

IN NEED OF TIKKUN (A Reflection on Samuel Bak's Painting)

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This painting** did not hold my attention when I first walked through the Rivier Art Gallery. It actually had the opposite effect; I was repulsed by it and quickly walked past it. My first attempt at revisiting the collection on Monday was aborted. Some poor soul had vomited all over the stairs leading to the gallery. I returned on Tuesday to a freshly scrubbed stairwell.

I slowly walked around the gallery, resting my eyes on each work, gauging my response. I had decided hours after my initial visit that I would partner with the painting I reacted to the strongest. I rejected my first choices, deeming them too "safe," although none could ever be considered safe. *In Need of a Tikkun* was the one that caused my strongest reaction.

The background has a rusty, bubbly, amorphous quality to it; it is thick and deep, concealing a looming presence. The foreground has an old, cracked, tan countertop resting on a green cabinet. The cabinet is peeling and faded. The hint of an old red and blue door has the appearance it is about to fall off its hinges.

Behind the counter stand two unseeing angels. The angel on the left is old and tired looking. He has a beard and long, flowing white hair. Jesus, Moses, or the Archangel Gabriel come to mind, but I have a hard time with this association. He has corrugated metal wings that are twisted and flimsy. He is wearing an old, worn, light green straightjacket. Its buckles are flapping loose and he looks as if he's just escaping from it.

He is sightless; he is unseeing; skin is stretched over his eyeballs. Flesh covered orbs stare back at me. He is holding what I perceive to be Bak's lost pillow, but it's a giant version of it. The side nearest him looks like a full, rounded pillow. The side farthest from him is thin and narrow, more like paper crumpled up. He points to a hole ripped in the center which reveals the thinness of it.

On my second visit, I was struck by the thought that the angel may not be holding Bak's pillow at all. It is more like a large piece of blank paper. It may represent God's laws that had faded and the paper is torn. God's laws are disrespected and illegible. The angel holding them is lamenting the loss but he can't see them anyway.

A ring on the right sleeve of the straightjacket has a line or slender rope tied to it. The line runs along the counter and underneath a small building and shed with a giant, industrial chimney rising from it. Dark, acrid, sooty, evil smoke pours from the chimney. It is a crematorium. I had the uneasy feeling that if the angel moved any closer to the crematorium, then the paper would combust from the heat and embers coming from the smokestack.

Bak used a combination of complimentary colors (opposites on the color wheel) and analogous colors. The tunic, straightjacket, wings, and cabinet are all analogous to one another, yet they are complimentary to the background, countertop and crematorium. It creates a patchwork of colors that helps to unite the painting. Another form of unity is created through the repetitive use of creases and folds in the wings, tunic, straightjacket, pillow/paper, and countertop. The focal point is the hole in the center of the pillow/paper. To me, it symbolizes the hole that the Nazis ripped out of the universe.

The other angel is on the right, slightly behind the pillow-hugging angel. This angel has his (or her?) eyes closed. One arm is raised and bent, with one finger raised- maybe in supplication. The tunic is old and faded; its wings, fragile and clumsy.

There is an implied line, a stable pyramid, from the tip of the wing in the top, center of the painting that runs down either side of the two angels and across the countertop. The painting is slightly vertically unbalanced. The lower portion is heavier, more stable and fuller at the bottom. The countertop anchors the scene. As you move your eyes upward, there is more space and light, concluding at the top of the painting where only the tips of the wings are present.

Countertops are usually found in houses although they are in restaurants and other businesses as well. Wherever this is, it's old, decrepit and uncared for. The inhabitants, the angels, are also old, hurting and powerless- neglected. One angel is tied to the crematorium, held down by it. If this is God's house, God's world, then it makes me very sad.

The pillow could be representative of the world, whatever sense of home and safety that could have existed in that turbulent, unpredictable time. There's a hole, a gap in it; it is thin, broken, revealing nothing of consequence, no hope or hidden treasure on the other side. Whether a pillow or a blank parchment, it is obvious that something has gone very, very wrong here.

Upon further reflection, it could be considered that the angels are returning damaged goods at a customer service counter. They would like a refund because theirs is defective. Who is the customer service representative who will help them? The viewer.

A *'Tikkun'* is a Hebrew word meaning, "the mending of a flaw, the returning of an object to its whole or rightful condition—change for the better. The divine invitation to humanity to 'rectify' or 'repair' the world" (from Google web definitions).

The Holocaust was definitely in need of a Tikkun. How could anyone fit these horrific experiences into their collective consciousness and into their world? I can understand why many questioned where God was.

As much as I am faithful, I see horror, evil, and soul-gutting pain here and an acknowledgement that evil took over. It is like shattered glass. How can this fit? What do you do with it? What would Bak's work have been like if the Holocaust didn't happen?

I can honestly say that I do not “like” this or any other of Bak’s works. At every visit, I felt like I was attending a wake. I respect him and I am moved by his work. Samuel Bak is a courageous man. God bless him for sharing his experiences and his perceptions with the world. Go to the light!

* **Helen Ballou** has lived in Brookline, NH for most of her life; the happiest years being the last 11 with her wonderful husband, Pete. She is a sophomore in Rivier College’s Human Development, Early Childhood Education, and Special Education program. She is a peer tutor for the First-Year Seminar (FYS), Religion. She will continue to shine on and she hopes that the reader will as well.

** Samuel Bak, “*In Need of a Tikkun.*” Oil on canvas, 1999.