nature. It marks war's transgressions and also looks like a huge industrial wheel in the war machine. The two towering chimneys – one broken amid the debris, one still belching smoke – evoke the crematoria of Nazi death camps. The figure in the foreground, dressed in workman's clothes and wearing metal, tubular wings, holds the number "6" in his hands. After the Holocaust, even angels are refugees. They are bound to walk the earth with other displaced persons, fashioning their wings from industrial debris.



Making metaphors, even memorials out of debris is central to Bak's art. He can render a scene like the tableau in *Of Space and Time* (BK1304) with the mastery of a Renaissance painter, but he also uses oil paint in a modern, even postmodern way, to construct human figures and objects in the form of a pastiche

or bricolage. His figures often emerge from the paint like a contemporary art installation or sculpture. In *Recapitulation* (BK1282), the bodies of the displaced musicians merge with wood, stone, paper, and debris in a layered evocation of memories.



In *Latest News* (BK1291) we see a set of stacked, incongruous figures in the midst of mayhem. The flames of war color the horizon, guns jut into the frame, and what appear to be cannon balls or mines litter the landscape. The painting's title is ironic on many levels. The figures are buried in the news, but oblivious to the destruction around them. The newspapers have no writing on them and look like ancient parchment. The latest news does not equip them to see the world or to act on their own behalf. A figure resembling a prophet, with long white hair and raised arms, is dwarfed by a man wearing a suit and

tie, holding a newspaper at arm's length. The newspaper reader is a picture of brokenness: the arm that holds the newspaper is severed at the shoulder like a broken statue; his face is a papered over image that looks like a newspaper photograph or poster. A younger man buried in the rubble of cast-off newspapers tugs at the suit jacket of the newspaper reader; his arm too is severed. Is it news that those who will be swept up in the winds of war do not see it coming, no matter how many newspapers they read, no matter how many prophets warn them? And what about the modern reader in the age of 24-7 cable news and the Internet? Does the barrage of news prepare us to see and act more knowledgeably, or is it as evanescent as the flying newspapers that merge into rubble in Bak's painting?

Disarming Knowledge (BK1290), *Historian* (BK1263), and *The Art of Reading* (BK1292) are variations on the tale told by *Latest News* (BK1291). In *Disarming Knowledge* (BK1290), books dangle helter-skelter from ropes in a tree. The tree, severed from its roots, looks like a jerry-rigged tree of knowledge. The two men reading below are literally disarmed, with severed and prosthetic arms fashioned from wood. What truths can these dangling books provide these knowledge-hungry, dismembered persons? Behind the tree, books are stacked high. Estranged from their place in libraries, displaced in the landscape, the books, like the people, are homeless. They too bear the injuries of war.



In *Historian* (BK1263), a towering stack of books in the background is on fire. In the foreground of this conflagration, we see giant, war-torn leaves from a tree of mythological proportions. One leaf is aflame, strung up like a sacrificial victim or burnt offering. The leaf has the sensuous green and gold shape of one of Bak's pears and the curves of a bird's wings. Another giant leaf, shaped like a cradle, is suspended by pulleys in front of the historian – perhaps the empty remnant of the cradle of knowledge. In this phantasmagoric landscape, the historian stands before us in his brown suit and red tie with a woeful look. What does he write when the world is in flames? One hand holds the base of the giant burning leaf; the other hand is in his pocket. One foot is in a bucket with a sprig of a tree, the other foot stands shoeless on a small stack of books. The historian too is a refugee. He bears witness to the trauma, yet is immobilized by it.

The Art of Reading (BK1292) brings out another aspect of the reader as

refugee. While the books burn in the distance, the reader keeps on reading, a solitary figure sheltered and protected in a makeshift refugee camp whose only other occupants are books. Like many of Bak's refugees, the reader is missing a shoe on one foot. But this detail is not what strikes our eye. It is the curve of his body, his complete concentration, as he gives himself over to his reading. The world is burning, but the reader, absorbed in his book, inhabits a different world. In the distance, blue tents peel back from books stacked up like rock formations in an apocalyptic landscape. Near the reader, a blue tent partially covers a pile of books reduced to rubble. But there is something magnificent about the reader sheltered with his books. In the reader's tent, the books are intact and neatly stacked. Here books and reader have found shelter, if not a home. The art of the reader is the art of the survivor – to improvise, to find a place for oneself in a broken world.



In Bak's art, the improvisational qualities of the refugee exist in tension with depictions of displaced persons as trapped, victims of forces beyond their control. Often the inventiveness of his refugees results in outlandish schemes and whimsical reconstruction projects. Bak's refugees are connoisseurs of debris, making their artful inventions out of the remains of war. In *Observant Observer* (BK1286), an enterprising refugee has fashioned an observation post out of cast-off wood, rock and metal into the shape of a blue bird. Telescope in hand, he stands astride the bird's head looking at the full moon. The burnt out trees to his right bear testimony to the ravages of war, but the sky, moon and mountains on the horizon are glorious. The way the refugee's telescope connects to a curve of a large leaf also makes him look as if he is punting through the field with the bird as his boat. He is not a broken figure, but stands erect, graceful in his long coat and backpack, as purposeful as the reader under his tent.

Repair Team (BK1261) shows a group of refugees standing in a large room of a destroyed building, busy patching together a giant bottle, pitcher and pear. These surreally sized objects are as tall as the men. Undaunted, the repair team is hard at work, but they never really reconstitute the objects. They have done their best, but the bottle will never be a bottle again, nor will the pear or pitcher ever be whole. The ironic title of the painting reveals a deeper truth. Like these damaged artifacts of daily life, displaced persons will always bear the marks of trauma.





In one sense or another, many of the people who populate Bak's new paintings are members of a "repair team." Some try to mend objects, some try to fashion nature out of debris, others try to repair the natural world. *Transfer* (BK1285), *Identity Bound* (BK1264), *For Better or Worse* (BK1278), and *An Unveiling* (BK1268) feature refugees coming up with wildly inventive attempts to rescue and reclaim uprooted, flying trees. Uprooted trees are a recurrent metaphor in Bak's art. They often stand for families lost, severed and uprooted by war, genocide, and trauma. *Transfer* asks us to reflect on the meaning of repair and renewal. A ragtag refugee has rigged up a brace for a large uprooted tree and is pulling it confidently behind him in a cart. Yet he is thwarted. Part of the brace is stuck in the ground and will prevent the tree from moving. The painting seems to suggest that what is broken cannot ever be patched together and carried away. The family tree can never be made whole. And yet the refugee's absurd scheme gestures

towards other truths. The remnants, the things we carry, even the broken things, are the materials we use to fashion who we will become.

In *An Unveiling* (BK1268), a refugee loops a large, flowing blue cloth around a severed tree floating in the air. This graceful movement has multiple meanings. It could suggest the ceremonial unveiling of a gravestone. Or perhaps the refugee is trying to identify and account for the tree as someone returning to the place where many have perished in unmarked graves. In a similar gesture, the distant figure in *Identity Bound* (BK1264) tries to secure a tree floating high in the sky, using a long red cloth that curves upward like the string of a kite. In both cases, the flowing cloths are like threads of memory that seek to recover what has been lost.

Bak is a master chronicler of rupture and metamorphosis. Human agency is responsible for the brokenness depicted in his paintings, but it is also what holds the world together. The refugee binds things together with rope, staples, wood, metal; using familiar things in unfamiliar ways, he makes his way in a fractured world. But Bak's refugees are also adrift, seeking asylum but finding no safe haven. *Messenger* (BK1298), like many of Bak's paintings, presents the paradoxes of the refugee's plight with wry humor. Is the messenger – the man in the giant bottle with a curved leaf forming a sail – liberated when the top of the bottle breaks and he reaches his hand out? Or, is he on the verge of drowning in the sea? Will the messenger in the bottle be reborn from the brokenness or doomed by it?



The scope of human agency is an open question for Bak, because the brokenness he depicts is so far reaching. *Introspection* (BK1279), *Self Questioning* (BK1276), and *Still Life with i* (BK1271) bring the sense of displacement and effacement into the interior realms of the psyche.

With these paintings, Bak poses existential questions about the masks we present to the world and the inner ruptures we hide from view. In *Introspection* an angel with metal wings and a hollowed out face sits in a chair contemplating a



mask that dangles from a rope in the shape of a question mark. *Self Questioning* is an ironic take on a child's Jack-in-the box: the upper body of a faceless man pops out of a tattered cardboard box and contemplates a mask affixed with a metal rod. The man's hand floats in space, and his thumb and forefinger stroke an absent chin. The wall behind the figure (like most of Bak's walls in this series of paintings) is riddled with bullet holes.



In *Still Life with i* (BK1271) Bak brilliantly distills his themes in the form of a puzzle, a palimpsest and a self-portrait. A patched, wooden picture frame intermingles with the still life rather than framing it. The line between inside and outside, nature and artifice, animate and inanimate is blurred in the patterning of bottles, pears, sprigs of leaves, and shards of metal. The eye in the pyramid has mythological and religious resonance evoking the all-seeing eye of Providence, familiar

from the Great Seal of the United States and the back of the dollar bill. But the eye in this bricolage is also the eye of the artist looking at us from the brokenness. The crumbling pyramid symbolizes life in a disenchanting world.

Bak's paintings suggest that ours is the age of the refugee, but that displacement is part of the human condition. To be human is to recognize the fractures and fissures in the world in which we live.



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