

SAMUEL BAK

THE LANDSCAPE OF JEWISH EXPERIENCE

HOLOCAUST MUSEUM HOUSTON

B'NAI B'RITH KLUTZNICK NATIONAL JEWISH MUSEUM
WASHINGTON, D.C.



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PRESENTED IN COOPERATION WITH THE ARTIST AND PUCKER GALLERY, BOSTON.

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BAK
95

BEYOND THE LANDSCAPE OF JEWISH EXPERIENCE

I. IMAGE AND CONTEXT

That Samuel Bak should choose to label a body of his work *Landscapes of Jewish Experience* reflects his profound sense of historical and art historical irony. When in the 19th century, Western art, from Europe to the United States, began to focus on unpopulated landscapes, part of the impulse to do so derived from a desire to see the world around us – mountains and sky, trees and fields, seas and streams and cloud formations – on their own terms. Stepping even beyond the dwarfing of humans that the 16th century Dutch and Flemish painters had introduced into our visual thinking, painters from Corot to Monet to Bierstadt eliminated humans from the scene altogether: the point became to see the aesthetics of nature without reference to any sort of narrative – without reference to the human experience, except the subjective one of viewing the work of art before one's eyes.

A field of poppies or the road to Louveciennes or a dark, mysterious wood or a series of haystacks – even the man-made cathedral at Rouen in the twilight – become, on the one hand, a pure visual experience, and evoke feelings related to the beauty of the landscape as it has been captured by the artist. On the other hand, such subjects offer no opportunity to tell the story of people, because there are none intruding into the vision placed before the viewer. This also means that works of art such as these require no explanatory labels – they are approached by us with nothing more than our eyes and our emotions; there is no iconography and no interpretation necessary.

If one visits the great art museums of the world, not surprisingly, one finds a vast array of magnificent paintings with a minimum of narrative texts and labels: we don't need them to appreciate the images. Most of what one encounters when one visits a *Jewish* museum is precisely the opposite in this respect: explanatory labels abound, necessary to the hermeneutics of the experience of walking through spaces devoted to exploring and explaining the history, culture and traditions of a far-flung and varied people, the details of whose experience are not immediately familiar to many Jews and most non-Jews alike.

Even with the remarkable burgeoning of visual self-expression among Jews – from Pissaro to Lifschitz and Modigliani to Rothko and Susan Schwab – there is a perceived need to *explain*. *What does this work mean; how* is the work of these artists "*Jewish*"? How does what they do *relate* – if at all – to the genre painting of a Moritz Oppenheim or the craftsmanship of a Torah finial from Poland or one from Morocco or to the mosaic floor of a sixth century synagogue? And so on.

Opposite page:

Study F, 1995

Oil on Linen, 23⁷/₈ x 15¹/₈", BK415

There is irony here. Many people still assume that Jews have no visual art history due to the Second Commandment. They are *wrong*. There is a *rich* history, although there *have* been some times and places where there *have* been feelings of inhibition regarding visual art – but so much of what was produced has not survived, due to the constant experience of destruction and exile of the Jews, that one could receive the impression that we are not a visual people. But, in fact, the problem is rather that Jewish visual history is so varied that one can't fit it into a neat and simple box of definition. And at the same time, the intense *textuality* of the Jewish relationship to reality often obscures the importance of imagery in articulating that relationship.

Explanations and the raising and reraising of questions is necessary to fully grasp Jewish history and experience. For the condition of Jews in Russia of the late 18th century is not what it is in Russia of the late 20th century; neither is comparable to the experience of Jews in Morocco in the 16th century or Kai Fung Fu, China, in the 12th century, or New York City or Jerusalem in the 20th – and so on. The *Landscapes of Jewish Experience* are enormously varied. To seek to explore them is to engage in a complicated process that yields no simple answers. It is to view "landscapes" as other than mountains and seas in their natural glory; it is to offer narrative and to seek explanation – to locate humans and their condition within, and expressed by, the stones and trees themselves. For Samuel Bak, to juxtapose the notion of "landscape" with the notion of "Jewish experience" – to imbed the one within the other – is, simply as a concept, profoundly perceptive: there cannot *be* landscapes in the Jewish context that are devoid of human experience. Bak recognizes this in the broadest art historical and most specifically Jewish terms.

The eclectic subject and style proclivities of Pissaro reflect, in part, the Jewishness of his thinking: his straightforward and unsentimental empathy for the disenfranchised; his intellectual focus on new scientific developments in optics and spectroscopy and how they apply to painting, and the sense of a social and not merely aesthetic responsibility for the artist; his constant search for new ways of visual self-expression – are partially, at least, a function of his Jewish background. Rothko's marvelous and luminescent abstractions, which drive the viewer's eye to the center of their spaces, are most fully understood and appreciated with respect to the programmatic intention that supplements their aesthetics: to offer *tikkun* – repair of the world on the scale of huge canvasses, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, and the blasting apart of the world that those twin events represent.

II. BAK'S VISION AND RE-VISION

Bak's vision encompasses the broad, general specifics of the Jewish experience, with its range and variety, and the threads that are common to all its parts. His landscapes are mostly – in this he is absolutely consistent with the last two centuries of western art history – devoid of people. But he populates them with a magnificent symbolology that speaks straightforwardly of the Jewish experience which is his focus. Within the body of human experience, and within the general specifics of Jewish experience, none is more traumatic and more devastating than the Holocaust. It would be surprising if that were not the scarlet thread that boldly interweaves all others through the artist's work. This is particularly so since his personal life experience was shaped in the crucible of the Holocaust – he can draw on his own trauma to create an awesome body of work.

And it is awesome both because of its narrative content and because of the pure aesthetics of his accomplishment. The story told throughout his paintings is one told with visual grandeur of two types. First, that the nature of the images he creates, in their surreal aspect, reflects an enormously fertile mind, carrying to an extremity the obligation of an artist to transform reality into a newness, a re-vision on the canvas; to filter reality through his sensibilities and make us see and think in terms we hadn't before. Second, that he manages this with a virtuosic skill; we look and look again with disbelief at his ability to turn paint into stone and wood and flesh as much as at his ingenuity in turning flesh into stone and wood.

Study G, 1995
Oil on Linen, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", BK416



Study I, 1995
Oil on Linen, 18 x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", BK418



Study B, 1995
Oil on Canvas, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", BK411



Study D, 1995
Oil on Canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", BK413





Pardes III, 1994
Oil on Linen, 45 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 45 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", BK312

The Four Degrees of Access lead us – if we can follow – through the everyday flotsam and jetsam of life's laundry, into four doorways. Each is subtly marked by a Hebrew letter, standing for a word. Each word refers to an approach to interpreting the Torah delineated by the thirteenth century rabbis. *Pey* ("P") represents *P'shat*, which seeks a literal meaning. *Resh* ("R") stands for *Remez*, which looks for an allegorical meaning; *Dalet* ("D") signifies *D'rash*, which is the method of interpreting by means of *midrash* – filling in lacunae and excavating the text by means of legends; *Samech* ("S") refers to *sod*, the hidden, mystical meanings sought beneath the surface of the deepest depths of the texts.

For a people of texts, the continuous cycle of their interpretation and reinterpretation is a synonym for life. For a people whose covenant is with an invisible, intangible God, texts in which that God has spelled out the covenant are the key to the doorways of life. The four doors lie open, each at its own level: there are many paths to the garden within. The garden is the paradise left behind by our aboriginal ancestors after they disobeyed God's commandment and ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Without their disobedience, they would still be there, innocent as children – and we wouldn't *be*.

Thus the destruction of paradise is the construction of human history – with its magnificent chamber music and its unfathomable ovens. "Paradise" as a word, as text, is derived (by way of Latin and in turn by way of Greek) from Persian. Borrowed into Hebrew, and transformed, it became *pardes*, meaning "garden" or "orchard". But the consonants of Hebrew's unvocalic personality yield the four letters (P,R,D,S) which are the compendium of the four-fold path of approaching the Torah. The garden within is the garden of Torah – which *is* the bridge between God and ourselves; it is the creation and creator of our spiritual landscape, the mirror in which God and we see ourselves and each other.

IV. THE OPENING OF THE MYSTICAL LANDSCAPE

The letters are the keys – and in Bak's landscapes, keys can be as hidden as *sod* and as obvious as *p'shat*. In *Wall*, for example, we see a giant key embedded in the mountainous stone wall before which the stage-set houses on wheels rest – homes that are not homes, prepared to move with no more than false means of locomotion, like the Jewish people in its eternal wandering from landscape to landscape. The light that washes at a diagonal across the surfaces, engendering striped shadows, creates the stripes of a *Tallit*, a prayer shawl, constant companion of places and times of devotion through centuries of exilic wandering. The key's teeth form the letter *shin* ("SH"), standing for the word *Shaddai* – God's power-name, in turn symbolizing God's protective aspect: it is on the *mezuzzah*, (the doorpost); in Jewish homes, it is the container with its scroll that *marks* the doorposts of our houses and our gates. It was on the doorposts and the gates of most of the Jews torn from their houses – left empty, and insubstantial, like flat stage sets, stripped of their inhabitants – and transported to Auschwitz and other destinations.

And so: the key that opens no door, the doors that lead nowhere, the empty rooms and empty skies that offer no answers. Candles mark the weekly commemoration of the Covenant embodied in the Sabbath (*Zakhor et Yom HaShabbat...* "Remember the Sabbath Day..."), but also the annual remembrance (*Yizkor*) of loved ones gone, known and anonymous. Smoke rises out of the candles and out of the toy trains that lead to a familiar crematorial chimney, and out of the smokestacks on ships of stone filled with stage-set homes and the flat backs of Covenantal Tablets, in a *Voyage* going nowhere, except, perhaps out into an empty sea as devoid of answers as the sky and as devoid of connection as the barren mountains.

Yet there is *Continuing Prayer* and the endless faith of *T'filah*. *The Four Trees of Learning*, even if one has been reduced to flame and smoke and the second cut apart, include the third, held up by the stiffest of braces, as its branches still seek and its leaves have not ceased to flow out. They include the fourth, yearning for the heavens beyond the edge of the picture frame.

Family Trees – a series of them – torn, cut, or burned, somehow still flourish. The yellow leaves of *Family Tree III* are shaped as Stars of David: they hang on a dismal old oak in a more dismal landscape – but one cannot miss the small sprig of green that grows just above the horizon line. *Family Tree II* bursts through an empty house, and is itself hung with tree houses – or rather, its branches grow through them. One of these has a small chimney, with smoke coming out of it: there must be *life* within; the chimney which, elsewhere, is death, is life *here*: this is the tree of resurrection. The paradoxes of human existence become intensified as the paradoxes of Jewish experience have become focussed as a series of layered symbols, with revealed and hidden meanings.

"... *It is a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to it...*" – which, in Bak's lexicon, is an old trunk and roots and crippled branches which yet flow out of the orifices of a house that is no longer a home. But if the Torah is a tree and the tree is the Torah, its text is the source of never-ending *life*, of the never-quenched covenantal promise of *survival*; and if the home is the person and all that we contain within ourselves, then Bak's *Tree of Life* is each of us, however torn down by the world, from which life rises, renewed and bursting through us by means of the particulars of that Torah which we each carry within us.

It is within the *Protected Area* which each of us, like Bak, holds hidden, filled with water and offering greenery in emergence. The hiddenness – the *sod* – may be as invisible to ourselves as it is to others, as unfathomable as the skies and the God that made them; as obscure as the dark double curved doorway of the Ten Commandments which are the centerpiece of Torah, with the mysterious answer – the Garden, *pardes* – spelled out over the doors, yet missing the vowels that clarify its pronunciation.

Bak leads us past the laundry and the roots and the stones and the wood fragments, with candles and the texts that they illuminate, through the complex *Landscapes of Jewish Experience*. These are the most extraordinary of landscapes, overrun with growths found only in the world of Bak's magnificent imagination, attached to and detached from the human condition. Their eery silences cry out with a bold eloquence: they ask us to reclaim civilization within the repeating ravages of barbarism, that lead out of Auschwitz to Biafra and Cambodia, Rwanda and Yugoslavia; they importune us to go forward without ever forgetting what we have left behind – so that the dark stillnesses may *be* left behind in favor of the light carried forth by our children's children.

— ORI Z. SOLTES
 DIRECTOR AND CURATOR
 B'NAI B'RITH KLUTZNICK NATIONAL JEWISH MUSEUM



Smoke, 1977
Oil on Linen, 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 63"





Different Point of View, 1996
Oil on Linen, 26 x 32", BK388

Opposite:
Orbyoth
Oil on Linen, 51.18 x 38.58", BK223



A Tree of Learning, 1995
Oil on Linen, 39 x 32", BK408



The Four Degrees of Access, 1995
Oil on Canvas, 32 x 26", BK399



The Four Trees of Learning, 1995
Oil on Linen, 22 x 26", BK391



Family Tree III, 1995
Oil on Canvas, 26 x 22", BK392



In a Corner of Ponari, 1995
Oil on Linen, 31⁷/₈ x 25⁷/₈" , BK366



Terminus, 1995
Oil on Linen, 32 x 39", BK406

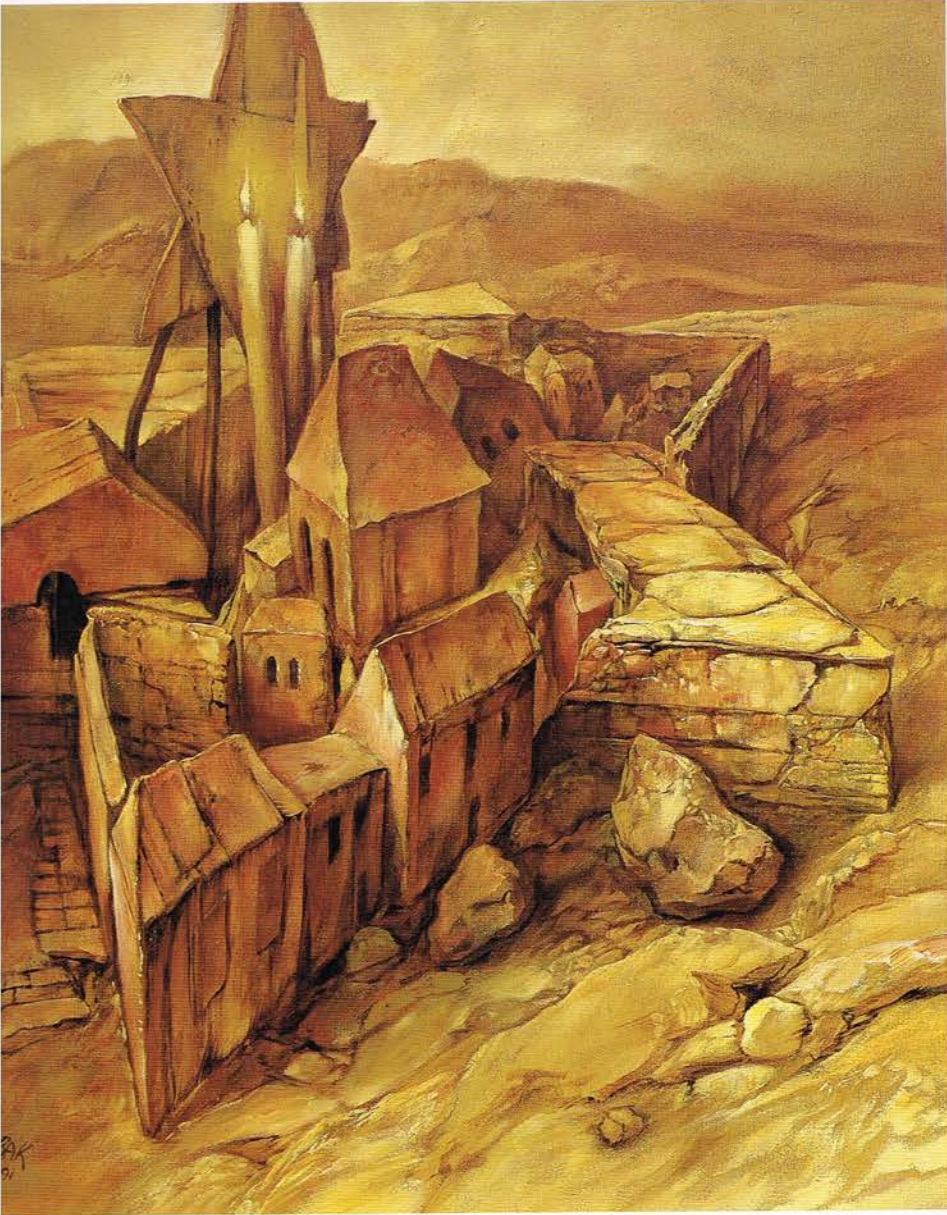


Wall

Oil on Linen, 25.6 x 31.9" , BK213

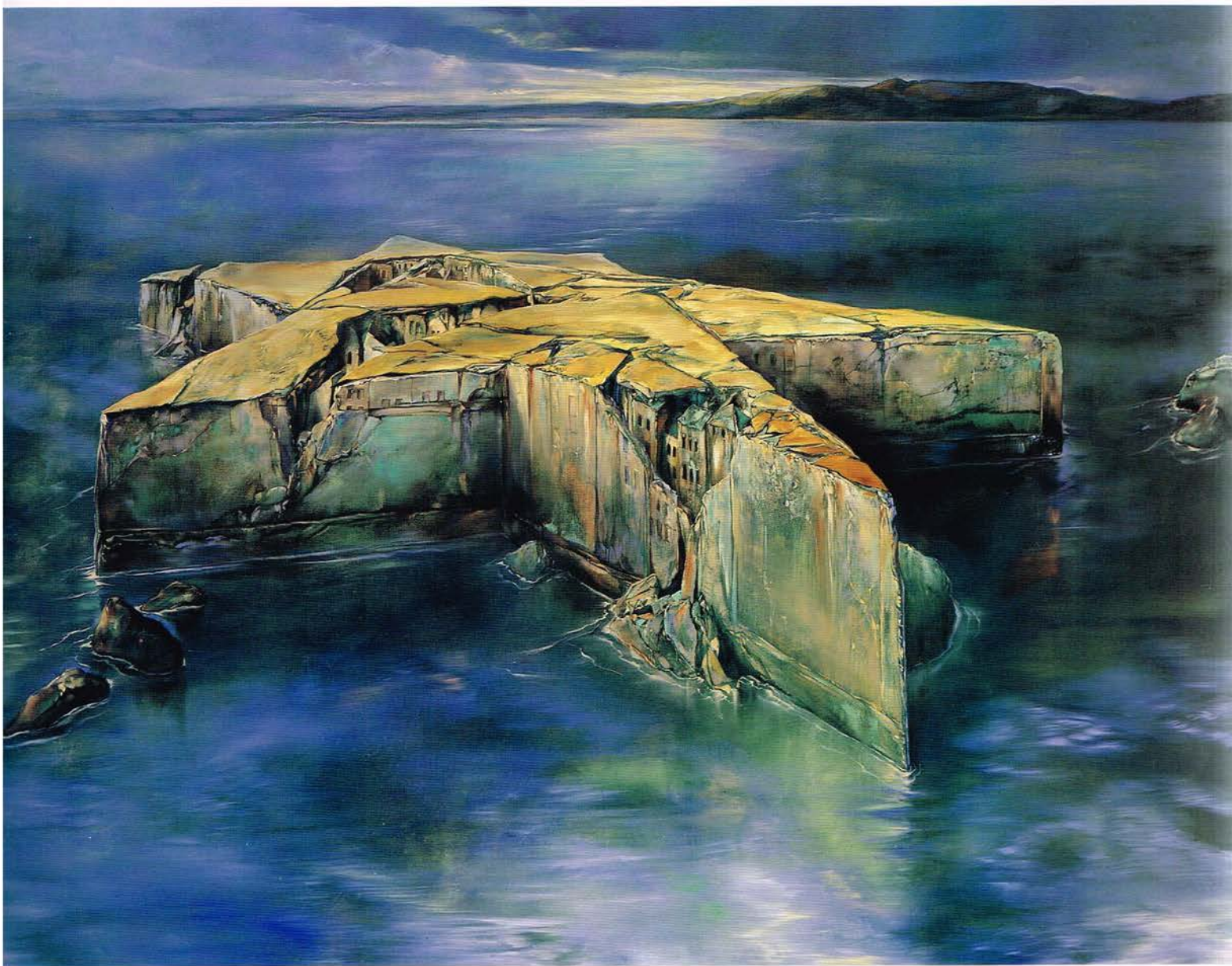


Voyage
Oil on Linen, 39.37 x 31.9", BK221



Camp

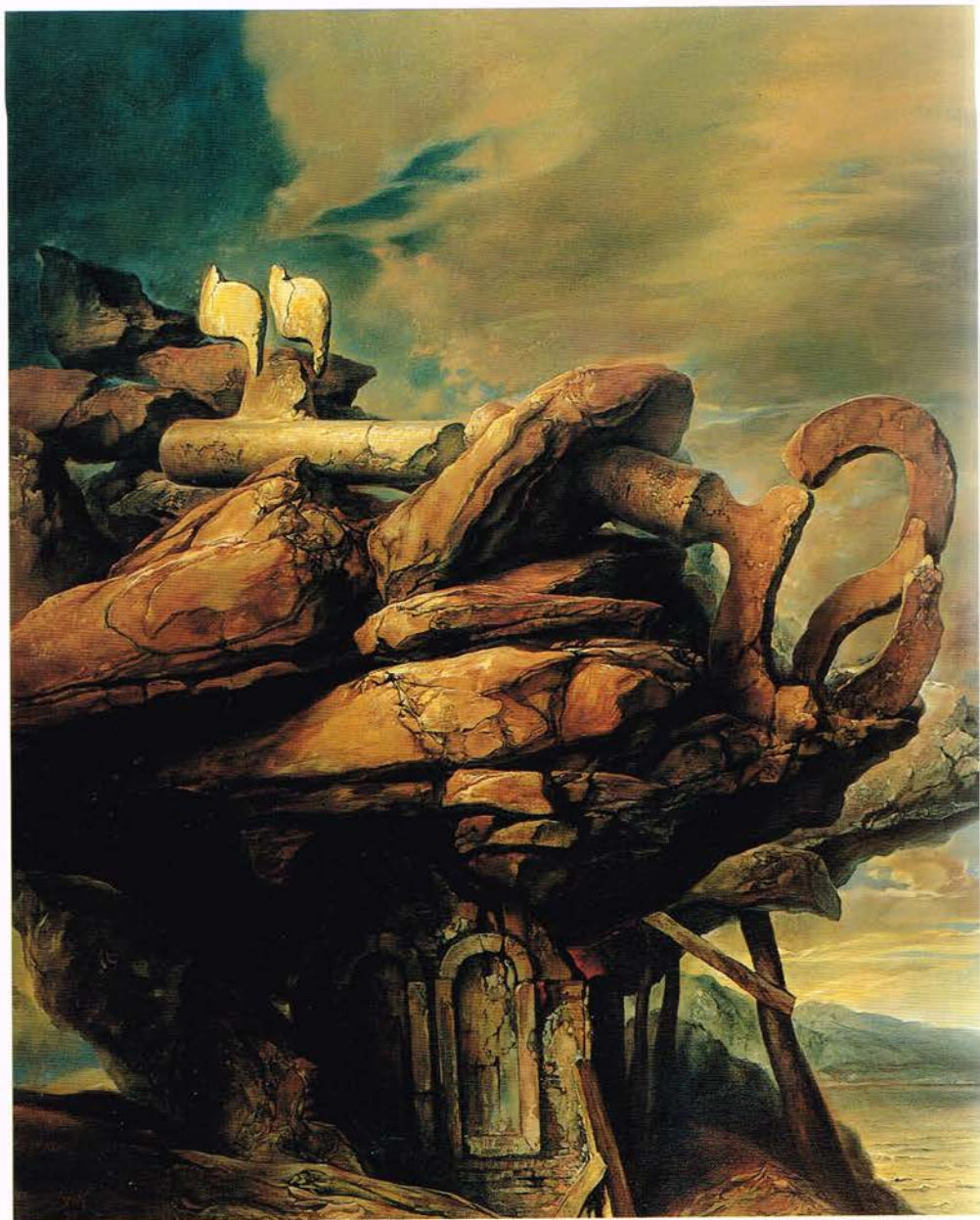
Oil on Linen, 16.1 x 13", BK189



Alone III, 1994
Oil on Linen, 36 x 48", BK313



Yellow, 1992
Oil on Linen, 63 x 78", BK422



The Hidden Question, 1994
Oil on Linen, 31⁷/₈ x 39³/₈", BK359



Gal Ed III, 1994

Oil on Linen, 25³/₈ x 21¹/₄" , BK375



Continuing Prayer, 1995
Oil on Linen, 39 x 32", BK407

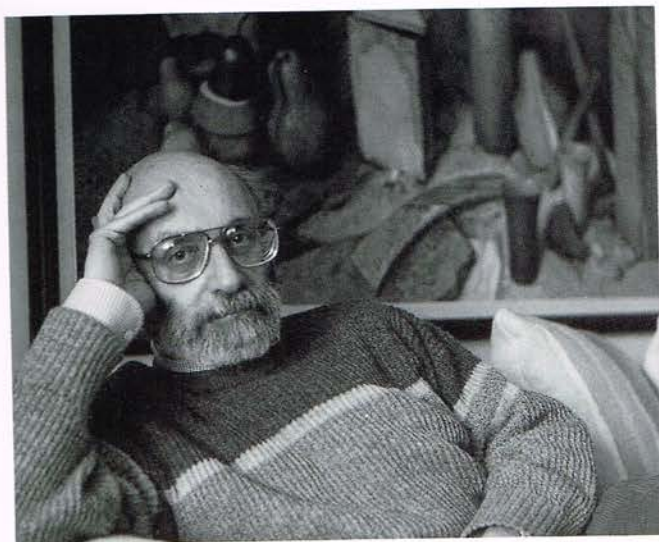


Last Movement, 1996
Oil on Linen, 55 x 63", BK434

Opposite page:
Solo, 1996
Oil on Canvas, 50 x 34", BK432



SAMUEL BAK



- 1933 Born 12 August in Vilna, Poland.
1940-44 Under German occupation: ghetto, work-camp, refuge in a monastery.
1942 First exhibition of drawings in the ghetto Vilna.
1945-48 Displaced Persons camps in Germany; studied painting in Munich.
1948 Emigrated to Israel.
1952 Studied at the Bezalel Art School, Jerusalem.
1953-56 Army service.
1956 Received the First Prize of the American-Israeli Cultural Foundation.
1956-59 Lived in Paris. Studied at the "Ecole des Beaux-Arts."
1959-93 1959-66 lived in Rome;
1966-74 in Israel;
1974-77 in New York City;
1977-80 in Israel;
1980-84 in Paris
1984-93 in Switzerland.
1993 Moved to Weston, Massachusetts.

SOLO GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

Galleria Schneider – 1959, 1961, 1965, 1966
Galleria Liguria – 1963.
L'Angle Aigu, Brussels – 1965.
Alwin Gallery, London – 1965.
Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv – 1966.
Roma Gallery, Chicago – 1967.
Modern Art Gallery, Jaffa – 1968.
Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston – 1969, 1972, 1975, 1979, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991.
Hadassah "K" Gallery, Tel Aviv – 1971, 1973, 1978.
Aberbach Fine Art, New York – 1974, 1975, 1978.
Ketterer Gallery, Munich – 1977.
Amstutz Gallery, Zurich – 1978.
Vonderbank Gallery, Frankfurt – 1978.
Goldman Gallery, Haifa – 1978.

DeBel Gallery, Jerusalem – 1978, 1980.
Galerie Levy, Hamburg – 1980.
Thorens Fine Art, Basel – 1981.
Kallenbach Fine Art, Munich – 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987.
Soufer Gallery, New York – 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992.
Galerie Ludwig Lange, Berlin – 1987.
Galerie Carpentier, Paris – 1988.
Galerie M.A.G., Paris – 1989.
Galerie Marc Richard, Zurich – 1990.
Galerie de la Cathedrale, Fribourg – 1991, 1992.
Galerie Picpus, Montreux – 1991, 1992.
Pucker Gallery, Boston – 1993. "Landscapes of Jewish Experience"
Pucker Gallery, Boston – 1995. "The Fruit of Knowledge"
Pucker Gallery, Boston – 1996. "Landscapes of Jewish Experience II"
Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH – 1997.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- The Carnegie International, Pittsburgh – 1961.
"Image and Imagination", Tel Aviv Museum – 1967.
"Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th Century,"
Jewish Museum, New York – 1975.
International Art Fair, Basel – 1979, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1986.
"Nachábilder," Kunstahalle, Hannover – 1979.
"Bilder Sind Nicht Verboten," Stadtische Kunstáhale,
Dusseldorf – 1982.
"Still Life," Tel Aviv Museum – 1984.
International Art Fair, Ghent – 1986.
"Chagall to Kitaj", Barbican Art Center, London – 1990.
"Witness and Legacy", Travelling Group Exhibition in
North America – 1995 - present.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts.
Dürer House, Nuremberg.
Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg.
German Parliament, Bonn.
Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.
Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
Jewish Museum, New York.
Kunstmuseum, Bamberg.
Municipality of Nuremberg.
Rose Museum, Brandeis, Waltham, Massachusetts.
University of Haifa, Israel.
Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel.
Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem.
Vaud State, Switzerland.
Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

MONOGRAPHS/BOOKS

- Chess as Metaphor In the Art of Samuel Bak,
Jean Louis Cornuz. Boston & Montreux, 1991.
Samuel Bak, The Past Continues,
Samuel Bak and Paul T. Nagano. David R. Godine,
Boston, 1988.
Bak, Monuments to Our Dreams, Rolf Kallenbach.
Limes Verlag, Weisbaden & Munich, 1977.
Bak, Paintings of the Last Decade,
A. Kaufman and Paul T. Nagano. Aberbach,
New York, 1974.
Ewiges Licht (Landsberg: A Memoir 1944-1948),
Samuel Bak. Jewish Museum Frankfurt, 1996.
Landscapes of Jewish Experience, Lawrence Langer.
University Press of New England,
to be published Spring, 1997.

MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

- Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem – 1963.
Tel Aviv Museum – 1963.
Brockton Art Center, Fuller Memorial – 1969.
Bronfman Center, Montreal – 1970.
Rose Museum, Brandeis, Waltham, Massachusetts – 1976.
Heidelberg Museum – 1977.
Kunstverein Esslingen – 1977.
Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg – 1977.
Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf – 1978.
Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn – 1978.
University of Haifa, Israel – 1978.
Museum Der Stadt, Landau – 1979.
Kunstmuseum, Wiesbaden – 1979.
Kunstverein Braunschweig – 1980.
Traveling Exhibition organized by Ministry of Culture
and Education - visited 30 cultural centers in Israel
– 1980-85.
Stadtgalerie Bamberg, Villa Dessauer – 1988.
"The Past Continues - Two Decades" Koffler Gallery,
Toronto Ontario – 1990.
"The Past Continues" Temple Judea Museum,
Philadelphia – 1991.
"Bak and Dürer" Dürer Museum, Nuremberg – 1991.
"Samuel Bak - Landschaften Jüdischer Erfahrung"
Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main – 1993
"FLIGHT: Escape, Hope, Redemption" Hebrew Union College
- Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, New York – 1994.
"Samuel Bak- A Retrospective Journey: Paintings 1946-1994" Janice
Charach Epstein Museum/Gallery,
West Bloomfield, MI – 1994.
"Myth, Midrash and Mysticism" Spertus Museum,
Chicago, IL – 1995.
"Myth, Midrash, and Mysticism" Mizel Museum of Judaica,
Denver, Colorado – 1995.
"Landscapes of Jewish Experience" Wilshire Boulevard Temple,
Los Angeles, California – 1995.
"Myth, Midrash, and Mysticism" The National Catholic
Center For Holocaust Education, Seton Hill College,
Greensburg, Pennsylvania – 1995.
"Myth, Midrash, and Mysticism" Rosen Museum Gallery,
Boca Raton, Florida – 1996.

Back cover:
Reflections in a Window, 1995
Oil on Linen, 26 x 32", BK404

