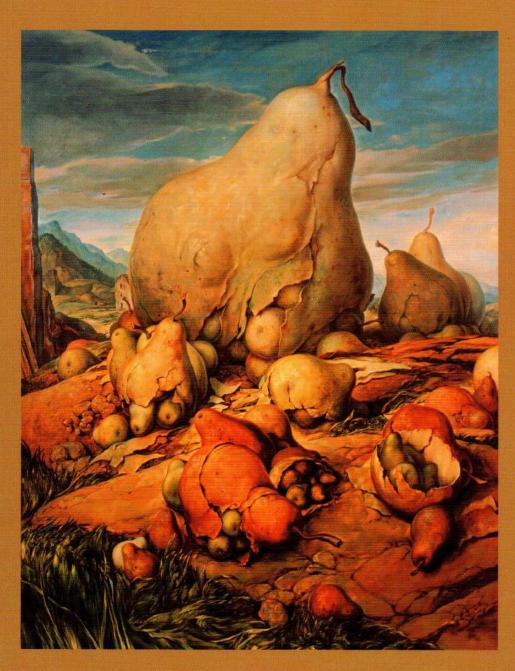
SAMUEL BAK

NEW PERCEPTIONS OF OLD APPEARANCES



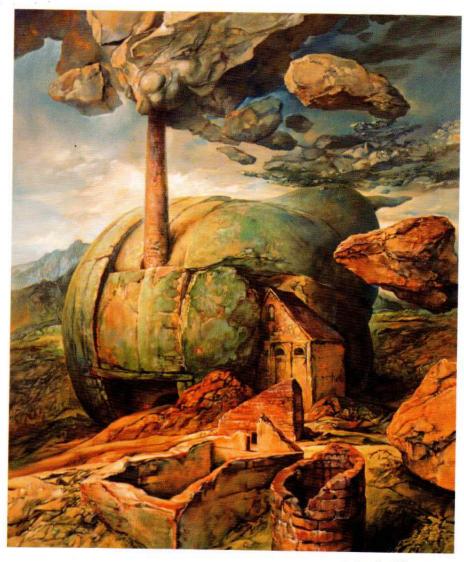
PUCKER GALLERY, BOSTON - 2004

Front Cover:
1. *The Returns of the Legend*, 2003
Oil on Canvas, 65¹/₄ x 50¹/₄", **BK1027**

Design: Samuel Bak, Jennifer Bennett

Editor: Destiny McDonald Photography: Max Coniglio

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2. Irrefutable I, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20", **BK991**

"This is Not a Pear" Reflections on Samuel Bak's Pear Paintings

"Imagination is Memory." - James Joyce

The subject of the current Samuel Bak exhibition is "Pears." In Bak's personal vocabulary of images, pears are the fruit of knowledge, always linked with that bitter 20th Century evidence of mankind's descent into the abyss, the Holocaust. As a boy (born in Vilna in 1933) he witnessed the Shoah first hand, and his creative imagination is driven by the memories of what he saw. Look, for example, at *Irrefutable I* {pl. 2}, where the green fruit's massive body

The famous Belgian artist René Magritte painted a pipe on canvas and asserted in the underlying text, "Ceci n'est pas un pipe (This is not a Pipe)." Indeed it was not. It was a painting of a pipe.

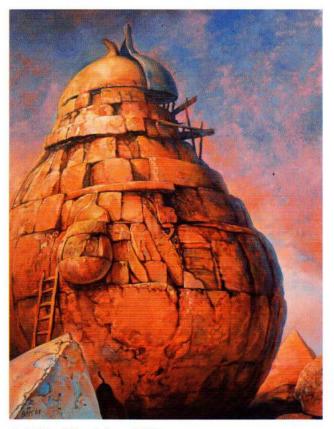
is bursting with an inner violence, pierced by erupting structures and a chimney that belches the smoke of death. We understand the metaphor. But why should this horror take place in a pear? In Hebrew, the word "pear" is "agass," spelled by the letters aleph, gimmel, and samekh, which appear occasionally on Bak's pears as architectural components. Perhaps such pears may be thought of as stand-ins for Jews and the surplus of memory attached to the Jewish experience. Yet his pears also stand in for figures from classical iconography, the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Holy family, including the Passion of Jesus. With its suggestive human shape – subtly sexual, and thus mortal – it is hardly surprising that this "fruit of the knowledge of good and evil" can be seen as encompassing the entire human condition, both its potential beauty and its grievous capacity for murdering and maiming its own.

Some viewers see Bak's work as a variant of surrealism, with its exquisite treatment of the canvas' surface. Those who are interested in theology see in his paintings a visual Midrash, focusing on the problem of God and Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Shoah. But every viewer, whatever his predilections, will be struck by the creative flexibility of Bak's metaphoric vision. The great writer, chemist, and survivor Primo Levi drew on the technical language of chemistry to write about the large topics of life and memory, specifically as they concern the Jews of Europe and their fate during the Holocaust. As a painter, Bak has drawn for similar purpose on such common objects as keys, clocks, chess pieces, and crockery. These painted objects create a visual syntax that brings to life the world of Bak's own memory and imagination.

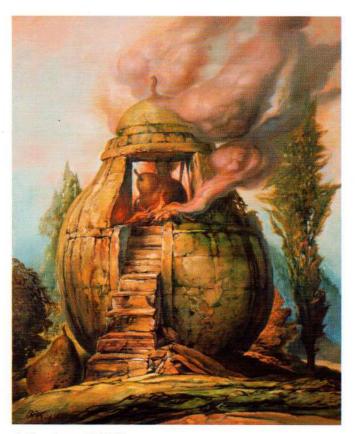
The pear, too, is a common visual object. Let us look now at its enormous range of suggestion in Bak's art. In one group of paintings it bears a kind of architectural motif. Sanctuary Z {pl. 4}, for example, depicts a pear-shaped altar on which a small pear is being sacrificed instead of a goat or lamb. Aftermath {pl. 40} shows a whole shattered city in the form of a pear, barely stabilized by a prop on the lower right, surrounded at the base with the facades of ghetto homes that have crashed and fractured. (One might compare Bak's image here with the 16th century Flemish painter Pieter Breugel's Tower of Babel.) Elsewhere cut pears look like broken tombstones.

It is telling that Bak's pears are always alone, devoid of contact with other life forms, and almost never in a state of physical wholeness and strength.

The still life Color of Night II {pl. 48} depicts a blue candle and holder, blue vase and overturned cup, with two blue pears on a wooden table with a broken and propped-up leg, all suggesting Bak's own broken past as it is linked to the Vilna ghetto. How may we know this? Blue is a color linked with the Jewish people, from the description of the prayer shawl, the tallit, to the colors of the Israeli flag. The unstable table, propped and shaky, represents not only an unstable past but also the fragility of the present and of memory. The overturned and empty cup hints of some abandonment – perhaps of faith. The candle's flame is cast in blue stone; it can never be lit. The hanging cloths evoke the facades of Jewish homes from a ghetto that is no more. They not only hover over the scene, but they also suggest an almost human face of fear. We should bear in mind here that the still life genre is related to the memento mori tradition, whose message is "remember that you will die."



3. Belated Egyptology, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK979**



4. Sanctuary Z, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", **BK970**

In *Gathering* {pl. 5}, the viewer is provoked to consider a series of questions. Is this an attempt to suggest the problems or the impossibility of prayer to God after the Shoah? In the foreground are a group of pear-figures, some wrapped in cloth, some bound up in Bak's familiar iron or leather devices. The viewer is hard pressed to find ten whole figures, the number needed to make up a *minyan*. The propped-up pear figures to the left and right suggest either a listless convoy or perhaps a group turning toward a larger stone object that might be a religious site or temple. In the background lie buildings with ominous chimneys. In the foreground, a sliced and broken pear looks like shards of the broken tablets of the law.

Protected {pl. 9} is reminiscent of Bak's earlier works such as Pair and DeProfundis, which use images of the Ten Commandments about to be buried in a barren landscape. In Protected, a small stone pear is about to be buried in a larger crypt that also has the shape of a pear – yielding a "pair" of pears, a punning allusion to the earlier work. But in Protected there is no suggestion of law, or of God, or even of Jews. There is simply absence. Both outer and inner pear shapes are exposed to the elements. Nothing is "protected," not even the cemetery.

Multiple Studies with Holes {pl. 32}, a pencil and watercolor work, presents a series of drawings within a drawing, as if to suggest a wall of family pictures. Unlike typical family pictures, however, these depict figures that have been bound, broken, shot, cut, or burnt. One of the



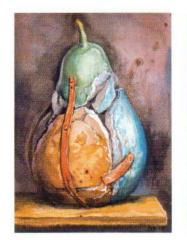
5. *Gathering*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 30 x 36", **BK1021**

drawings itself appears torn. The holes are surely holes in memory. The combination of so many motifs in one drawing suggests this may be Bak's anti-Dayanu, derived from the prayer from the Passover Seder, when "enough" history can become "too much" to bear. Looking at this gallery of pears, one might be reminded of Shylock's famous speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

... I am a Jew.

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, shall we not die?

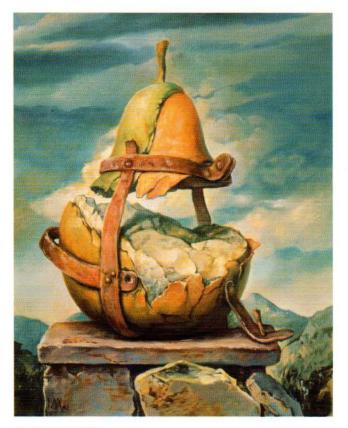
Bak's "working through the past" and his dwelling on the future of the Jews has often focused on trees with yellow stars as leaves, and with severed roots or trunk. It is as if the tree's fate is certain death, if not for human inventions that seek to prop and mend it. Forever {pl. 8} suggests a new version of this theme of the Jewish future. It shows



6. Tricolour, 2003 Watercolor, 6¹/₂ x 4³/₄" **BK947**



7. Clandestine, 2003 Watercolor, 6¹/₂ x 4³/₄" **BK946**



8. Forever, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 14 x 11" **BK968**

a fractured pear—its center missing—that is nevertheless held together by a complex steel contraption. Looking at this image one can only be pessimistic about the future, as suggested by the "forever" of its title.

The viewer need not insist on finding a Jewish or Holocaust theme in much of Bak's work, especially in his still life paintings. *The Nine O'Clock Still Life* {pl. 51}, for example, can be viewed as a modern and surrealistic version of the traditional still life. But a nagging question is raised by the number "9" nailed on the clock—or is it an inverted "6," restored incorrectly? Could the number nine refer to "1939," when life was altered irreparably for East European Jews? Alternatively, Bak often refers to the Ten Commandments in his works, as well as to significant numbers from the Jewish traditions. If "9" is seen in this context, it might allude to the ninth commandment, which forbids bearing false witness against thy neighbor, just as "6" commands us not to commit murder. Indeed murder and bearing false witness have been closely interwoven throughout history, especially in regard to the fate of the Jews. Another still life, *On Common Ground* {pl. 44}, suggests the Jews' bloody fate through its traditional grouping of blue and white objects (including a pear) that rest on a makeshift table coated by a murky red that flows down past the bottom edge of the canvas.

The triptych *Enactment* {pl. 24} portrays the Christian crucifixion, but with pears in every role, perhaps to suggest the human universality of suffering. In the center panel, three pears lean against the bottom of ... not a cross, but a decayed and broken pedestal, on which a larger



9. *Protected*, 2003 Pastel and Gouache, 19¹/₂ x 13¹/₂", **BK961**



10. *Humble*, 2003 Charcoal and Whitening, 19 x 13¹/₄", **BK958**

pear and white loincloth are set. The pedestal seems to be dripping blood, and the figures at the foot of the pillar appear to be bent in devotion. The two side panels repeat the crucifixion image in a more visceral way. On the left panel a partially inverted pear is being crucified and pierced by a limb of a tree, and a blank sheet of paper is tacked above as if waiting to be inscribed with the traditional Latin "INRI." The right panel shows a similar scene, but from an uncharacteristic perspective.

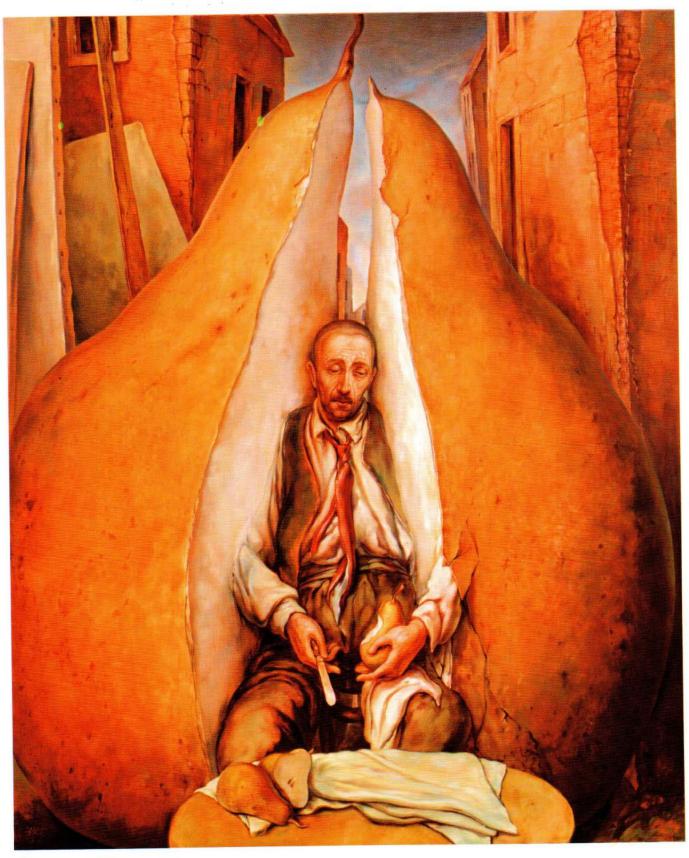
One of the few pear paintings in which Bak includes a human form is *Coffee Break* {pl. 11}. This work contains a sweep of images that summarize the entire history of Genocide. In a broad natural landscape, an apparently dead man sits beneath a tree in an upended dining chair. He is still holding a cup to his lips. The still life debris in the foreground—a cup, bottle, table, pitcher, broken plates and a partially eaten pear—suggests a sudden and horrible interruption to a picnic. A broken leg and fractured edge of the table are somehow jammed into the tree and seem to point off to the viewer's right. There is no text, nor is there a road; the sign, if it is a sign, points to nowhere. This is a frightening and mysterious painting. Every element indicates disruption. The word "break" in the title assumes a grim meaning. The composition reminds one of the photographs of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans during the 1990s. The one human body, reminiscent of the figures of Pieter Breugel, blends into a typical Bak landscape.



11. Coffee Break, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36", **BK988**

We have seen that the pear can speak to the universal issues of human destruction, loss, and memory. But Bak does not avoid the actual physicality of the Holocaust. In Irrefutable I {pl. 2} and Irrefutable II {pl. 36} he confronts the essentials: the destroyed towns, the chimneys emitting ominous smoke, or smoke that turns to stone, and doors that seemingly cannot open. Close Up (pl. 12), is a startling image of a disheveled and emaciated man with a tie sitting within two halves of a dinosaur-like pear situated in the center of an East-European street. The pear appears to be enveloping the figure, whose arms and elbows are disappearing into the fruit of the pear while he, at the same time, appears to be cutting a pear with a knife, above a small table and cloths in front of him. Irene Tayler, commenting on an earlier version of this work (entitled *Parable*), has asked the critical questions about these paintings: "Is the disheveled man before us being born from out of the shapely loins of this enormous split pear or is he being interred in them? Are we witness to a new beginning or a near ending? ... And this man, does he eat as he is eaten—pear into pear, as it were-or do we see him in the performance of some gesture of circumcision, a comic pathetic displacement of obedience to God's command?" One might wonder: could this image be a reflection by the painter on his success and failures in art? In the left background appear three blank canvases on stretchers, as if to suggest that all Bak's challenging riddles will someday be solved - or perhaps not.

In the end, are these not the essential questions of Samuel Bak's long journey and his desire to create art?



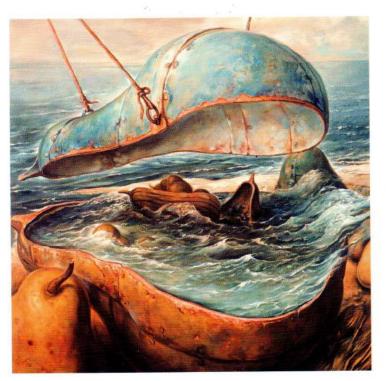
12. *Close Up*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 63¹/₄ x 51¹/₂", **BK1026**



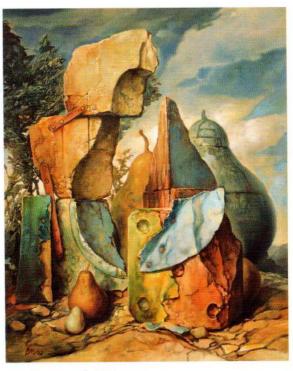
13. Absent Presence, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 36 x 36", **BK1018**



14. *Present Absence*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 36 x 36", **BK1019**



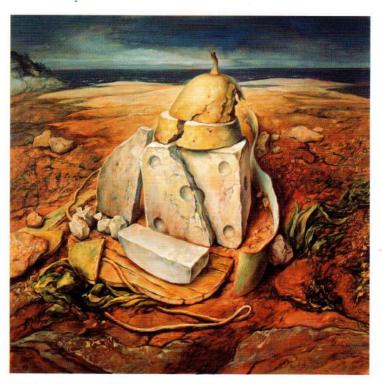
15. *Inner Turmoil*, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 24", **BK1000**



16. *Composed*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", **BK973**



17. Contemporary, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 24", **BK1001**



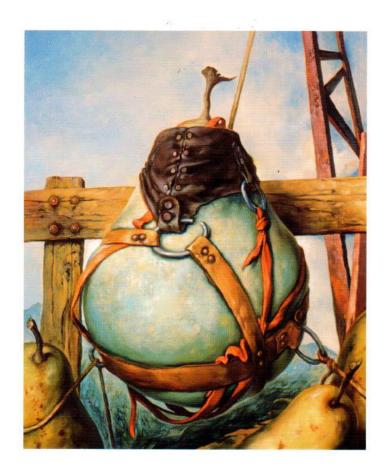
18. *Per Chance*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 24", **BK1003**

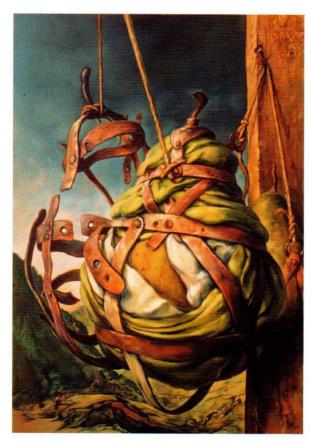


19. At Random, 2003 Pastel and Oil, 12¹/₂ x 18¹/₂", **BK963**



20. *Coherence*, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 24", **BK1002**



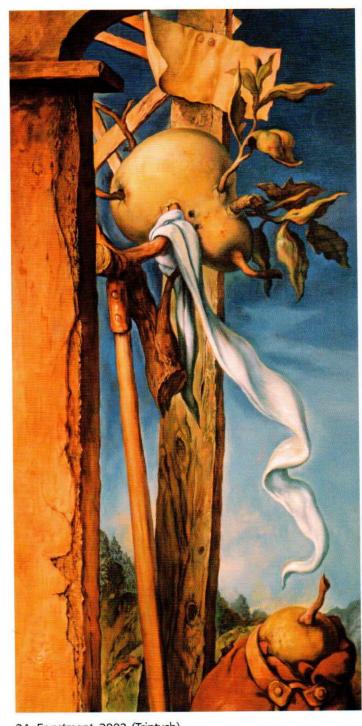




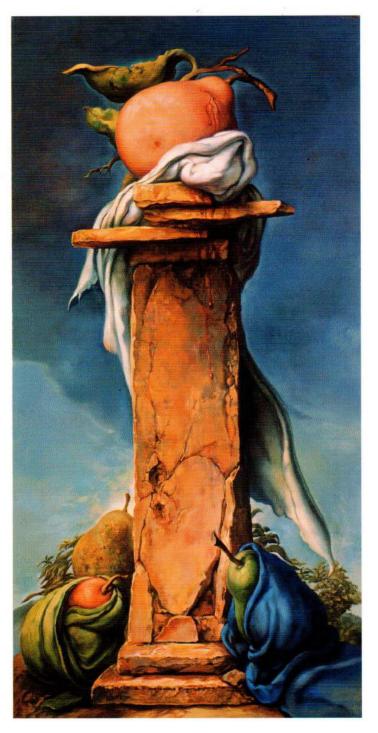
21. *Exposure*, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20", **BK1008** (top left)

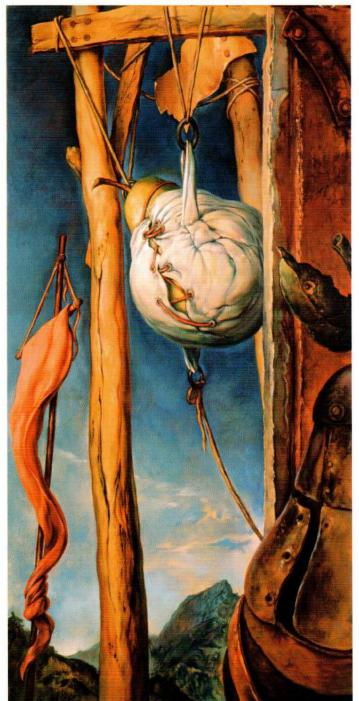
22. Second Exposure, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK995** (top right)

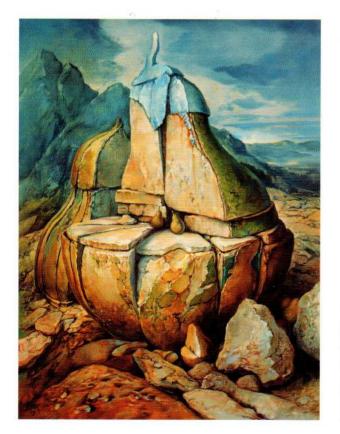
23. *Resisting*, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", **BK980** (bottom)

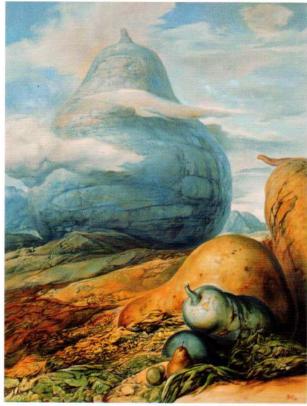


24. Enactment, 2002 (Triptych)
Oil on Canvas, each panel 38 x 20", **BK983**



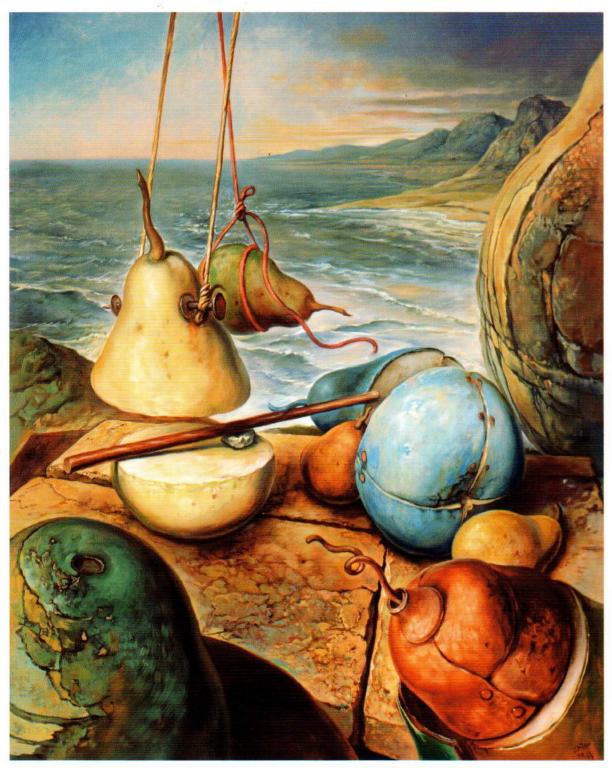








25. Two In One I, 2003, Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK997** (top left) 26. Inner Perspective II, 2001, Oil on Canvas , 24 x 18", **BK976** (top right) 27. Group Power, 2003, Watercolor, 81/2 x 161/4", **BK951** (bottom)



28. *Swinging*, 1998/2003 Oil on Canvas, 30 x 24", **BK1012**



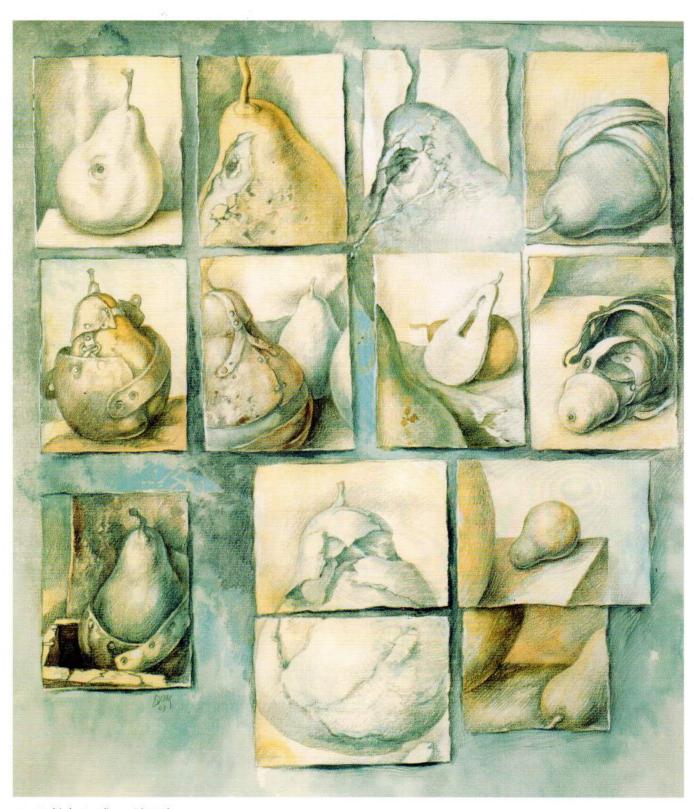
29. Recent Legend, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK981**



30. For Whom?, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", BX974



31. *Purification*, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20", BK1005



32. Multiple Studies with Holes, 2003 Pencil and Watercolor, 18¹/₂ x 16¹/₂", **BK964**

PAGE 20:

33. Offering, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20", **BK1009** (top)

34. *Blue Envelope*, 2001 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 20", **BK1007** (bottom)

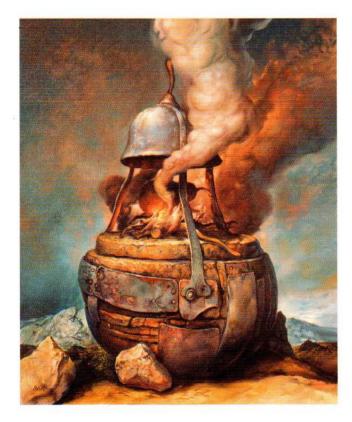
PAGE 21:

35. Between Then and Now, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK993** (top left)

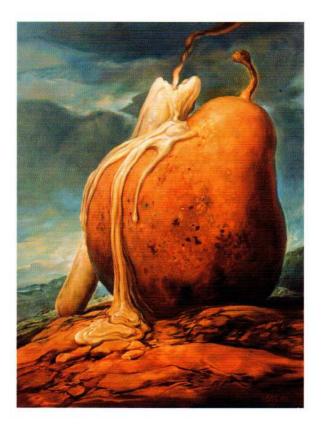
36. *Irrefutable II*, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK992** (top right)

37. Sanctuary W, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", **BK971** (bottom left)

38. Falling Memorial, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 16", **BK977** (bottom right)



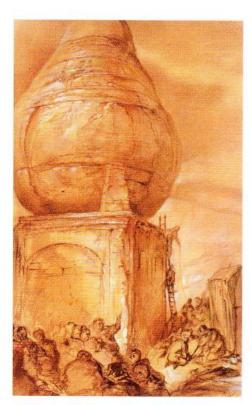








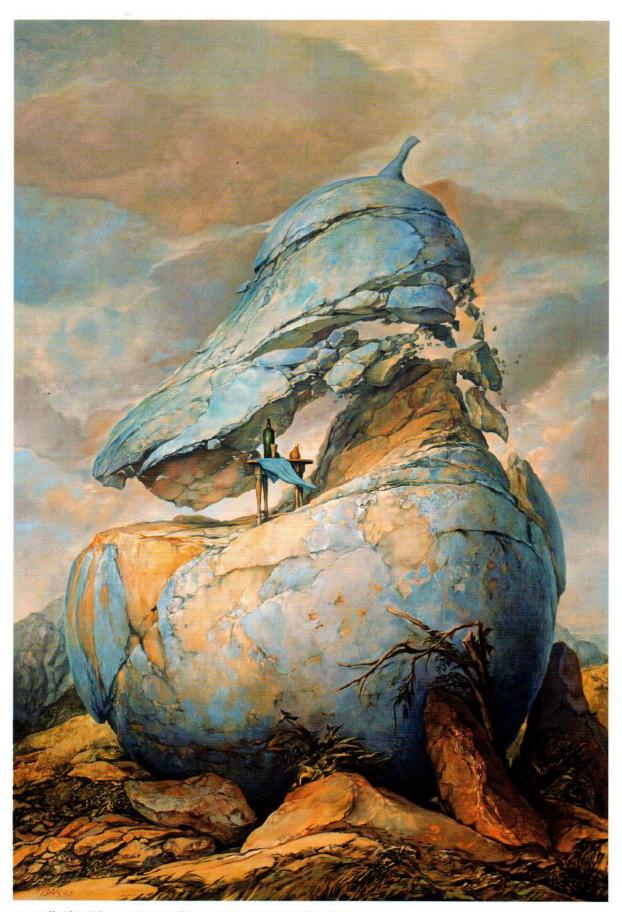




39. Ancient Monuments, 2003 Crayon, 13³/₄ x 8³/₄", **BK948**



40. *Aftermath*, 2003 Pencil, 19 x 13", **BK959**



41. Still Life With Ego, 2003, Oil on Canvas, $50^1/2 \times 34^1/4$ ", BK1025



42. *Memorabilia II*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 36 x 24", **BK987**



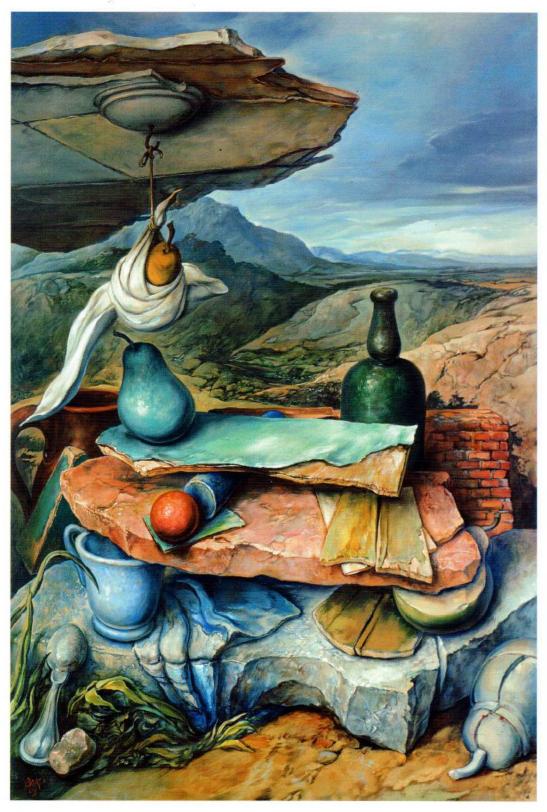
43. *Memorabilia I*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 36 x 24", **BK986**



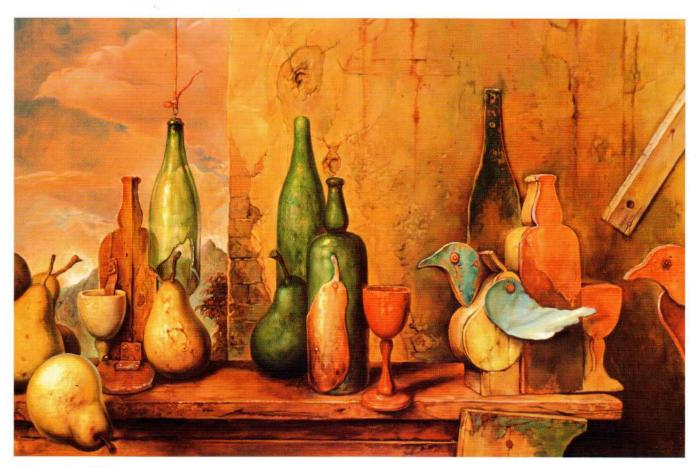
44. *On Common Ground*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK990**



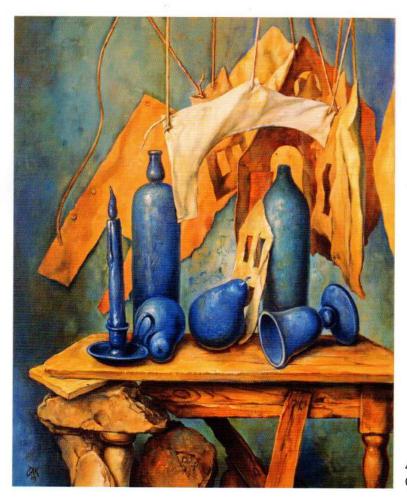
45. Still Life With Assumed Self, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK982**



46. *Balancing Act*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 36 x 24", **BK984**



47. *Intruders*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36", **BK989**



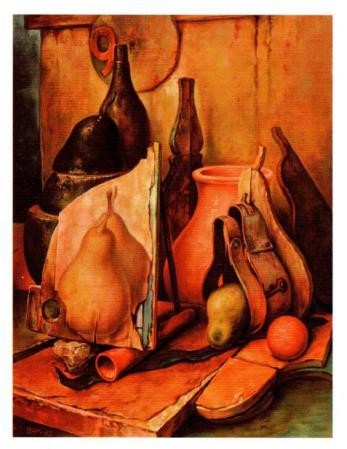
48. Color of Night II, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 30 x 24", **BK1016**



49. Still Life With Star, 2002 Oil on Canvas, 20 x 24", **BK1004**



50. *Ongoing Journey*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 30 x 36", **BK1022**



51. *The Nine O'Clock Still Life*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 24 x 18", **BK978**



52. After A Prolonged Halt, 1970-2003 Oil on Canvas, 45³/₄ x 45³/₄", **BK1023**

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1933	Born 12 August in Vilna, Poland.		
1940-41	Under Soviet occupation.		
1941-44	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.		

Selected Solo Gallery Exhibitions Galleria Schneider, Rome - 1959, 1961, 1965, 1966 L'Angle Aigu, Brussels - 1965 Alwin Gallery, London - 1965 Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv - 1966 Roma Gallery, Chicago - 1967 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 Thorens Fine Art, Basel — 1981 Kallenbach Fine Art, Munich - 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987 Soufer Gallery, New York -1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1997, 2000 Galerie Ludwig Lange, Berlin - 1987 Galerie Carpentier, Paris - 1988 Galerie Marc Richard, Zurich - 1990 Galerie de la Cathedrale, Fribourg – 1991, 1992 Galerie Picpus, Montreux – 1991, 1992 Pucker Gallery, Boston - 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004 George Krevsky Fine Art, San Francisco — 1998 Beaver Country Day School, Chestnut Hill - 2004 The St. Botolph Club, Boston - 2004

Selected Museum Exhibitions

Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel - 1963 Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel - 1963 Rose Museum, Brandeis, Waltham, MA - 1976 Heidelberg Museum, Heidelberg, Germany - 1977 Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg, Germany - 1977 Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf, Germany - 1978 Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, Germany - 1978 University of Haifa, Israel - 1978 Kunstmuseum, Wiesbaden, Germany - 1979 Traveling Exhibition organized by Israeli Ministry of Culture and Education - 1980-85 Stadtgalerie Bamberg, Villa Dessauer, Germany - 1988 Koffler Gallery, Toronto, Canada - 1990 Temple Judea Museum, Philadelphia, PA - 1991 Dürer Museum, Nuremberg, Germany - 1991 Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Germany - 1993 Hebrew Union College -

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, NY – 1994

Janice Charach Epstein Museum/Gallery, West Bloomfield, MI — 1994

Spertus Museum, Chicago, IL - 1995

The National Catholic Center For Holocaust Education, Seton Hall College, Greensburg, PA — 1995

Holocaust Museum Houston, TX

& B'Nai B'Rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, DC — 1997

Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy Exeter, NH — 1997

Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen, Germany — 1998

Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, IN — 2001

Florida Holocaust Museum, Saint Petersburg, FL – 2001

National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius,

Lithuania - 2001

University of Scranton, Scranton, PA - 2003

Neues Stadtmuseum, Landsberg am Lech,

Germany - 2002

Canton Museum of Art, Canton, OH - 2002

Clark University, Worcester, MA – 2002

92nd Street Y, New York, NY - 2002

Jewish Cultural Center and Memphis College of Art,

Memphis, TN - 2003

The City Hall Gallery, Orlando, FL — 2004

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX - 2004

Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota,

Duluth, MN - 2004

Selected Group Exhibitions

"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
"Nachabilder," Kunstahalle, Hannover — 1979
"Bilder Sind Nicht Verboten," Stadtische Kunstahalle,
Düsseldorf — 1982
"Still Life," Tel Aviv Museum — 1984
"Chagall to Kitaj", Barbican Art Center, London — 1990
"Witness and Legacy", Traveling Group Exhibition in
North America — 1995 to present

Public Collections

Aidekman Arts Center at Tufts University, Medford, MA Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY Ben Uri Gallery, London, England Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Brookline, MA Boston Public Library, Boston, MA Constitutional Court of South Africa, Braamfontein, South Africa Davis Museum, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA Dürer House, Nuremberg, Germany Facing History and Ourselves, Boston, MA Florida Holocaust Museum, St. Petersburg, FL Germanisches National Museum. Nuremberg, Germany German Parliament, Bonn, Germany Hillel Foundation, Washington, DC Hobart & William Smith College, Geneva, NY Holocaust Museum Houston, Houston, TX Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel Jewish Museum, New York, NY Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Germany Kunstmuseum, Bamberg, Germany McMullen Museum, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA Municipality of Nuremberg, Germany Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius, Lithuania Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen, Germany Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada Simmons College, Boston, MA Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame University, South Bend, IN Springfield Museum of Fine Art, Springfield, MA Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel

Tweed Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Duluth, MN University of Haifa, Israel University of Scranton, Scranton, PA Vaud State, Switzerland Williams College of Art, Williamstown, MA Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

Bak, Paintings of the Last Decade, A. Kaufman and

Monographs/Books/Films

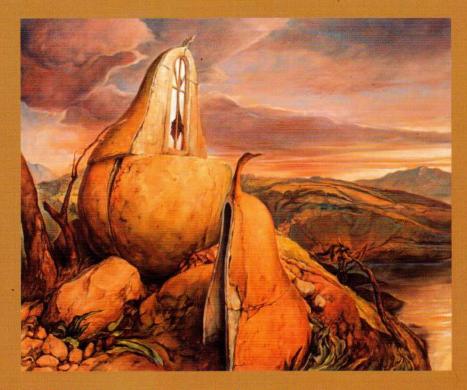
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Back Cover: 53. *Reflection*, 2003 Oil on Canvas, 32¹/₄ x 39¹/₂", **BK1017**

Christa Singer, Toronto, Canada, 2003

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