On the Eighth Day: Ethics and the Face in Samuel Bak’s *Adam and Eve* Collection

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Abstract

Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak has dedicated his life to exploring the intersections of trauma and the human condition through his artwork. Though most scholarship on his paintings has been focused on its implications for Holocaust studies, I look to re-position Bak’s works in the context of ethics, gender theory, and disability studies. Focusing specifically on his 2008 to 2011 Adam and Eve collection, I examine the face as a site of ethical exploration to suggest that Bak reimagines the landscape of memory to illustrate how truly remembering the Holocaust entails both recounting the narratives of the past and ensuring that future generations do not endure trauma. In the first section of this thesis, I suggest that Bak’s use of the face leads to the production of communities of healing between victims, survivors, and viewers alike. In the next section, I illustrate how Bak invites the viewer to problematize her relationship to social norms in order to confound systems of gendered and ability-centric oppression. In the conclusion, I demonstrate how Bak’s paintings refuse to situate themselves within a confined set of ethical dilemmas, revising narratives of Holocaust memory such that they come to empower people to challenge the trauma that becomes perpetuated in their own society.
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Just over two years ago, I sat in Naomi Koltun-Fromm’s office, leafing through the thin pages of the Harper Collins Bible, anxiously chattering about the paper I had just written on Genesis 2-3. It was in the conversation that ensued that my eyes were opened (pun intended) to the potential for liberation within the text; it was there that the start of my passion for Genesis 2-3 was born and that the trajectory of my relationship to Religious Studies was shaped. Without Naomi’s encouragement, I would not have become a minor and then a major in Religion. I am indebted to the support and kindness she has continually extended to me over the years: were it not for her, my time at Haverford would not have been the same.

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Most importantly, I owe everything to the eleven million people who perished in the Holocaust, who I have lived with but never met, loved but never known. This thesis is theirs.
R’fuah Sh’leimah¹: Bearing Witness to the Unbearable

Let it be known: I did not fall from grace.

I leapt
to freedom.

ANSEL ELKINS, “THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EVE.”

In the beginning, there was a narrative.

A tale of origins, of humanity, of loss and life, Genesis 2-3 tells the story of Adam and Eve, the two beings that the Hebrew Bible² suggests were the first among the “generations of the heavens and the earth.”³ According to the story, God formed ha’adam (האדם) and subsequently created the Garden of Eden, the space that the being would inhabit, “till[ing] it and keep[ing] it.”⁴ To sustain ha’adam, God created bountiful, beautiful trees filled with luscious fruit, intended for eating, and in the center of Eden, God placed two trees: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life. Though God invited ha’adam to eat freely of almost all of the trees in Eden, God warned that ha’adam must not eat of either of the two specially-designated trees. If ha’adam were to do so, God explained, the human would face imminent death.

As time passed for ha’adam, God came to realize that isolating the human in Eden would not suffice. Rather, the being needed a companion, a helper and partner with whom Eden could be enjoyed. In a first attempt at providing ha’adam companionship, God offered the human the opportunity to interact with and name every living creature; however, even as ha’adam named them, no partnership seemed apt. In response, God put ha’adam in a deep, tranquilizing sleep and

¹ Borrowed from “Mi Shebeirach,” the Jewish prayer for healing, this phrase traditionally translates to a “complete healing.”
² The Christian Bible and the Qur’an also view Adam and Eve as the original beings, though the Qur’an associates their origins with a different narrative than that presented in Jewish and Christian traditions.
³ Gen 2:4.
⁴ Gen 2:15.
ultimately cleaved the being in two (תּוּלָּתָהוּ אָחָה וּרְקָה). Upon awakening, the man proclaimed: “This at last is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (אשה), for out of Man (אש) this one was taken.” At the time of their creation, both woman and man were naked but not ashamed.

One day, the serpent, an animal deemed “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made,” asked the woman whether God had said not to eat from any of the trees in the Garden of Eden. Of course, the woman knew that she was allowed to eat of almost all the trees except those in the middle of Eden. She explained this to the serpent, adding that she would die if she even touched either of the trees in the center of the garden. However, the serpent explained that neither the man nor the woman (“you”) would die if they were to eat of the Tree; instead, the serpent suggested, they would gain access to knowledge that would put them on a similar plane as God, knowing “good and evil.” Weighing the choice that lay before her, the woman decided to eat the fruit of the Tree, and she subsequently gave some of the fruit to the man, who ate it as

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5 Though the traditional account of the Genesis 2-3 story suggests that Eve was taken from the “rib” of Adam, feminist theologians have long argued that the Hebrew term actually points toward the notion that Eve emerged from the “side” of Adam. In keeping with their understanding of ha’adam, I suggest that the one being was split in two. This also makes sense in light of Adam’s proclamation in Genesis 2:23, which is the first time the actual terms “man” and “woman” are used in the text.


7 Gen 3:1.

8 Eve’s discussion that she might die if she were to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil continues to perplex scholars of the text, as nowhere did God suggest that touching the tree was a problem. Some have argued that this addition was given specifically by Adam, assuming that he had access to God’s direct word. However, this reading relies on the construct that it was Adam, and not ha’adam, who was created first. Others suggest that God may have conveyed a different meaning to Eve than to ha’adam, but such an account would not adequately explain why she did not remember God’s original discussion. Still others have argued that Eve is untrustworthy, which would explain why she was not given the information, as she could easily be “tempted.” Though outside the scope of this paper, I have previously contended that Eve’s rendition of the tale differs from the one originally displayed because of the sheer power she possesses: in fear of her capacity to act and use her agency to affect change, she was provided a different story—one which was more fully encompassing—in recognition of the tremendous sway she held in determining the course of human experience. Emily Chazen, “Eve as Creator,” 2.

9 Gen 3:5.
After eating from the Tree, the two realized they were naked, leading them to make loincloths for themselves out of the fig leaves in the garden. When the man and the woman realized that God was in their midst, they hid themselves. However, it was not long before God inquired as to the location of the man, and the man explained that he had hidden out of fear that God would see him naked. God, flabbergasted, questioned how the man knew of his nudity, and the man deflected to the woman, explaining that she had given him the fruit to eat. Upon being asked, the woman turned to the serpent, saying that it had been the animal that had led her to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In response, God decided to transform the body of the serpent such that the being would crawl on its belly; to make child birth painful for the woman; and to make the man toil and work the earth for the rest of his days. After officially experiencing the transformation, the man named the woman “Eve,” because she would be “the mother of all living.”

Though not explicitly stated in the text, he would therein assume the name “Adam,” connecting him to ‘adamah (אדמה), the earth. Following their naming, God realized that Adam and Eve might eat of the Tree of Life—the last vestige of “forbidden” fruit—and become immortal. As a result, God cast the two out of the garden, sending them east of Eden, and placed the cherubim in front of its gates in order to safeguard the Tree.

Adam and Eve departing Eden does not mark the end of their stories. Rather, it marks the beginning, as the Genesis 2-3 narrative became a central fixture of exegetical work and thought; in a sense, just like its protagonists, the narrative itself found that religious scholars and thinkers

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10 Though this moment has often been seen as Eve “tempting” Adam, I have argued that it marks the stark contrast in agential capacity that exists between the two figures. Where Eve was capable of weighing the various insights surrounding the Tree before eating it, Adam thoughtlessly accepts her offering. To me, his actions mark a sense of delirious following, whereas Eve’s mark a sense of leadership, agency, and empowerment. As the individual responsible for giving humans access to knowledge, then, Eve seems to be empowered with the capacity to determine the trajectory of the human condition. Ibid, 4-5.

“breathed into [its] nostrils the breath of life.” For the Jewish rabbis who authored a series of midrashim—“homiletic commentaries on texts from the Hebrew Scriptures”—the story clearly pointed to the supposedly universal problems characteristic of womankind:

…She was made from Adam's rib, a hidden, modest part of his body, so that she, too, might be modest, not fond of show, but rather of seclusion. But woman baffles God's design and purpose. She is haughty and walks with outstretched neck (Isa. iii. 16), and wanton eyes (Isa. iii. 6). She is given to eavesdropping (Gen. xviii. 10). She chatters slander (Numb. xii. 11), and is of a jealous disposition (Gen. xx. 1). She is afflicted with kleptomania (Gen. xxxi. 19), and is fond of running about (Gen. xxxiv. 1). In addition to these vices women are gluttonous (Gen. iii. 6), lazy (Gen. xviii. 6), and bad tempered (Gen. xvi. 5).

In their arguably misogynistic account, the Rabbinic texts attribute each of the “flaws” of womankind to her deviation from God’s original intent. In fact, by suggesting that “woman baffles God’s design and purpose,” the text not only suggests that she was merely created for Adam’s utility (e.g. “purpose”), but also makes essentialist claims about what constitutes both appropriate and inappropriate womanhood. Responding to these claims and a litany of other androcentric interpretations of the text, feminist theologians such as Phyllis Trible, Mieke Bal, Phyllis Bird, and Carol Meyers dedicated their works to unpacking the Genesis 2-3 story. Arguing that the narrative was one of woman’s power and agency at the most or one of equality between the sexes at the least, they sought to liberate Eve from the notions of inferiority and evil projected onto her body. Though some, such as Jerome Gellman and R. S. Kawashima, have since challenged these revisionist readings on social and linguistic grounds respectively, their legacy continues to have profound impacts on how the origin tale is understood by exegetes worldwide.

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12 Gen 2:7.
14 Genesis Rabba, 51.
15 Anne Lapidus Lerner argues in Eternally Eve that the rabbinic midrashic tradition can be understood as predominantly androcentric, rather than misogynistic. This specific midrash illumines—through its particular conflation of “women” with “haughtiness,” “slander[ers]” and “kleptomania[cs]”—the longstanding animosity coursing through a variety of other moments within the rabbinic texts.
As scholarly discourse surrounding the Genesis 2-3 narrative continued to unfold, so too did the media by which interpretations became represented: from artwork to cinematography, interpretations of Genesis 2-3 emerged as commonplace, a staple of Westerners’ ability to conceptualize human beginnings. Artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Hieronymus Bosch took Adam and Eve as their subjects, looking to recreate and reimagine the landscape of divine paradise. In the scientific realm, National Geographic has offered a genetic exploration of the human species’ journey, using Adam as a pragmatic tool for conceptualizing the existence of an “original” human being. Even within the popular imaginary, National Lampoon’s 2005 Adam & Eve repositions the narrative of Genesis 2-3 in order to examine the role of (hyper)sexuality and sensationalism in the lives of college students. With new forms of representation came additional interpretations of the text, understandings that fought to make sense of the vague possibility that exists within it. The “fruit of the Tree” was not merely a fruit, but an apple. The decision of Eve to eat of the Tree was not merely an action, but a “sin,” the beginning of evil. And Adam and Eve’s departure from Eden was not merely an exodus, but punishment, loss, paradisiacal death.

Such was the rich history that artist Samuel Bak inherited when he decided to create his 2008 to 2011 series depicting various iterations of the lives of Adam and Eve. A survivor of the Holocaust, Bak presents a collection that recapitulates the narrative of Genesis 2-3 over eighty times, engaging in an imaginative process of perpetual regeneration within his representations of the tale. Posturing and manipulating each figure’s body over and over again, he portrays the narrative as one of endless possibility, one which gestures toward a sense of futurity even as it harkens back to an ineradicable past. Much like his own mother, who he credits with
“overcom[ing] the direst of circumstances to give me life again, and again,” Bak embraces a sense of “again”-ness (read: continuousness, cyclicality, dynamism) as a means of refusing narrative singularity. Rather than represent Adam and Eve as static beings, his works oscillate between images of them in order to suggest the opportunity for interpretive multiplicity. Situating his paintings within a context of trauma, one which is resonant with his own experiences in the Holocaust, Bak’s Adam and Eve exegeses grapple with not only the ontological implications of the biblical story itself, but also fundamental questions surrounding the human condition.

Indeed, Bak’s artwork stimulates profound ethical questions for the viewer. As she gazes at the images that Bak creates, recognizing their ongoing re-assemblage of the original biblical text, the paintings invite her to ask: what is the ethical responsibility of the artist to both his subjects and his audience? How does he mediate visual space(s) in ways that preempt concern for the texts that he inherits? In electing to represent biblical text, how does his ability to guide the viewer’s eyes—and, in turn, her affective response to the materials that lay before her—grant him the power to reframe her relationship to sociohistorical triumph and tragedy? And how might his power as artist subsequently shape, reshape, or misshape the viewer’s relationship to modern power imbalance and embodied disenfranchisement?

In this thesis, I will argue that Bak’s artwork allows the viewer the space for interrogating her relationship to past, present, and future traumatic experiences. In particular, his Adam and Eve collection calls upon the viewer to recognize the sheer memorial power she has in relation to the Holocaust. The images recognize that the viewer could just as easily turn away from past trauma, could move on toward a future that does not reflect on the past. And yet they urge that the viewer

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16 Lawrence Langer, In a Different Light, 82. In fact, Bak’s mother can—in her connection to his birth and “rebirth”—be understood as an “Eve incarnate” for him. His own “mother of all living,” she provided to him what Eve provided to the entire human race: kinship, creation, and continually-sustained life.
not do so. They ask that the viewer acknowledge scenes of pain and devastation, and that she cast her eyes towards the victims and remember. In inviting the reader to sit with the woes of the Holocaust and to carry them with her, Bak’s artwork allows her to recognize that deciding whether or not to remember the lost, the survivors, and the genocide more broadly places her in a position of extreme power: should she choose not to remember, she could inflict yet another form of violence onto the bodies of survivors and victims alike. In advocating for the viewer to bear witness to the Holocaust, then, the images look to create communities of healers and healing who can work together to try to make sense of the catastrophic devastation that was the Holocaust.

At the same time, Bak’s artwork recognizes that trauma does not end with the Holocaust: the viewer herself could just as easily be—and likely is—complicit in modern day systems of gendered and ability-centric oppression. I thus contend that the images also allow the viewer a fecund space for problematizing and questioning her own relationship to modern day traumatic experiences. Specifically, I argue that, by encouraging the viewer to enter into the world of the painting, Bak’s artwork complicates the relationship between “object” (e.g., image) and “subject” (e.g., viewer). In doing so, the images invite the viewer to self-reflexively probe her own relationship to others and to the world around her. The subjects of the images, Adam and Eve, guide the viewer’s gaze to allow her to think critically about the ways in which gendered and ability-centric disenfranchisement manifest themselves in an American social imaginary. Though my thesis marks one of the first engagements with Bak’s works outside of Holocaust studies, I suggest that such an exploration allows the viewer to engage more critically with the Holocaust, as it encourages her to recognize how trauma can persist throughout all historical moments, cultures, and societies. In fact, it reimagines the scope of memory in order to suggest that the process of remembering loss does not simply require the static re-immersion within past spaces;
rather, it demands that future generations reconsider the world they inhabit in order to destabilize other forms of trauma that exist in their societies. Bak’s images thus not only ask that viewers remember those ruthlessly dehumanized, victimized, and murdered in the Holocaust, but they also invite the viewer to challenge the human sufferings that may exist in her future.

In order to explore the ethics of representation in the work of Samuel Bak, I will dedicate the first section of this thesis to exploring the role of the face in relation to Holocaust-era trauma. This discussion will illuminate how Bak unites survivors with post-Holocaust social subjects in order to create communities of healing. In the next section, I will illustrate how Bak’s images invite the viewer to scrutinize her relationship to the gendered and ability-centric biases that characterize her society. Ultimately, I demonstrate how Bak’s images refuse to situate themselves within a singular temporality of ethics. As a result, they re-envision the landscape of Holocaust memory by demonstrating how past trauma is inextricably linked to the present and future.

**Here there is a why**: Post-Holocaust Traumatic Reconciliation in Samuel Bak’s Artwork

Steeped in histories of the Holocaust, Bak’s artwork has been examined from various perspectives in Holocaust studies. Some, such as Michael Fishbane, have examined Bak’s works from the perspective of mysticism and myth, suggesting that Bak’s images try to understand whether the world has been transformed by evil itself or by a broken sense of memory and memorialization. Others, such as Alicia Ostriker, have emphasized dreams as Bak’s means of providing exegetical interpretations of biblical text. And still others, such as Yvonne Sherwood,

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17 This quote is adapted from Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz.*
19 Alicia Ostriker, “Bak’s Dreams: Painting as Midrash.”
have been intrigued by the role of the Akedah\(^{20}\) in Bak’s images, suggesting that the failed potential for internal reparation is a means of understanding Bak’s Holocaust trauma.\(^{21}\)

Extending discursive examinations of Bak’s paintings into the realm of the ethical, I explore the role of the face in interpreting his depictions of Adam and Eve. Namely, I argue that the face presents an opportunity for understanding the relationship between a post-Holocaust self and a Holocaust other. In functioning as an exegetical reflection on the Genesis 2-3 narrative, Bak’s Adam and Eve collection intimates a sense of continuity—that is, by producing and re-producing images of the Genesis 2-3 narrative, his paintings construct a multiplicity of original selves. By cyclically navigating among fleshed portrayals, Bak’s works both capaciously allow for the perpetuity of Adam and Eve and yet also ensnare them within the confines of death itself. As hinted at by Lawrence Langer, an American scholar and Holocaust analyst who holds a theoretical monopoly\(^{22}\) over Bak’s work, the process of constructing these “multiple life-plots”\(^{23}\) is not without its Holocaust-era valence. By constantly iterating and re-iterating the narrative of Adam and Eve, the paintings create what Langer terms deathlife:\(^{24}\) wherein the termination between each painting appears to constitute the rupture of life (e.g., death), the next in the series produces a conception of rebirth (e.g., life) such that the viewer remains in a purgatorial state between “life” and “death.”\(^{25}\) Here, I want to suggest that deathlife can also be understood as a methodological

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\(^{20}\) The Akedah is the moment in the Hebrew Bible when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. At the potential moment of the slaughtering, God substitutes a lamb for Isaac, allowing the boy to live (Gen 22).

\(^{21}\) Yvonne Sherwood, “Iconoclash and Akedah.”

\(^{22}\) Samantha Baskind, 2017. Phone conversation.

\(^{23}\) Lawrence Langer, In A Different Light, 1-2.


\(^{25}\) Langer understands Holocaust testimonial as the perpetual product of memorial “redeath,” which he deems the experience wherein the entirety of a Holocaust survivor’s memory becomes colored by loss. Consider, for example, Samuel Bak’s own Holocaust testimony, and his memories of his friend Samek Epstein, expounded in “Samek and Samek.” In brief, the piece tells of how Bak (then Samek) had a friend, also named Samek, who, unlike him, was killed in the Holocaust. Musing on the experiences that he and Samek had, Bak still carries with him the remnants of his deceased friend, haunted by the fact that their lives could have been easily exchangeable, down to the very fact of their names. He further illustrates how his memories of Samek, as they remain in his mind, are fresh with the tinges of death, as he knows that, no matter how many beautiful times they shared, Samek’s existence will always end in his
approach to reading Bak’s images. Because the start of each image marks both the end of the last and the beginning of the next, deathlife allows viewers to critically engage with each painting as an experience of rupture, suture, and critical continuity.

For the Holocaust survivor, Bak’s artwork provides the capacity to not simply recapitulate loss through memory, but to empower and embolden a new sense of life. Throughout this section, I contend that the ability to manipulate the face brings the survivor into direct contact with future generations. In turn, Bak’s images re-situate the burden of memory onto those who have not directly experienced the Holocaust. Asking that communities not commit second acts of violence against the dead in the form of forgetting, Bak’s paintings unite survivors with the public in this process of corporeal reimagination and emotional recovery. It is through this juxtaposition of the inheritors of Holocaust trauma that victims and survivors alike ask of their living contemporaries the quintessential question surrounding bearing witness to genocide: “Are you listening? Can you hear?” In inviting the viewer to respond (“Yes! I am listening!”), Bak’s images enable communal care, reconciliation, and recovery in a post-Holocaust world.

The production of “multiple lifeplots” does not depend on a linear progression from one image to the next for Bak. Instead, the images can be manipulated individually to give rise to a series of different interpretations suffused with understandings of deathlife. In Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End, Bak portrays a diptych—“painting composed of two leaves which close like a book”—of Adam and Eve as sculpture-like heads crafted of fragmented rock (Figure 1). Behind the two linger signs: one, painted blue and imbued with holes, states “Adam,” and the

premature demise. “Redeath,” then, is, in Langer’s terms, the process wherein the Holocaust survivor’s past, present, and future are defined by the destruction of friends, family, and peers. Using and Abusing the Holocaust.

26 Thomas Trezise, “Unspeakable,” 61. For more on the highly significant role of listening as constitutive of testimonial (i.e., “listening” as the force necessary for creating Holocaust memory), see Dori Taub. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.”

Figure 1: *Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End*, Samuel Bak$^{28}$

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$^{28}$ All photos of Samuel Bak’s work are from *Adam & Eve in the Art of Samuel Bak.*
Figure 2: *Adam and Eve and the Inevitable*, Samuel Bak.
Figure 3: *Adam and Eve, Day and Night*, Samuel Bak
other, in a faded pinkish-red, hidden behind its referent, “Eve.” A crematorium lingering in the background, encapsulated by remnants of fiery red smoke, is both at a distance and in proximity: never forgotten, always in consciousness, its presence takes center-stage in one iteration of the diptych. In the other, the crematorium is peripheral, lingering on the corner of Adam’s plate as though it were a sudden afterthought. Paralleling the shift in centrality encapsulated within the image, binary potentials emerge for Adam and Eve: in the first instance, where the crematorium remains central, the two gaze toward each other. In the second, their lines of vision are turned away from each other, as though their eyes—and, perhaps more pressingly, their faces—cannot meet. It is in this continual performance of repositioning and revision that deathlife is born from within the creation story that Bak paints.29

Though Langer argues that the presentation of a parallel diptych “destabilizes the reign of fixivity in our visual (and intellectual) experience,”30 I suggest that this destabilization is perhaps even more radical. To my mind, it actually emphasizes the ways in which human beings do not exist monolithically, but are instead in a state of constant (and potentially tragic) flux. For the self in a post-Holocaust world, loss is inevitable. Not only must an individual grapple with the ramifications of spiritually, emotionally, and/or metaphysically having lost others, but she must also recognize that her selfhood is subject to that same sense of loss. In the case of Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End, the decision to allow for the contortion and reframing of the beings themselves suggests that, even within the confines of a singular corpus—whether physical, literary, or artistic—an individual experiences change. By extension, change itself implies a self re-made;

29 A similar posturing and re-posturing of the face is present in another diptych, Adam and Eve and the Inevitable (Figure 2). Unlike the diptych Adam and Eve, Day and Night (Figure 3), where Bak presents the two—gazing outward toward the viewer—in static formation, both Figure 1 and Figure 2 depend on pluralistic posturing to convey their message. This bolsters the argument made about the notions of “self” and “other” portrayed through Bak’s work.
30 Lawrence Langer, “Adam and Eve: The Quest for Identity.”
however, in that process of re-making, a subtle form of death transpires, as the self anew must unmake the old self. Perhaps most critical regarding this transformation, though, is that the change itself may not simply be made by the individual: instead, it may be engendered by some other person, and the self may reciprocally produce changes and losses in that same other. Both self and other, then, emerge as intertwined in a relational world in which each being’s experience of tragedy is contingent upon the decisions of her counterpart(s).

Latent within the option to manipulate the faces of the two beings remains the possibility for the self to turn away from the other, to refuse to recognize the other’s mutual humanity. Because Bak centers Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End around the face, issues surrounding the ethics of “facing” others arise, drawing the viewer to question: what happens when the self gazes into the eyes of her counterparts, identifies the craters in her flesh and the giddiness ensconced by her lips, truly sees that the other person is exactly that—a person? And, perhaps more dauntingly, what happens when the self is incapable of scouring the contours of the other’s face for the traces of common humanity, when she shuts herself off to the flesh of the other and refuses to look back? An ethicist concerned with constitutive selves, Emmanuel Levinas views the face itself as imbued with an answer to these quandaries: “The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc. It is all of that, of course, but takes on the meaning of a face through the dimension it opens up in the perception of a being.”31 For Levinas, the face serves as an access point for understanding both self and other, as (in Lacanian terms)32 the ability to perceive the possession of flesh allows the self to gaze into a mirror and perceive her existence; by extension, in the “mirroring” of the self through the image of the other, she can recognize the humanity of that other. Thus, for Levinas, an inability to access the face of the other not only reduces the other

to an abject object, but also forecloses the individual’s ability to conceptualize herself: “The other is always a Thou, because she has a face; she foredooms every effort to reduce her to an It, because objects do not have faces… The I-Thou relation is constitutive of the self, not the other.”

In *Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End*, then, the ability to posture and re-posture the face(s) of Adam and Eve illustrates how the post-Holocaust self has the capacity to either turn towards or away from survivors. In the initial configuration of the diptych, in which the two people face away from one another, Adam becomes associated with the Holocaust by virtue of his proximity to the crematorium located near him. Bak ties Eve, on the other hand, to the post-Holocaust self’s sin of negligence and forgetting by shielding her eyes from the view of the crematorium, and placing the pear next to her bodice. Indeed, though Adam’s face is fractured, his skin is pallid; the similarly-fractured face of Eve, however, is smattered with red hues that resemble blood and that pool at the nape of her neck. Rendering a poignant commentary on the responsibility of the post-Holocaust self, then, Bak uses the faces of Adam and Eve to suggest that the ethical burden of memory does not fall onto the survivors of the Holocaust. Rather, should the post-Holocaust self refuse to meet the gaze of the survivor, to bear witness to loss, and to remember the genocide and its victims, the guilt of forgetting will soil her with the blood of the dead.

The images further demonstrate how the post-Holocaust self and Holocaust survivor remain inextricably linked. In allowing for the re-posturing of the image, Bak suggests that the post-Holocaust self—in the process of “bearing witness” and, as Jacques Derrida argues, *listening*

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34 Some may also argue that Bak’s diptych actually rivals the treatment that those in the concentration camps actually endured at the hands of passive bystanders: refusing to acknowledge the tragedy going on just behind them, they turned their backs to the victims of the Holocaust. As a result, they, like Eve in Bak’s depiction, become doused with the reddish blood of the lost, inheriting the guilt and being *forced* to face the ramifications of their silence. Provocative though this reading may be, I would argue that it is slightly reductive. Based on the distance that separates Adam from the crematorium, the image itself suggests that Adam is geographically—and possibly temporally—isolated from the gas chambers; as a result, it seems to project that same inheritance of sin onto the bodies that continue to refuse to acknowledge and grapple with the long-lasting ramifications of and trauma experienced in the Holocaust.
to and believing the testimony of survivors\textsuperscript{35}—creates a sense of relationality between survivor and self that eradicates the sin(s) committed by society. In allowing the eyes of Adam and Eve to meet in the space of the repositioned image, Bak illustrates that the sense of alterity that formerly characterized the relationship between self and survivor-other has dissipated. As a result, the pear, previously aligned exclusively with the post-Holocaust self, now lies between the two and in close proximity to the crematorium. In fact, based on where the reddish ashes and smoke of the crematorium land in relation to the pear, Bak demonstrates that the post-Holocaust self de-situates her relationship to sin and refracts it back onto the evils perpetrated in the Holocaust in her acknowledgement of the survivors’ trauma and common humanity. Working together, the survivor and the post-Holocaust self not only begin to grapple with the social ramifications of the genocide, but also begin the treacherous work of coming to terms with atrocities perpetrated in that time. In doing so, they mutually contribute to the deconstruction of what Emil Fackenheim terms a “seamless reading”\textsuperscript{36}—that is, by recognizing their mutual humanity and acknowledging the horrors of the Holocaust, they refuse to neglect the tragedy and instead elect to wrestle with its implications both for themselves and for humanity at large. In a word, they produce an “unseamly reading”\textsuperscript{37} of a post-Holocaust world.

It is critical to recognize, however, that in every iteration of the image, Eve maintains the blood of the victims sprayed across her face; in fact, even the letters that constitute her name behind her are scrawled in a red that looks bloody compared to the placid bluish colors\textsuperscript{38} that define Adam’s name. Though it may be argued that this suggests the ongoing culpability of the post-

\textsuperscript{35} Jacques Derrida, \textit{Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan.}

\textsuperscript{36} Emil Fackenheim, \textit{The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-reading.}


\textsuperscript{38} It is important to note that the colors that Bak uses to write “Adam” behind the man’s head are often used in other pieces of his artwork to color the striped uniforms worn by Holocaust victims. This supports the notion that Bak creates, in the face of Adam, an individual who lived through the Holocaust.
Holocaust self even amidst her decision to bear witness to the experience, I would argue that the presence of blood on Eve’s face in this case poignantly marks her relationship to the deceased. Rather than allow herself to be viewed as “other” to the experiences that people endured during the Holocaust, the omnipresence of blood on her face illustrates the ways in which, no matter the geopolitical, temporal, or spatial moment in which she finds herself immersed, the post-Holocaust self will always maintain a connection to the victims of genocide. Broadly speaking, such a representational decision manages to: (1) emphasize the continued imminence of memory and re-memory of the Holocaust victim within the collective consciousness of society; (2) illustrate how even those who feel themselves to be isolated from the Holocaust are always already existing in an intimate relationship to it; and, by extension, (3) convey a sense that, even in the midst of modernity, in which the post-Holocaust self feels that such an event could never be repeated, there always remains the possibility that she herself could have been the individual smattered with blood, teeming with fear, decimated and destroyed.

Indeed, it is out of this sense of corporeal universality (i.e., the sensibility that “they” could have just as easily been “us”) that Bak looks to illustrate the ways in which all people inherit and share the trauma that was endured during the Holocaust. Seeking to understand Bak’s modus operandi, Dan Mathewson argues that Bak (who he terms a “Modern Job”) uses various bodily contortions to encapsulate the mechanisms by which individual hope deteriorates under the weight of past loss. Drawing on the language of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Mathewson argues that “someone that is dead or ought to be, is still alive. Life is no longer simply life, but becomes death-in-life, a combination of seeming opposites. To live after the disaster is to live impossibly—to experience life as death in life or life lived-through-death, an experience… demanded by the impossibility of
the ruptured world.”

Though Mathewson’s argument primarily relates to the death-life cycle as it is constructed across images, the same could be argued about the self-Other relationship illustrated in *Adam and Eve and the Story that Has No End*: by allowing the post-Holocaust self to confront the experiences of the survivor when Eve’s gaze meets Adam’s, Bak illustrates the ways in which the mutually-perceived experience of trauma allows for a sense of globalized feeling and shared experience. In a sense, the “death in life or life lived-through-death” experience that Mathewson describes is not only experienced by the Holocaust survivor, but is also mutually applicable to the self that bears witness, to the one who inherits the trauma of the Holocaust and sees, in the eyes of the survivor, her own visage reflected back towards her.

What matters most about the aforementioned sense of universality is that it also has the power to produce feelings of universal suffering. Perhaps Bak’s most significant contribution to discourse(s) surrounding the relationship between the post-Holocaust self and the survivor, then, emerges from his decision to incorporate images of bodily disintegration, images of enfleshed and facial separation, and images of stasis or “paralysis.”

Because these images of corporeal destruction are universal—that is, the post-Holocaust self is not disambiguated from the Holocaust survivor in that both she and the other experience and endure this physical fracturing—the Holocaust experience becomes one of mutual endurance, as the post-Holocaust self is forced to walk alongside the survivor and witness his pain. Establishing a dialogic relationship between two of his images—*Adam and Eve and Awareness* (Figure 4) and *Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire* (Figure 5)—Bak creates a universally tragic metanarrative of destruction. In *Adam and Eve and Awareness*, Bak (re)births “beginning” by situating both the man and the woman in

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40 Though Mathewson uses the language of “paralysis” to describe that which occurs in Bak’s works, I employ the term loosely, as its conflation of embodied dissolution and destruction with physical disability ought to be problematized.
Figure 4: *Adam and Eve and Awareness*, Samuel Bak
Figure 5: *Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire*, Samuel Bak
the space of Edenic departure. Emerging out of a pear, Adam and Eve—“the eyes of both…
opened”41—stare at a shard of fruit 42 within their hands. Adam’s gaze lands directly upon his shard, his body tilted towards it, as though he recognizes that latent within his piece is the subtle sense of rupture that will inevitably come. Eve, alternatively, uses her interlaced fingers to push away from her piece of pear, gazing out and beyond it, as though she—the embodied manifestation of a post-Holocaust self—looks to distance herself from the social reality that is the possibility of horror(s) in a modern world. In a sense, the fleshed distinctions that exist between Adam and Eve illustrate the ways in which, in his time, the Holocaust survivor saw and recognized the immediate possibility of the horrors that laid before him. Reciprocally, the post-Holocaust subject tries, in a self-salvific act of emotional foreclosure, to distance herself from both past terrors and future possibilities of violence. Nonetheless, as they both gaze through their respective pieces of pear—that last remnant of their lives in Eden—the ground beneath them remains cracked, darkened, obscured: the foundations of their paradisiacal past(s) linger, as though imbued with the sense of hope that characterized their lives prior to an acknowledgment of terror. The ground, however, waits to collapse.

It is in Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire that these two bodies—cloaked, unable to see, reaching towards “nothing”—experience the total fruition of their mutual fragmentation, one which emphasizes the universal nature of genocidal trauma for all generations. Where Eve once stood outside the pear, she is now immersed deeply within, one hand reaching toward empty space while the other grips firmly to the cloak covering her face. Adam, who once peered outwards—as though imbued with both optimism and a subtle, awe-inspired recognition of

41 Gen 3:7.
42 It is also possible that this shard of fruit is a leaf. The multiplicity of meanings conveyed through the image emphasizes how sexuality (as illustrated by the leaf, which covered the loins of both) and sin (as suggested by the pear) eventually become intimately connected in exegetical traditions on Genesis 2-3.
his future plights—now glances downward, both of his hands reaching up, his fingertips gently tracing the tops of the flames. These flames—red, dark, and reminiscent of metal—envelop the entire scene, engulfing the two figures in a scalding, hellish reality. Central to the image is the crematorium, which punctures the fractured pear out of which the two bodies emerge. To an extent, then, the overarching setup that Bak creates for Adam and Eve in this space is one of universal Holocaust-era conflagration: both the post-Holocaust self (Eve) and the Holocaust other (Adam) find themselves overcome by the scalding flames. Even more significant in light of _Adam and Eve and Awareness_, however, is the sizing of and desperation hidden behind the cloaks worn by the two figures. Where Adam’s cloth is thin, covering just his eyes, Eve is practically veiled, completely covered such that the cloak subsumes her entire being. These distinctive cloaking patterns illumine the dangerous yet conceivable failure of post-Holocaust selves to recognize the imminence of universal trauma. Based on the placement of Eve’s hand, which grasps to fight against the cloth rather than the fire, the cloak also suggests that the decision not to “recognize” is arbitrated by the self. Though both self and other may be incapable of identifying future fiery and traumatic entrenchment, it is incumbent upon the post-Holocaust self—the one who has not herself endured or touched the brims of the fire before—to use her position as a social agent in order to prepare herself to acknowledge, identify, and potentially ward off the possibility of future devastation. Put another way, the post-Holocaust self inherits the responsibility to prevent continual genocide and trauma.

In _Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire_, Bak also demonstrates that tragedy is not simply constructed by but is implicit within the human condition. Though the two humans occupy a critical space within the image, the fractured pear out of which the human flesh emerges is punctured by two metallic, deep-red arrows that point towards a lone yet vibrantly green entity:
a smaller, consumed pear. Inasmuch as the areas of consumption directly parallel the regions occupied by the two beings in the larger pear, the microcosmic re-iterative pear represents the sin internalized and subsequently excreted by humankind. Bak uses the smaller pear as a medium for underscoring: (1) the tragic means by which humans ingest, experience, and endure trauma throughout their lifetimes, regardless of the sociopolitical moment in which they are immersed; (2) the ways in which humans therein regurgitate and reinstate the trauma that they have endured by inflicting it onto other flesh; and (3) the unpalatable (read: “bitter”⁴³) experience of subsequent tragic experience that tinges the lived conditions of all human beings. Critically situating the pear on a piece of cloth that mirrors the one worn by Eve in its sizing, the image thereby recapitulates the ways in which understanding past trauma can be more significant for the modern subject than it is for the individual who endured it. After all, it is she who remains connected to future iterations of devastation and has the capacity to prevent the proliferation of trauma. Bak’s image thereby challenges the post-Holocaust subject to metaphorically touch the flames of terror, just like the survivor, and invest her power in working to extinguish the fire of tragedy itself.

However, neither Adam and Eve and Awareness nor Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire can be fully understood without an engagement with the other image: by producing a metanarrative progression regarding the strained nature of human existence, Bak implicates the viewer in the process of bearing witness. In doing this, he encourages her to recognize her own association with the post-Holocaust self and to solidify an ongoing dedication to terminating devastation throughout the globe. On the surface, no relationship between the two images exists; in fact, the disparate colors used in the two depictions, the usage of vision in the former that is deprived in the latter, and the overwhelming intrusion of the chimney in Adam and Eve and the

Memory of the Bitter Fire all appear to illustrate that the two images exist in diametric opposition to one another. However, upon further scrutiny, the viewer comes to realize that the juxtaposition of the two images within Bak’s book Adam and Eve in the Art of Samuel Bak, in which the two stand side-by-side across a two-page spread, underscores their interconnectedness. Indeed, once the viewer re-cognizes her relationship to the images and recognizes the fluidity between, rather than the isolation of, each of them, she immediately begins to make connections that link the two together. Adam and Eve emerge from the same sides of an enormous pear in both images; at least one of their hands is extending outward, as though probing the external world; and their bodies navigate space similarly, reaching, penetrating, contorting, and maneuvering a world that is neither overwhelmingly welcoming nor ineluctably tragic. In a sense, then, the images prompt the viewer to read them together, to recognize that the placidity that abounds in Adam and Eve and Awareness dissipates in Adam and Eve and the Memory of the Bitter Fire. With this foreclosure of possibility comes the overwhelming sentiment that “human nature [renders itself apparent in the aftermath of] the communal trauma that was the Holocaust, and the horror that such genocide represents for Jewish people and for all people.”\textsuperscript{44} Implicated, therefore, in the community of “all people,” the viewer finds that the paintings themselves refute her status as bystander. Instead, she must engage with the ramifications of the images more broadly. The images thus render her an active participant in the process of grappling with the Holocaust and preventing future genocide.

Insofar as Bak’s works allow the post-Holocaust self, the survivor other, and the viewer all to contend with and against the realities of the Holocaust and the human condition more broadly, they create a sense of community that enables the alleviation of trauma. Rather than force any individual to struggle with the tragedy alone, Bak’s paintings do not simply provide him a fruitful

\textsuperscript{44} Wolcott Gallery. “Samuel Bak: Survival and Memory,” 5.
space for working through his own traumatic experiences during the Holocaust. In their representations of various players living in different temporal and spatial stages, they also create a metaphysical purlieu for traumatic reconciliation. By putting forward his work for consumption by the general public and making commentaries on the status of society in relation to Holocaust survivors, Bak ensures the refutation of Paul Celan’s oft-quoted assertion that “No one / bears witness for the / witness.”45 Affecting the analytical trajectory of a society that often fights to move forward beyond the Holocaust without continued reflection,46 his works call upon post-Holocaust bystanders to actually consider the ramifications of the Holocaust, rather than simply moving on without giving it a second thought. In this sense, they demand that potentially apathetic on-lookers “bear witness for the / witness,” internalizing the loss that Bak endured and validating the “witness[es’]” experiences. Thus, Bak’s works create a community between the healing and the healers that functions as the breeding grounds for demanding public awareness about horrors inflicted upon those living in the past, present, and future.

**Nothing Can Be Changed Unless it is Faced**: The Ethics of Representation

For Bak, narratives of communal restoration do not simply falter with the end of the Holocaust in 1945. Rather, as societies continue to cycle through their own crises—including, but not limited to, wars, social unrest, and systemic oppression—it is necessary to draw disparate communities together and allow them to reconcile the feelings of alterity that isolate them from

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46 In his *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust*, Emil Fackenheim critiques the “seamless reading” of literature and theory that transpired after the Shoah: rather than reflecting critically on the tragedy that the Jewish people had endured, academia trudged forward. He thereby (much like Bak) calls upon people to complicate their own narratives of literary theory by thoughtfully on the global trauma exacted during the Holocaust in what he terms an “unseamly reading.”
47 This quote is borrowed from James Baldwin. Emphasis is my own.
one another. Nowhere is Bak’s aspiration to better the human condition more apparent than in his reflections on the dialogic relationship between his artwork and biblical text. He states:

I start with the Bible. When I read in the Bible that Amalek should be destroyed, the women and the children, because they are the enemies of the Jews, I realize that what is being said by [politicians in a modern era] quotes the Bible and quotes those most shameful parts of human history… We have inherited a lot of problems, we have created a lot of problems we are going to leave over to the generations to come. I am terribly sad when I think of the world my grandchildren inherit… I’m talking about it in my paintings.48

Emphasizing how people “have inherited a lot of problems, we have created a lot of problems,” Bak situates his discussion of the Bible within contexts of cyclical historical tragedy and shame. In particular, he articulates how the biblical infatuation with the destruction of the other (e.g., “Amalek” and “the enemies of the Jews”) has so detrimentally influenced the Western world that it has percolated into modern day political praxis. By highlighting how the biblical process of extreme othering remains amongst “those most shameful parts of human history,” he rejects vindictiveness, hinting instead towards society’s need to re-envision justice and retributive behaviors committed against people understood to be “other.” Perhaps most critical about Bak’s reflection, though, is that it is a self-critique. While he no longer affiliates with any religious group, his reference to the “Jews” harkens back to his own Jewish roots. In turn, it becomes clear that his understanding of the Bible as expressing moments that are “shameful” and that produce “a lot of problems” illustrate his willingness to scrutinize the communities from which he himself comes.

Using the face as a site of examination, I will highlight how viewership becomes complicated in the space of the image. I will demonstrate how Bak anticipates the viewer’s presence within the image as a means of disrupting the dyadic relationship between image as “object” and viewer as “subject.” By dissolving the boundaries between these supposedly dichotomous roles, the images produce an affective response in the viewer, one which leads to an

experience of awe and transfixon that calls upon her to recognize her own place within society. In creating a space for emotive lingering, the paintings guide the viewer’s gaze such that she can envision the discursive (un)realities underlying her understandings of society. As such, the paintings call immediate attention to the ways in which society has constructed sites of liberation for cis-gendered women, allowing them to wield agency in and against patriarchal social structures. In fact, the images empower narratives of gender non-essentialism by provocatively calling into question how gender is projected onto the body by a series of material symbols. At the same time, however, they invite the viewer to problematize her own relationship to ableist discourse. By calling attention to the ways in which visual impairment and blindness become used as sites of gendered liberation, the images encourage the viewer to scrutinize how feminist liberation schema often rely on the unjust abnegation of disabled communities. Ultimately, then, I will argue that, in bringing the viewer face-to-face with the biases rife within her own society, Bak’s works prompt the viewer to reflect on her own behavior such that she can conscientiously make decisions that begin to alleviate the oppression experienced by marginalized communities throughout the United States.

*Transforming the Process of Viewership*

Where artwork can position the viewer as peering into a scene as an outsider to it, Bak’s works reimagine the boundaries of the image such that the viewer’s gaze allows her entrance into the painting. In *Adam and Eve and the Sins of the Other B* (Figure 6), two figures sit with their backs turned, staring at a field of pears and rolling hills that lay ahead. Eve rests on a blanket that blends into the ground beneath her and yet is notably distinct from it. The blanket has a coral color present only in two other places in the image: in the scarf draped across her body, and on the second blanket curled into a careful ball in the open suitcase lingering behind Adam. By turning
Figure 6: *Adam and Eve and the Sins of the Others B*, Samuel Bak.
Adam and Eve such that only their backs are visible, the painting suggests that the viewer gazes in the same direction and onto the same landscape upon which the two figures peer. As a result, the image invites her to gaze with Adam and Eve, not at them. In fact, the gesture towards the open suitcase, coupled with another blanket situated inside, creates the feeling that the viewer can literally join them: the possibility for her inclusion, for her to situate herself alongside the two, creates space for her entrance into the realm of the painting.

In leaving space for the viewer to metaphorically enter the image, Bak elicits an affective response that engages the viewer’s body, blurring the boundaries between the pictorial world as object and the viewer as the autonomous subject within that space. Consider for a moment affect theorist Sara Ahmed’s “Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others.” In her work, Ahmed describes how the contours of multiple worlds inhabited by different subjects become defined by feelings, which make the collective appear as if it were a physical body in the first place. Her work illustrates how individuals have the capacity to empathize with the painful experiences of others as a result of their ability to imagine themselves as occupying similar spaces. Likewise, she suggests that people can, in the process of witnessing affect, approximate the feelings that others experience. Imagine, then, the affective response of a viewer of Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers (Figure 7). As she gazes upon the painting, the viewer finds herself interacting with beings whose faces she cannot fully see. Because of the use of vibrant colors and the play with nudity, the viewer is captivated by the image. Her eyes freeze, her heart flutters, as she experiences feelings of overwhelming awe upon gazing at this image in particular. There is something so tactile and urgent about it that she cannot pull herself away. She has been drawn into the image, allowed to metaphorically leave her world and enter the space of the painting itself.

Figure 7: *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers*, Samuel Bak
Though the experience described above is not universal and people relate to the image differently, I contend that affective responses to *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers* (and all of Bak’s works) are the product of critical challenges to the boundaries of viewership. In particular, the viewer’s experiences lead her to recognize the fluidity of positions between the “gazed upon” object (e.g., artwork) and the “gazing” subject (e.g., viewer). In the process of concurrently disrobing the two figures and highlighting their bodies through the use of bright pinks and blues, the image produces an exaggerated sense of vulnerability. The painting therein allows the viewer to imagine her own body, nude, rendered susceptible to the gaze of another. One need only think of the “male” gaze and the “white” gaze to think of why the image evokes such strong reactions: by demonstrating how bodies can be made spectacles for the consumption of others, the social subject comes to understand how the forces of hyper-scrutiny influence her relationship to others and the world around her. As a result, the painting invites the viewer to understand her own body as subject to consumption, much like those of Adam and Eve. In other words, the image allows her to recognize how, just as she peers at the two figures, she herself is constantly surveilled, analyzed, and understood through others’ gazes. She thereby is invited to witness how she exists in highly mediated spaces, navigating interstitial positionalities between “gazing subject” and “gazed-upon object.”

Because the viewer receives the opportunity to *feel* how constructions of self become linked to the gazes of others, the image encourages her to enter self-reflexive space—that is, Bak’s images invite her to think through her ongoing negotiation of a status as both observing and observable. In *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers*, a pear sits in the palm of Eve’s hand. Insofar as the shading around her elbow illustrates a sort of forwardness and her hand is foregrounded against Adam’s shirt, Eve extends her arm out to the viewer, seemingly handing her the pear. On
the one hand, considering the typical conflation of the “fruit of the Tree of Knowledge” with temptation, one might assume that Eve’s action marks her as seductress, as an individual trying to tantalize the viewer. On the other hand, however, Eve’s behavior also initiates human access to knowledge: when she and Adam eat of the fruit of the Tree, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked,”\(^{50}\) signifying the beginning of their ability to conceptualize the human condition. By reaching out towards the viewer and offering her the pear, then, Eve invites her access into that same world. She not only summons the viewer to enter the space of the image, but also suggests that the viewer can achieve a new form of knowledge in the process of viewership. She allows the viewer to recognize how artwork can transform her worldview. Thus, the image lays the foundation for allowing the viewer to gain new insight into not only the world of *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers*, but also into the society in which she lives.

Even as *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers* leaves the space for the viewer’s social ruminations, the image apposes figures that are both “Hiding” and experiencing revelation. In turn, it suggests the paradoxical difficulty entailed by trying to understand one’s own socialization. Drawing on the biblical moment when, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, “the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden,”\(^{51}\) Bak’s title itself asks: what would it mean for Adam and Eve to “hide” from an omniscient God, one who would have total access to their thoughts, actions, and by extension, location? In other words, what would it mean to be, on the one hand, completely immersed in a space, and on the other, to be completely oblivious to that space? Because in *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers* the two beings themselves are completely vulnerable—that is, their bodies are nowhere near “Hiding”—the image confuses the site/sight of salience. What is hiding is *not* the world around the beings,

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\(^{50}\) Gen 3:7.
\(^{51}\) Gen 3:8, emphasis added.
but rather their faces. This marks a reversal of general loci of embodied “Hiding”: whereas the face is generally one of the few parts of the body revealed to a gazing public, the situation is here reversed. Thus, the image demonstrates the paradox of self-reflection. Because what is generally obscured is now rendered visible and vice versa, it demonstrates for the viewer how self-reflection is not actually a process of excavating social realities and making them immediately apparent. Rather, it is a process of undermining the individual’s hiddenness such that she can fully understand the world in which she lives. *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers* demonstrates, then, how the tools for self-reflection are always already apparent to the viewer, “Hiding” though never fully hidden.

However, the painting moves to suggest that the viewer must decide for herself to begin interrogating the world around her. Much like how God asks, “Where are you?”52 despite God’s apparent omniscience and capacity to identify where Adam and Eve actually are, *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers* encourages the viewer to act of her own accord in order to uncover the biases underlying (potentially problematic) social systems. Rather than completely dictate the direction of the viewer’s gaze or over-determine the understandings she derives from the image, the painting leaves the space for the viewer to elect to situate herself within it. There is no obligation. She need not necessarily engage in the self-reflection that the painting allows her to explore, and even if she should choose to do so, the extent of her exploration is mediated by her own desire and will. The image thus empowers the viewer to take control of her introspection, providing her the opportunity for a more capacious, comprehensive self-examination as she lingers with the painting. Indeed, it is in Bak’s willingness to allow the viewer to ask herself, “Where are

52 Gen 3:9.
you [in relation to this image]?” that he manages to inculcate ethical sensibilities both within and across his works.

**Revisions/Re-visions of Gender and Ability**

Of course, allowing the viewer to reflect on her world does not mean she needs to do so alone. Though the viewer stands alongside Adam and Eve in the process of viewership, gazing with rather than at them, the two beings—akin, in some sense, to Virgil in Dante’s *Inferno*—still guide her observational journey. Through gestures, body language, and signals, the subjects of the painting direct the viewer’s gaze. In doing so, they not only claim their own subjectivity, but they also assist the viewer in recognizing how sexism and ableism manifest themselves in her world.

In particular, Eve takes advantage of her capacity to direct the viewer’s gaze in order to problematize the foundational principles of patriarchal and/or phallocentric, masculine impulses. As the viewer traces the curvatures of Eve’s body, gazing from the top of the head to the bottom of the legs, her eyes land upon a small yet not insignificant detail: Eve’s finger, gesturing directly downward. Though subtle, Eve’s finger does not haphazardly dangle. Rather, it is taut, as though pointing immediately towards something. In trying to follow the direction of Eve’s finger, the viewer finds herself staring at a pile of small brown stones on the ground below, offset from the earth not only in their coloration but in the stark, defined lines that render them apparent. Though not immediately clear, it is in this—a quiet, seemingly meaningless gesture—that Eve manages to begin the process of challenging patriarchal systems of power. As literary critic Barbara Johnson remarks in her *Persons and Things*, mythic fascination with rocks, as exemplified by the tale of Pygmalion and (the unnamed) Galatea in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, has revolved directly around the impulses that have allowed men to literally “construct” women out of stone.53 In turn, the stony

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material itself has often been understood as a product of a phallocentric impulse to exert control over the female social subject, to determine her behavior and render her powerless in a patriarchal social system. Insofar as Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers presents a series of misshapen, fragmented stones, rather than a singular unblemished stone, the image illustrates the ways in which the patriarchal social system more broadly has been subject to internal strife. Since Eve redirects the viewer’s gaze to a pile of fractured stones, she marks a sense of territorial reclamation over them, indicating that the feminine/femme social subject has the capacity to infiltrate and disrupt a preemptively ruptured system of oppression. Eve challenges the viewer to recognize that, based on the fissures already separating the various stones, patriarchy cannot fully withstand external pressure and can be confronted in social spaces.

In fact, Eve points the viewer to face her (dis)robed flesh in ways that illuminate how women can reclaim agency over their bodies. Among the key insights into how patriarchy unfolds on the female/femme body is the branch carrying leaves that cover the genitals of both Adam and Eve. Where a large, bright blue leaf matching his cloak and tied around his neck covers Adam’s genitals, Eve is concealed by a smaller, chartreuse leaf. Significantly, both leaves—not just Adam’s—emanate from the branch held tightly in Adam’s hand, illustrating how the man, rather than the woman, actively engages in the “covering” process. Insofar as the image suggests that Adam conceals both figures, it illustrates how the process of “Hiding”—of “keeping out of shame or discomfiture”\(^54\)—is a phallocentric impulse. By extension, the attribution of value (e.g., “shame”) appears masculinized, as well. The conflation of nudity and vulnerability with shame, then, becomes deeply related to the patriarchal social system.\(^55\) Although Eve does not move to


\(^{55}\) In fact, Bak moves to establish an underlying connection between capitalist and phallocentric impulses. In Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers, Adam wears a green collar necked shirt with a bright red tie and brownish-green suit jacket. Though tattered, the suit marks a certain white-collar sensibility, one which arose with the advent of late
push the leaf away, she still evades the objects of coverage placed upon her: just as her bra slips off her shoulder, her socks appear almost scaffolded, one raised significantly higher than the other as though a deliberate effort was made to re-orient them. Even as Eve is cloaked, then, she resists the desire to keep her covered. Refusing to simply tolerate the impacts that external decisions and forces have on her, she reclaims ownership over her body. Thus, she interrogates the phallocentric inclination to dictate the presentation and/or responses expressed through women’s bodies.

Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürers further points the viewer towards the body to illustrate that patriarchal structures can detriment men and masculinized social subjects, as well. Although Adam wears significantly more clothing than Eve, his clothing is not situated across his body seamlessly. Rather, his shirt is tattered; his pants sit around his ankles; his shoes are discarded; and, most tellingly, his jacket is draped across only one of his arms. While the second arm of his jacket is not visible to the viewer, the suggestion that it has been removed and discarded insinuates that the man need not simply accept the patriarchal system that affords him certain privileges. Rather, he can embrace traditionally “feminized” spaces, can relish in the vulnerability that has been denied to him, and can look to cast off systems of gendered oppression. Indeed, insofar as the belt emanating from Adam’s pants appears serpentine, evoking images of the snake understood in some traditional Christian accounts of the tale as Satan incarnate, the image achieves three significant objectives. First, it dissociates the individual subject from the systems of oppression in which he is immersed—that is, it suggests that the conflation of “men” with “patriarchy” is detrimental, allowing the viewer to recognize that individuals’ implication in systems of oppression need not suggest their complacency within those systems. Second, in capitalism. Likewise, the leaf covering Eve’s genitals—which marks the patriarchal rejection of openness—emerge as the same color as Adam’s attire, linking the two. As a result, the image illustrates how capitalism and patriarchy are necessarily interwoven, how each sustains and empowers the other in ways that directly impact femme individuals and women.
marking the objects used to hide both bodies as “evil,” it disrupts normative assumptions that men should hide their emotions and encourages them to embrace vulnerability. And finally, because the serpentine belt is linked to but not actually on the body of the man, the image suggests that men can reimagine social systems that empower all people in order to holistically embrace all forms of gender identity. The image allows the viewer to recognize that men need not be complicit in systems of gendered oppression that exert serious pressure on both their bodies and the bodies of others. Instead, they can complicate and transform those systems to allow for more freedom for all people.

Of course, there exist not only a “male body” and a “female body.” In fact, the trope of “hiding” in the images illuminates to the viewer how gender exists as a discursive unreality. Bak’s Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürrers uses cloaking as a means of calling attention to what D. Fox Harrell would call “phantasms.” According to Fox Harrell, phantasms embody a form of ideological, cultural, and social entrenchment that preemptively dictate how an individual represents their beliefs. Because, as Fox Harrell suggests, “…self [is] influenced by social and cultural norms and externalized through situated behavior,” images can obscure, change, and/or redefine hegemonic tropes to force the viewer to probe norms that she might otherwise accept uncritically. In the case of Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürrers, Bak disrupts phantasms of a traditionally-constructed gender binary. Insofar as the cloaks cover the faces of both figures and the leaves cover their genitals, the sexes each was assigned at birth become inaccessible to the viewer, refusing her the capacity to determine the bodies’ biological manifestations and to make subsequent speculations about their genders. At the same time, the viewer interpolates their

58 Of course, the category of sex is not universally accepted as a biological reality, either. For more on this, see Pierre Bourdieu, Masculine Domination, 1-53 and Judith Butler, “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions.”
respective genders based on the clothing that each figure dons, the colors clad across their bodies, and the position that they occupy in relation to the initial figure. There appears, however, to be no reason that the individual wearing the work clothes should be understood as Adam, nor that the individual in pink should be Eve—no reason, of course, besides socialized assumptions about gender. In fact, even as the argument could be made that the person wearing the bra ought to be understood as Eve because of the hypothetical presence of breasts, the lack of cleavage and the stark line contrasting the flesh from the object suggests that the bra need not necessarily be filled by breasts—the viewer herself actually “fills in the gaps” by assuming their presence. In using cloaking as a means of obscuring the two beings’ faces, then, the image illustrates that: (1) gender is neither preemptively inscribed on the social subject nor implicit to the human condition; (2) that material objects signify certain gendered principles and, as a result of the meaning ascribed to them, reflect certain gendered sensibilities; and (3) that items thereby illustrate how the ungendered body acquires the gendered properties that radiate from various materials in order to mark the self as a gendered subject in a highly particularized form. *Adam and Eve Hiding with the Dürrers* thereby encourages the viewer to recognize the non-essential nature of gender and to question her own gendered assumptions.

At the same time, Bak demonstrates how social discourses surrounding gender often rely on ableist language. In their “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality,” Nirmala Ervelles and Andrea Minear contend that individuals who hold various disenfranchised identities—such as Eleanor Bumpurs, a poor, elderly, overweight, disabled, black woman who was killed by police—find themselves particularly susceptible to violence at the hands of systems of oppression: “[those] located perilously at the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no)bodies by the very social...
institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them.” At the same time, however, they contend that racist and sexist ideologies depend heavily on the heightened presence of ableism (e.g., “degenerate races”). To my mind, Bak’s images extend the argument made by Erevelles and Minear by suggesting that even modes of liberation rely heavily upon ableist discourses in order to achieve their goal. Because the cloak can be understood as a medium of “blinding” the two beings, Bak demonstrates how disrupting traditional assumptions surrounding gender relies on the use of disability. Although apparently innocuous, using the visual grammar of disability as a means for achieving one form of liberation suggests that disability can be appropriated as a tool, taken on and cast off, without the able-bodied person fully understanding the ramifications of doing so. In a sense, Bak’s images demonstrate how the uncritical usage of ability-centric discourse for the purposes of liberating able-bodied gender minorities disparages the experiences and lives of people with disabilities by rendering them pawns with which others can barter. By rendering this apparent to the viewer, the image begins to allow her the space to reflect on practices for re-imagining liberation without (ab)using disability.

Insofar as Bak’s images rely upon notions of seeing the face of the other, they call upon the viewer to recognize how discourses surrounding disability often conflate an incapacity to see with loss and failure. In positioning Adam and Eve and Awareness (Figure 4) as the first in his collection, Bak begins his exegesis on the Genesis 2-3 narrative near its conclusion, when, upon eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, “the eyes of both [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew they were naked.” Although Adam’s gaze—the only one that is visible in the image—appears rather blank, the look on his face, coupled with the status of his mouth as ajar,

59 Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, 382.
60 Gen. 3:7.
marks a sense of surprise. Indeed, the distance at which Eve holds the piece of pear from her body seems to reify a sense of awe, of stupefaction that generally emerges in relation to new information and/or capacities. Compounded by the sense of emergence that arises from the two bodies’ immersion within the pear, the visual positionality of the two seems to suggest that they are experiencing sight itself for the first time in the image. Though the bright blue skies of the image mark a sense of placidity, the fractured ground that lies beneath them is not exclusively marked by the pains of a potential Holocaust tragedy waiting to unfold. Instead, it encapsulates within it all of the human devastation waiting to reveal itself, to imprint the flesh of the two beings and their ancestors. To suggest that one needs to have their eyes opened in order to actually conceptualize the human condition, however, is to engage in a slippage between disability and inability. By suggesting that individuals whose eyes may not function normatively cannot fully understand or experience the earth in the same way as their peers is to disenfranchise individuals living with blindness or visual impairment. By conveying this to the viewer, Bak’s image urges her to think through her complacency in systems that oppress people with disabilities.

Bak further uses the title of the image to convey the ongoing marginalization experienced by people living with disabilities. By portraying Adam and Eve as literally having had their eyes opened, Bak’s image conflates “Awareness” with “vision” in ways that reciprocally mark the visually-impaired subject as “unaware.” At the same time, however, as the viewer grapples more with the image, Adam appears stereotypically “blind”: his hand gesturing outward as though reaching toward that which is inaccessible to him, his eyes staring ahead blankly, missing the view of that which exists within the frame, his flesh appears as the dyadic opposite to Eve, who—despite the lack of present eyes—clearly gazes at the shards of pear in front of her. Arguably disoriented based on his gaping mouth, Adam is positioned such that he conforms to stereotypes of
helplessness often associated with blindness. Although marking blindness on Adam’s body does position it as an “originally-intended” manifestation of human flesh, depicting visual impairment as a source of incapacity not only reproduces the biases experienced by the visually-impaired community, but also disenfranchises those living with blindness and vision loss by suggesting that they experience isolation from “Awareness.” The image thereby encourages the viewer to recognize the harmful ramifications of assuming the inability of people living with disabilities.

Though it could be argued that marking opened eyes as a departure from Eden suggests that visual impairment ought to be understood as paradisiacal, the sheer volume of Bak’s images refutes such a reading. In assuming that the disabled body exists in a paradise, viewers have the capacity to reinstate the objectification, exoticism, and othering experienced by people with disabilities. First, it understands people with disabilities as fodder for “inspiration porn,” in which the disabled body becomes objectified by nondisabled people, who “inspire [nondisabled people] …so that we can look at them and think, ‘Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.’” Likewise, viewing people with disabilities as paradisiacal attributes to their bodies a sense of extraordinariness that, in turn, renders them spectacles for the nondisabled: marking people with visual impairments as Edenic situates them within the realm of the extra-terrestrial, the unearthly, in ways that position them as peculiar, outlandish, and ostracized. Finally, elevating people living with visual impairments to a state of uncritical reverence not only refuses them the opportunity to lead “normal” lives but also allows nondisabled communities to neglect the necessity for infrastructural and societal change by deeming them “extra-ordinary.” In fact, the proliferation of images of Adam and Eve disrupts notions of extra-ordinariness by suggesting that people living with disabilities are not only common, but also average people. Through the ongoing

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61 Stella Young, “I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much.”
Figure 8: Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice, Samuel Bak.
(re)iteration of blindness throughout his work, Bak encourages the viewer to redefine both her conceptions of normative embodiment and her attitudes towards the visually impaired.

In particular, the attitudes that Bak challenges are specifically rooted in the assumption that disability leads to a negative or depressing life. While the abundance of images of Adam and Eve as visually impaired certainly refutes the nondisabled community’s perception of blindness as extra-ordinary, Bak’s *Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice* (Figure 8) conflates blindness with “lack” in ways that problematically locate it within the realm of the traumatic. As trauma theorist Dominick La Capra argues, the terms absence, loss, and lack each hold a different valence in relation to the individual’s experience of deprivation. Though his primary focus is on the distinction between absence and loss—which, he suggests, become associated in ways that impose narratives of trauma onto certain, non-traumatic experiences—La Capra understands “lack” as a quasi-ethnocentric imposition of meaning onto bodies and communities that do not necessarily feel the absence of a certain fixture that other cultures, peoples, or communities believe that they should experience (e.g., “This is what ought to be”). In terms of *Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice*, lack remains relevant insofar as Bak appropriates the ocularcentric beliefs of a nondisabled community. By suggesting that visual impairment is a traumatic lack, he demonstrates how trauma itself is a product of other peoples’ (namely, sighted peoples’) mindsets. In foregrounding these attitudes to disability within his work, Bak allows the viewer to understand her own complicity in ability-centric systems of oppression.

Bak’s images further illuminate for the viewer how viewing disability as a lack leads to assumptions about the agency (or lack thereof) possessed by people with disabilities. That is to say, Bak’s paintings highlight for the viewer how society objectifies people living with visual

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impairments by assuming that a lack of power is an essential quality to their person, rather than the product of larger social structures. In *Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice*, the juxtaposition of the un-blinded and the blinded body marks a dyadic relationship between the possessor and the “lack”-er of autonomy, agency, and self-determination. Standing at a distance from one another, Adam and Eve each find their eyes cloaked such that their vision emerges as presumably obscured. At the same time, however, each responds to the active blinding within the image differently: where Adam stands, his head cocked, his body limp, Eve takes it upon herself to grab at and remove the cloak itself, resisting blindness. In the process of self un-blinding, Eve grips a piece of wood that directly parallels the scale of justice often held by Lady Justice. In refusing a status as blinded, Eve marks, on the one hand, a deviation from the oft-quoted dictum that “justice is blind.” In this sense, the image seems to identify her as an arbiter of detriment. On the other hand, she also emerges as possessing a tremendous amount of agency. Because she can herself remove her cloak, she has the capacity to actually dictate her future as a sighted person. Her ability to *choose* to grip the scale of justice further illustrates that sighted people have the capacity to associate themselves with social good: because she can elect to connect herself to the social values of justice, fairness, and honesty, the sighted Eve comes to represent a sense of beneficence and good will. Meanwhile, each of Adam’s hands marks a sense of moral depravity and incapacity. Insofar as one of his hands rests upon the actual scale of justice, there emerges a sense that he physically skews it, negligently pushing it down with his hand by virtue of his inability to visualize its status as scale. Likewise, as his limp finger gestures toward the bucket below him, it lingers over the elliptical bucket at the end of the scale, as though redirecting the viewer to recognize the source of his unawareness: the eye which remains within its hollow confines and yet inaccessible to Adam. In a word, then, Adam is not only disenfranchised within
the image, but he proclaims blindness as the cause of his disenfranchisement. Adam thus illustrates for the viewer how disability has become unjustifiably marked as moral abnegation, as helplessness, and as embodied destruction.

Not only is the viewer made aware of how ideas surrounding disempowerment have been projected onto people with disabilities, but the image also moves beyond markers of subjugation to demonstrate how blindness becomes imagined as an experience of destruction, decimation, and deviation from the divine being. Hovering over the scales of justice, behind both Adam and Eve, stands an arch which, to the unsuspecting eye, appears to be an extension of the dismantled wall behind it. As she stands before the fixtures on the wall, Eve’s body—clothed with a robe of muted green, her skin a ruddy color—blends into the arch. In turn, she exists within the image as akin to and apiece of it. As the viewer’s gaze follows the curvature of the arch, she finds that her eyes initially land upon Adam’s head. Although his suit emerges as a brownish extension of the wall, his face is brightened, a starker white color exacerbated by the presence of the cloth; the disparity between his face and the wall subsequently renders him a focal point, the object situated at the end of the arch. Critically, however, from behind the arch emanates a piece of cloth that is the same white color as that which is wrapped around Adam’s head, as though an offshoot of the whiteness of his cloak. Hidden behind the cloth are stripes of green, red, orange, and blue, signifying both the completion of the arch and its overarching semiotic function: as a rainbow.

The rainbow—particularly in its brokenness—calls attention to the ways in which societies assume that people with disabilities are aberrant deviations from God’s intention for human beings. Genesis 6-9 tell the story of Noah and the flood, in which God sees that human beings have become wicked and decides to eliminate all but the family of Noah, who God deems a kind and generous person. After the flood eventually subsides, God makes a covenant with Noah (and, by extension,
the future generations of humankind) to never destroy human beings in such a fashion again. The sign of God’s covenant, according to Genesis 9:13-15, is the rainbow. Insofar as Bak’s work incorporates a broken rainbow, its fragmentation seems to identify a sense of disrupted covenant—that is, the image claims a sense of diminished connection between God, earth, and human beings. Situating the moment of recognition behind the individual with a visual impairment—and rendering him eye-catching and central through the use of the brightened color of his face specifically—the image locates blindness (and disability) as a physical manifestation of a broken covenant. Bak’s image suggests: (1) that, based on the muted tones of Adam’s jacket and the centrality of his face, his visual impairment functions as the critical component of his identity; and (2) that the social subject living with blindness is not merely set apart from his nondisabled counterparts, but resides in a body that is understood as experiencing ongoing decay, fracturing, and isolation from the divine. Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice thus demands that the viewer recognize how she has problematically misaligned blindness in ways that marks disability as lack, as tragedy, as the living testimony of divine abandonment and abnegation.

And yet, Bak’s painting does not simply illustrate the problematic underpinnings of ableism in an American social imaginary. Instead, the image encourages her to directly face, grapple with, and confront the ableist discourses that characterize her society. Although Eve’s engagement in the process of self un-blinding certainly remains questionable for the viewer, her relationship to the cloak remains crucial. Whereas Adam seems distant and unknowable, Eve’s self-revelatory posturing (e.g., tugging away at the cloak) demonstrates that she possesses eyebrows, a nose, eyes: a face. Much like the iterations of Adam and Eve’s bodies that faced one

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63 “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh…” (Gen 9:13-15).
another before, Eve now directly faces the viewer, staring her directly in the eye, as though to emphatically point to her humanity. She calls upon the viewer to recognize that behind the cloak lies a person. Eve demonstrates for the viewer that individuals with visual impairments are just as human as able-bodied individuals and deserve all the rights afforded to their able-bodied peers.

Of course, the viewer is not simply allowed to sit idly with her recognition of ableist social structures. Instead, *Adam and Eve and the Practice of Justice* encourages her to serve as an ally for people with disabilities by amplifying their voices. To an extent, Eve’s gaze is unyielding: as the viewer’s eye travels across the image, she cannot evade Eve’s piercing stare, which follows her no matter where she looks. This omnipresent stare seems to mark the necessary pressure that people with disabilities must place upon their able-bodied peers in order to prompt recognitions of ableism. At the same time as Eve pierces the viewer’s body with her eyes, however, her mouth remains hidden behind the cloak. Muffled by the piece of cloth in front of her mouth, Eve’s voice becomes obfuscated in the image. In turn, the painting illustrates how people with disabilities often have their voices stifled and overlooked. Through the juxtaposition of her screeching gaze with her silenced lips, then, Eve asks the viewer not to speak *for* her, but to (re)create spaces that allow her voice to be heard. The image encourages the viewer to recognize her own role in empowering the voices of those with disabilities—and, to some extent, all communities experiencing disenfranchisement—in order to ensure that their needs are being met. It calls upon the viewer to actively amplify the voices of those with disabilities in order to ensure that they are being understood, recognized, and addressed.

By drawing the viewer to reflect upon her own subjectivity in relation to the image as “object,” then, Bak’s paintings invite her to more critically interrogate the systems of gendered and ability-centric power that produce various hierarchies of power within and throughout
American society. In guiding her through the process of viewership, Adam and Eve illustrate for her how best to confound and complicate hegemonic norms surrounding gender and ability. They illustrate, on the one hand, the limitations of viewership, as simply gazing at the image will not confound systems of oppression. On the other hand, however, they also manage to: (1) instruct her on the manifestations of social ills experienced by certain communities within the United States; and (2) demonstrate for her how the act of listening to and elevating the voices of marginalized communities can more fully allow for the liberation of communities enduring disenfranchisement. The final decision—whether to internalize and vocalize the paintings’ messages, to reject them altogether, or to situate herself somewhere in between—lies with the viewer alone. But in allowing her the space for deep reflection, the paintings provide the viewer with the chance to recognize her own positionality, to challenge the society in which she lives, and to strive for meaningful equality for all.

(Re)visioning the Past: Transforming the Landscape of Memory

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, Bak’s paintings provide a fecund space for ruminating on how the face itself can allow people to more fully understand others and, by extension, themselves. In a way, the images invite the viewer on a journey of historical introspection. They first allow her the space to interrogate her relationship to past trauma, to recognize and see the losses endured during the Holocaust. As she travels through the process of viewership, the paintings encourage her to consider her own relationship to communities of the past, to find a way to hold onto the memories of those lost in the catastrophe and foster collective healing. Inviting her to venture into the realm of the present, they allow her to directly face the gendered and ability-centric systems underlying her experiences in the world. By the end of her
metaphorical journey through the paintings, the viewer finds herself gazing toward the future. The images have encouraged her to probe her own actions such that she can, in turn, re-imagine the boundaries of social experience. They therein invite her to complicate her own self-understanding such that she can stop herself from perpetuating trauma.

By allowing the viewer this space for reflection on past, present, and future, Bak re-envisions the landscape of memory. Whereas texts and paintings steeped in Holocaust language have generally been preoccupied with resurrecting the past—a task that no person could deny is both necessary and noble—Bak’s images allow the viewer to venture into the present and future. In doing so, they illustrate how bearing witness to the Holocaust has often been a process of memorialization, rather than memory. Memorialization, to my mind, is undoubtedly a process of commemoration, but it is also one that acknowledges its own termination. One does not memorialize the living. In fact, memorialization reifies death. In a sense, then, memorialization is a process of objectification, of rendering living flesh into decaying material. Bak’s paintings, on the other hand, concern themselves with memory, the continued process of (re)animating the past in order to allow it to sway the trajectory of its future. In some ways, the memory Bak presents is, much like his images themselves, linear: in their persistent de- and re-construction of the Genesis 2-3 narrative, they seem to conjecture a “new” story for Adam and Eve in each of their iterations. In other, poignant ways, though, Bak’s version of memory is also cyclical. His paintings allow the viewer to recognize how the future images are perpetually influenced by those that preceded them. In much the same way as the viewer experiences continued revisions of self in the process of viewership, memory itself becomes framed as a process of continued development. The past never truly fades; the future never truly “begins”; past, present, and future are inextricably linked.
As Bak empowers the viewer to reimagine the situation of memory, he allows her to mingle her lament for the past with her understanding of the trauma of the present. On the one hand, his images create a community of mourners, joining self and other together and asking them to unite their voices into a collective *Kaddish*\textsuperscript{64} for those ruthlessly murdered in the Holocaust. On the other, he asks that that very same community transform its grief-stricken tune into one marked by a sense of possibility. Rather than linger in the melancholic space of past devastation, the images’ support of the viewer allows her the opportunity to change the spaces that she currently occupies such that they refuse the propagation of new forms of trauma. In allowing the viewer this opportunity for active response to social catastrophes, Bak’s images produce a surge of hope in the light of tremendous pain: the viewer need not accept a world that marginalizes certain communities, as she can do something to change it. His images thus allow the viewer to work towards establishing equality, fostering inclusivity, and celebrating diversity in a world east of Eden.

\textsuperscript{64} The *Kaddish* is a Jewish prayer typically recited in synagogue to mark the death of another person.
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