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Delighted, still, by this life on earth

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When he was a child, the artist Samuel Bak lived in the Vilna Ghetto, established by the Nazis in 1941 in what is now Vilnius, Lithuania. Out of the tens of thousands of Jews who lived there,

only a few hundred survived. Bak grew up to become a tireless painter of Holocaust themes. His latest undertaking, at Pucker Gallery, is the morally complex narrative of Adam and Eve, cast out of paradise and grappling with the idea of a God who promised never to destroy humanity.

In a gorgeous, bright, and haunting series of paintings that ironically draws on the ideals of beauty set forth by Renaissance artists, Bak weaves the troubled and ongoing story of the expelled couple with a rich set of recurring symbols that tie together threads of biblical and art historical narrative. The works also raise questions of class, power, and the place of beauty in telling the ugliest of tales.

"Adam and Eve and the Celebration of Promise" begins with the story of Noah. In the Bible, as the floodwaters receded, God made a rainbow as a covenant that he would never again flood the earth. Bak sets the ark on a mountaintop in the distance in this painting, while Adam and Eve pull ribbons from a rainbow that more resembles a tacked-together stage prop — it's made of wood, and held up by ropes. Beneath the colored ribbons are stripes that recall concentration camp uniforms, or perhaps a prayer shawl. This kind of ambiguity is Bak's great strength; he mourns, but he does not condemn. He has tremendous sympathy for the vexed human condition.

Half-eaten pears appear in most of the paintings, symbols of the forbidden fruit. They're small or monumental, fleshy or manufactured. Adam and Eve cart them around; they grow trees from the inside of a giant pear, and shelter beneath another one. "Adam and Eve and the Family Tree" revisits Jan Van Eyck's 1434 "The Arnolfini Portrait" depicting a wealthy betrothed pair. Bak's couple sits beneath and entwined in the roots of a bolted-together tree; bitten pears hang from ropes over their heads. There's a scorched-earth quality to the image, despite the green grass beyond them; everything has fallen apart and been jiggered back together. Adam and Eve look inconsolable. Yet they persevere.

In her thoughtful catalog essay, art historian Maya Balakirsky Katz quotes



Top: "Adam and Eve and the Celebration of Promise" by Samuel Bak. Above: "Falling" (left) by Lynda Schlosberg and "A Loose Cognition Extrapolated: Carousel" by Wade Aaron.

philosopher Theodor Adorno: "After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric," and points out that artists who have addressed the Holocaust have done it through the lens of Modernism and abstraction. Bak, though, utilizes the lush, warm tones and delight in the human form of the Renaissance. For him, I suspect, the beauty does not redeem horror. But it does suggest a life that follows terrible loss, in which love, compassion, and faith play a part.

Family revelations

Paris Visone's color photos of her family remind me of Nan Goldin's photos of her friends: at times jarringly intimate, and often wittily revealing. Visone has an exhibit up at Suffolk University Art Gallery.

"Papa — Peabody, MA" is an up-close and perhaps too personal shot of a bare-chested, plump, tattooed man entertaining a lizard on his belly. "Dior, Paige and Anthony — Peabody, MA" depicts three young people, each with the carefully

SAMUEL BAK: Adam & Eve

At: Pucker Gallery, 171 Newbury St., through Sept. 12. 617-267-9473, www.puckergallery.com

PARIS VISONE: Culture of Looking

At: Suffolk University Art Gallery, 75 Arlington St., through Sept. 4. 617-573-8785, www.jameshull.com/suffolkartgallery.html

SPACE/LIGHT/CITY

At: 13Forest Gallery, 167A Massachusetts Ave., Arlington, through Oct. 7. 781-641-3333, www.13forest.com

constructed facade of adolescence. Anthony has his back to us, although we can see his impressive stubble, and his baseball hat is on backward. The two girls are studies in opposites: One hunches and hides behind dark glasses, while the other, recumbent in a white mini dress, offers herself to the camera.

There's something naked about these photos. Most of the subjects don't seem to pose, which allows us to glimpse the people beneath their tattoos, makeup, and emblazoned T-shirts. Paradoxically, it also makes a viewer wonder about the choices these folks have made in constructing their identity to present to the world.

Inside three dimensions

"Space/Light/City," a group show at 13Forest Gallery in Arlington, features, among other things, works on paper by artist Wade Aaron, who will have a new installation on view at the September opening of the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts. There's "A Loose Cognition Extrapolated: Carousel," an inkjet collage in which black silhouettes of chairs are joined in a snowflake pattern against a prismatic, multicolored background — the biggest piece in "Space/Light/City," but to me, a shallow evocation of Aaron's dexterous shadow-based three-dimensional works.

I prefer his less showy diagrammatic drawings, such as "Untitled (Text Word Idea . . .)," a schematic of intersecting lines filled in with metal leaf, the whole of which appears to cast a shadow, giving weight to forms we associate with sketchy ideas. Little numbers at the intersections correspond to a list: text, word, idea, whim, and more. The piece captures the artistic process of making something out of nothing.

Lynda Schlosberg's paintings, such as "Falling," are the most visually enticing works in the show. She layers intricate patterns of dots and grids that pop off the surface over flat blue swatches, which in turn float over deep, misty passages. The work jumps out and recedes at the same time, delightfully exercising the eyes.

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