

THE PAST CONTINUES:

Work of Samuel Bak

October 6 - December 20, 1991



Temple Judea Museum of Keneseth Israel
York Road and Township Line
Elkins Park, PA 19117

Museum hours for this exhibit:

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday: 1 - 4 p.m.

Friday evenings before and after 8:30 p.m. services

Sunday: 12 - 3 p.m.

Groups by special appointment, (215) 887-8700

Congregation Keneseth Israel's Temple Judea Museum is grateful to the Pucker Safrai Gallery in Boston for lending us fourteen paintings for this exhibit, the first major showing of Samuel Bak's work in the Philadelphia area. We wish to thank Bernard Pucker and David Israel who worked with us and encouraged us in the undertaking of this project. I am most grateful personally to Adele Hauptman for the initial typing, to Lois Meyers for using her computer skills to type and assemble the catalog, and to Dorothy Freedman and Simeon Maslin for their immeasurable assistance.

Samuel Bak's paintings entice us into his world. We can each bring our own personal interpretations to the powerful and magnificent creations of this remarkable artist. This catalog describes my personal approach to, and understanding of, the work. A challenge has been set before us by Bak. What ultimately matters is how each of us translates into our lives a response to his challenge.

For me these paintings are a unique blending of techniques and draughtsmanship of old Italian and Dutch masters with the liberating twentieth-century possibilities of cubism and surrealism. To analyze each piece by style would do the artist a disservice. To call it Holocaust Art, or Art of Message or Witness, would not allow us to appreciate the paintings as works of art unto themselves. Bak's art is universal through the particularity and through the metaphors and allegories of his own life—his experiences, his time and his people.

As Elie Wiesel has written ". . . By working for his own people a Jew does not renounce his loyalty to mankind; on the contrary, he thereby makes his most valuable contribution. . . . Only by drawing on his unique Jewish experience can the Jew help others. A Jew fulfills his role as man only from inside his Jewishness."

It was with a great deal of excitement that our museum in 1986 purchased Samuel Bak's *Domem*. Our enthusiasm for the man and his work has only increased in the five years which have passed since then. To learn Bak's language of expression is to become deeply involved in his life and his philosophy. The artist uses favorite themes: pears, birds, chess, clocks, landscapes of Jewish history. He uses and reuses each theme and develops a seemingly endless number of variations. One is reminded of a phrase from the Talmud, "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it."

Judith B. Maslin
Director/Curator
September, 1991



Domem, 1980's oil on paper, 11 3/4" x 16 1/4"

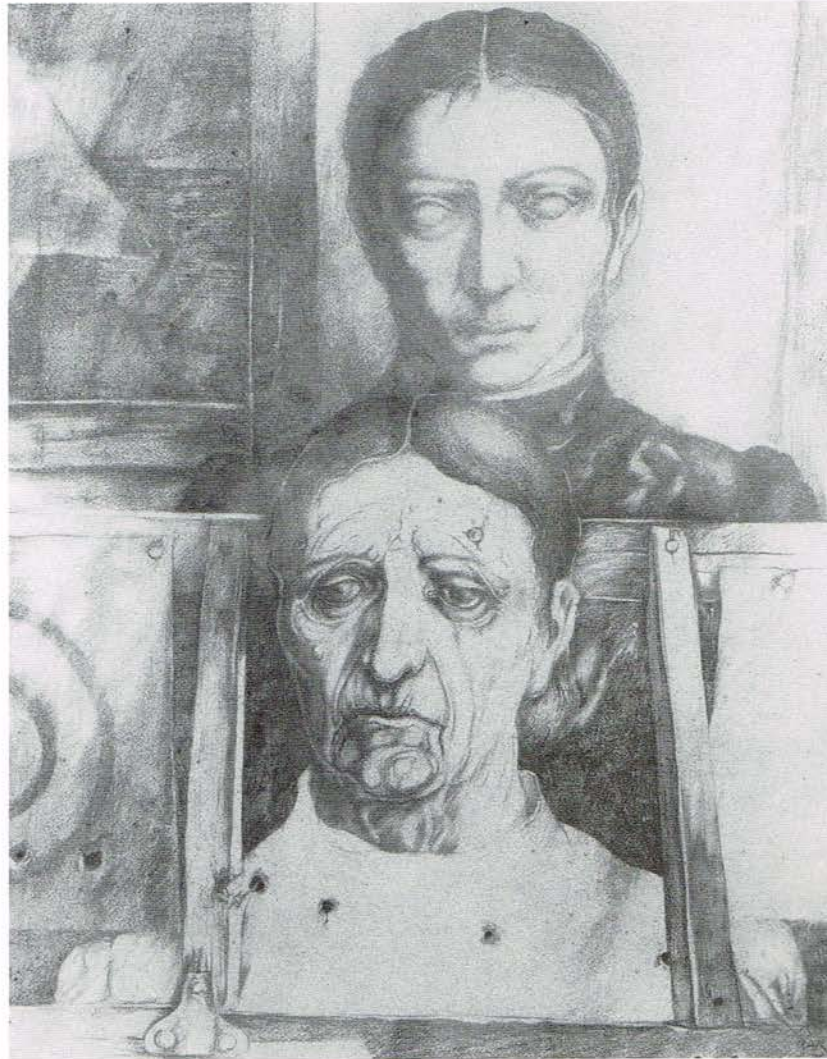
Temple Judea Museum of Keneseth Israel

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Gorin in memory of N. Herbert Gorin, 1984

Domem presents domestic life: a cup, a spoon, a teapot, a bottle, a wine goblet perched against a fragment of a building whose rain spout is somehow intact. The objects are set before a worn sign *Domem*. The style of the lettering is reminiscent of an Israeli death notice tacked to a wall, located in a peaceful landscape.

Domem, Hebrew for still life, perhaps refers to the traditional artistic use of the word, and also to life which has been ended. The teapot is unusable. Patched together in an attempt to make it whole, its handle echoing the ear shapes in front of it, it is nailed to a wall. The painting, while lamenting past life, is still hopeful. In the foreground are two complete and perfect objects, the cup and the small wine goblet. Although a flat wooden cut-out of a cup helps restrain the teapot behind it, the cup itself seems ready to receive something. Even the spoon is available to stir it back to life. The bottle appears bound and unusable but perhaps from some unknown source wine will again be used in the goblet as a symbol of joy. Although the wall behind the objects is old and from the past, overgrown with greenery, one senses a yearning and a readiness to fill the cup of life in the future.

All images courtesy of and © Pucker Saffrai Gallery, Boston. 1991
Photography: D.N. Israel



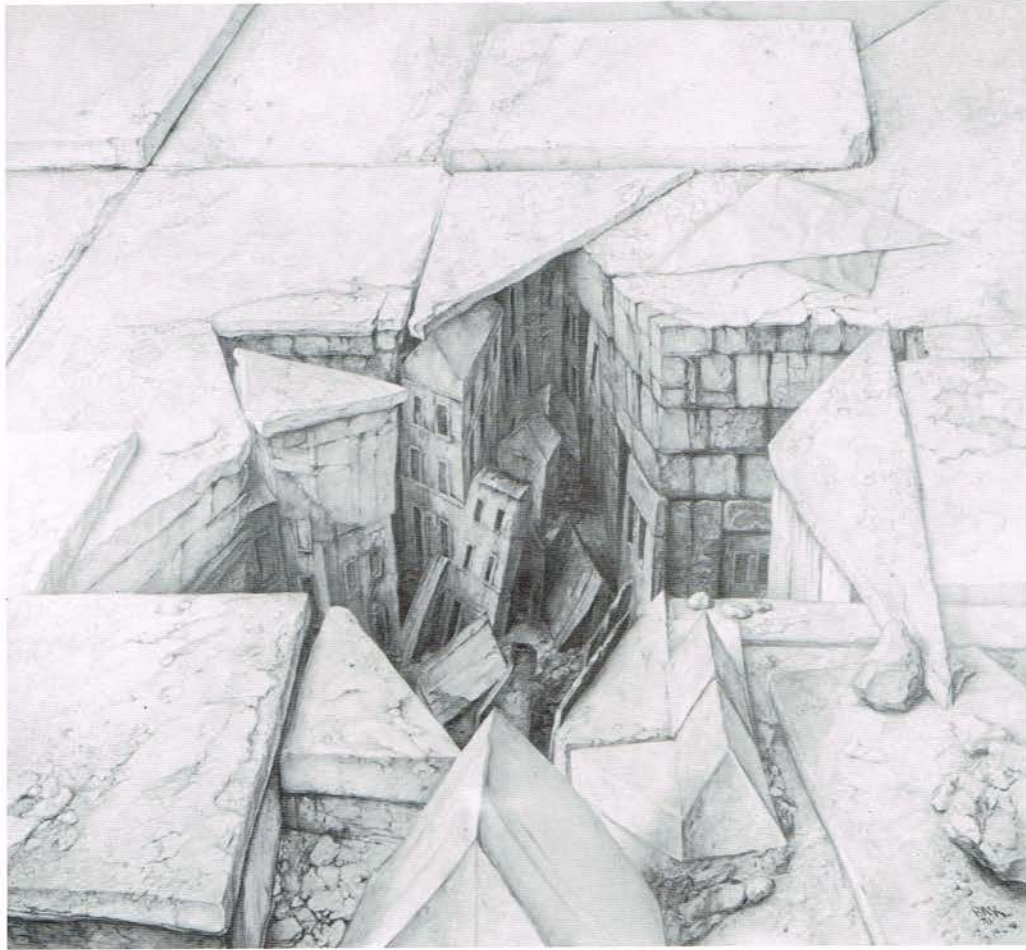
Two Figures, 1975 charcoal/chalk, 25 5/8" x 19"

Although there are two faces in this drawing, they represent the same woman as both young and old. It is possibly Bak's mother who is remembered in this powerful work of monochromatic starkness.

The young face in the background, garbed in black, is rigid, expressionless, and unseeing. She is next to a framed representation of a Star of David. As a young Jewish woman during the Holocaust, it is impossible for her to discern the future, to see what lies ahead.

The wrinkled and sad older woman has experienced life and its tragedies. Her face epitomizes strength and survival. She is wedged between wood frames in a gallery, and is shot as surely as the target board on her right. Although she is hit, she is erect and she lives. She wears white as if purified by the ordeals of her life.

The absence of color expresses an intensely ominous and sad mood, but the message of hope lies in the drawing. Human survival, although painful, has the potential to withstand and overcome evil and outlive it.

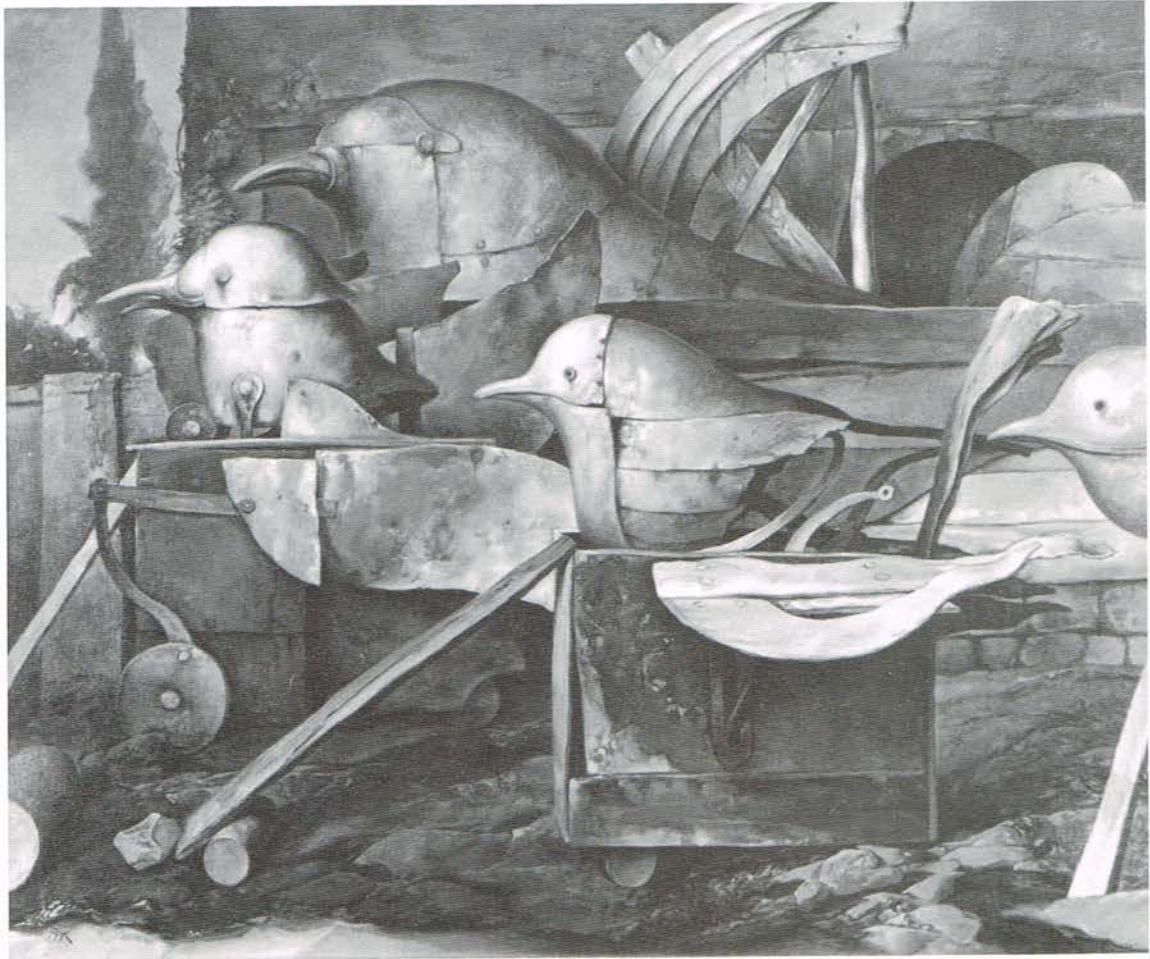


The Ghetto, 1976 oil on canvas, 52" x 48"

There is a simple grandeur and monumentality to this painting which is only partly due to its size. In it we see both past and present civilizations. We see the blood-stained remnants of the destroyed ghetto of Eastern Europe. It is buried, paved over, eradicated from sight and consciousness, like the old Jewish Quarter of Bak's native Vilna today.

The Vilna of Samuel Bak's childhood was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." We see the connection in this painting through the use of Jerusalem stone for the intended entombment of the ghetto. But the Jewish conscience will not allow this travesty. The stones are carefully removed, one might say "Jewishly removed" because of the six-cornered star excavation. Now, built over the ghetto and using it as a solid foundation, is the new Jerusalem.

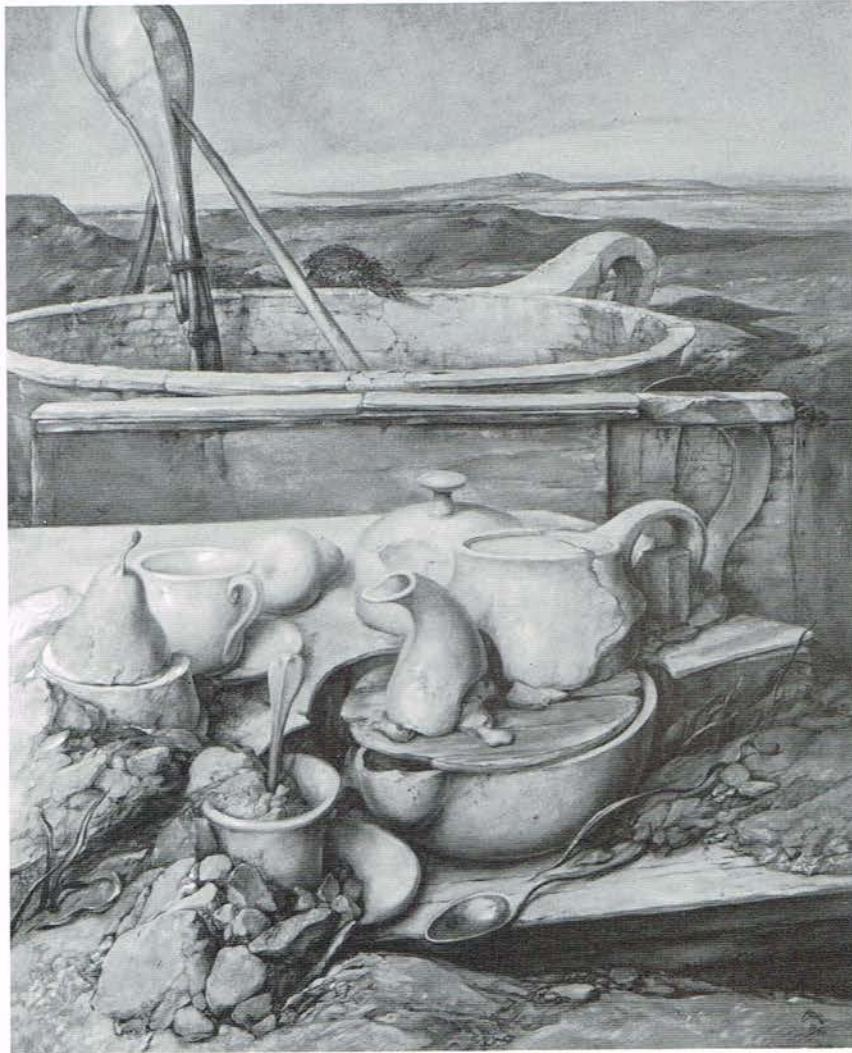
The yellow fabric triangles remind us of the patches that Jews were required to sew on their clothes during the Holocaust. The pebbles on the lower right of the painting suggest the custom of placing such stones on Jewish graves. This work cries out to us to remember and challenges us to use the memory of the past as a rock-solid foundation for a new and better future.



Evening Visitors, 1987

oil on canvas, 21 1/4" x 25 5/8"

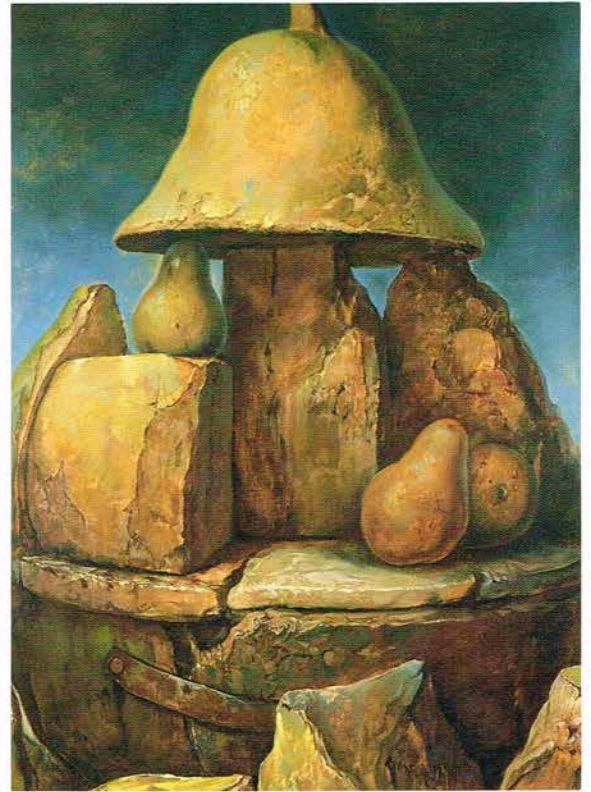
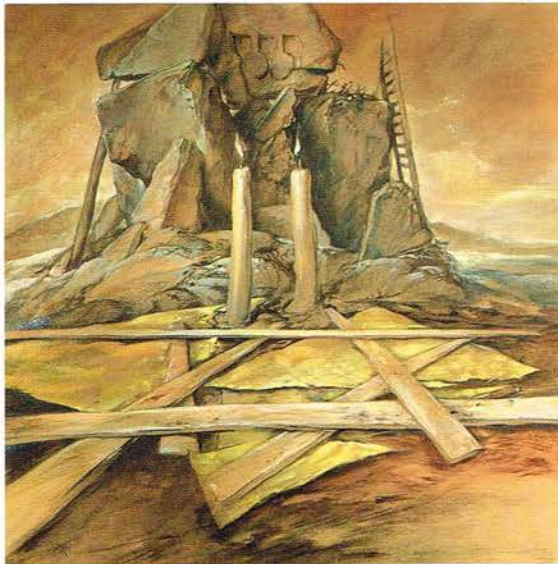
The light hearted image of a mother bird and three lively nestlings is hardly related to these metallic avians. The blood-red anodized body of the mother is behind a wall partly created by what could be her own wooden wing. The baby birds are fragmented with wing-like pieces attached to carts that cannot move. The scene suggests a moonlit junkyard but these birds are not at rest. The head of the one on the left reminds us of an armadillo, that nocturnal animal that seems to be encased in metal. A rusty tear is evidence of the sadness that the young leader of this little group feels, unable to move and grow and fly. But the colors are not dead. They are intense and clear in the night light. We are the evening visitors invited to help repair and re-animate the young.



Silver Spoon, 1981-1989

oil on linen, 39 5/16" x 31 7/8"

A silver spoon is a classic example of civilization, culture and luxury. The desert landscape of this painting juxtaposes what **was** with what **is**, or what **is** with what **could be**. In the foreground, the pitiful remnants of domestic life: a teapot, a cup, a bowl and a lifeless blue pear are never to be used again. They are half buried by sand and rock. During the Holocaust, spoons were implements of survival for Jews in refugee and work camps. They were of monumental importance. In an atmosphere of incomparable degradation, a spoon provided one with means to be more human than animal. Perhaps the huge spoon propped up in a gigantic cup of stone symbolizes that attempt in the camps to remain civilized in the seething caldron of debased humanity. The spoon stands undefeated although it is splintered and supported both from within and without the cup. Its height has no bounds as Bak raises it off the painting into the sky. Is the artist telling us that when people are concerned for one another, civilization has infinite potential?



Project for the Shin of Shabbat, 1989
mixed media on paper, 20" x 20"

In a heap of huge rocks, Bak has gouged a *shin*, the first letter in the Hebrew word for sabbath, *shabbat*. In the foreground are triangular yellow slabs which remind us of the yellow six-pointed stars which Jews were forced to wear in the ghettos during the Holocaust. Over this reminder of tragedy are strips of wooden boards attempting to build a new star over the old. *Shabbat* candles dominate the center of the painting.

Jewish tradition has many legends about the creative power of letters. The *shin* is regarded as one of three "mother" letters, which represent fire, water and air, out of which heaven and earth were created. The "project" for the *shin* of *shabbat* is the renewal and completion of the peace of the sabbath, the foretaste of the Messianic Age. The skyward-reaching ladder on the right also suggests the involvement of the *shin* of *shamayim* or heaven. The Bible says creation ceased on the sabbath, but Bak proposes that we join our energy to that mystically creative power of the *shin* in the repair and re-creation of our world.



Basic Structure, 1988

oil on paper, 25 1/2" x 19 1/2"

For over twenty years, one of Bak's favorite motifs has been the pear. He has used the pear both as a symbol of humanity and of the human heart. The triangular shape of the pear, reminiscent of classic contours of Renaissance painting, gives a sense of orderly calm. This painting has a simple composition which makes the title self-explanatory.

Basic Structure is a hopeful allegory of life. The large pear has been severely damaged, most of it destroyed, and its base is stripped of skin and held together by a rusted metal brace. But enough of its core remains intact for the top of the pear to fit properly in place. The pear manages to maintain its integrity as a whole. Inside are three apparently unblemished little pears; one actually helps hold the big pear together. The symbolism of the small supporting the big, the young aiding the old, and of the artist's hope for the younger generation, is unmistakable.



A Life of One's Own, 1987

oil on canvas, 25 5/8" x 31 7/8"

In this painting of a bird in a landscape setting, Bak depicts the frustration of attempting to have a life of one's own. The trees, some of which are still alive, have obviously suffered horror. There is an eerie twist to the limbs and an unnaturalness to the color. The wooden slabs, in place of wings have restrained the mature bluebird from flight. The foreground tree pierced a wing long ago. The mountains in the background remind us of the heights to which a bird should be able to soar. The blue-gray sky casts an ominous sadness with just hints of clearing in the distance.

The City, 1986

oil on canvas, 39 1/4" x 31 7/8"



There is an eerie glow which surrounds the towering fragments of decalogue Tablets and the crumbling ruin of the ghetto perched against them. It is as if the embers of Holocaust fires still emanate from somewhere deep within the ghetto. What has belched from the rusted smoke stack in the past has eroded the Tablets. Little remains of the ghetto—a few broken buildings and facades, all remnants and echoes of a living past.

As in several other of Bak's paintings, the second five commandments on the left tablet, which deal with human relationships, seem more damaged and precarious than the tablet on the right, whose commandments concern the relationship between people and God. That tablet is fractured but the top rests steadily on a solid base.

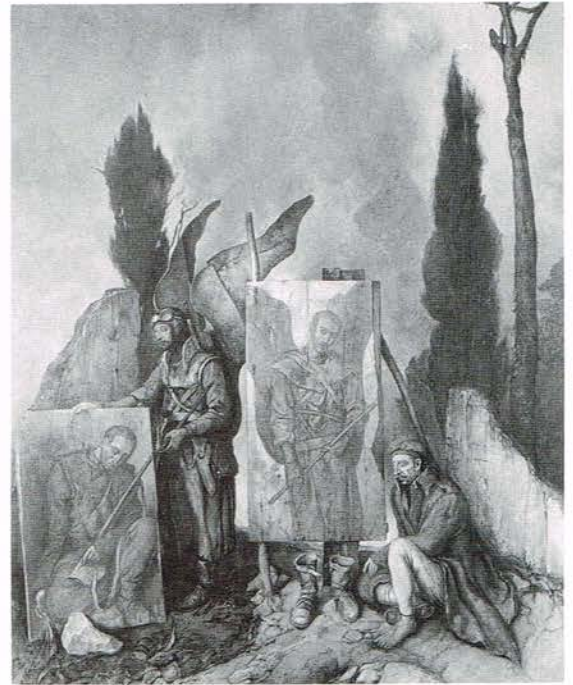
What does the title *City* represent in this picture? By combining the physical remnants of a Holocaust-ravaged ghetto with the spiritual height and timelessness of the Ten Commandments, perhaps Bak has created a wholeness, a city. It is *shalom*—peace—a completeness of past reality and future possibility.

Landscape with Scaffold, c. 1985

oil on canvas, 14" x 17 5/8"

Time stands still in this abandoned spot. The atmosphere is heavy with the sands of time slowly settling from the hot sky. We see the deserted remains of a city in the background. The awkward scaffold, which was set up in an attempt to repair the huge stone clock, has been left to rot. A Roman numeral nine is all that remains of the clock. Where the Roman numeral six should be, is a board with an Arabic numeral six painted in blood red, representing the six million Jewish Holocaust victims. One also senses that it is blood which has rusted the hands of time to halt before the hour of twelve. On the scaffold rests a two, intended to repair the twelve on the clock. But the project of repair has ended unsuccessfully, and the scene is incomplete and hopeless.





Angels and Their Guardians, 1985

oil on canvas, 39 1/4" x 31 7/8"



These four figures are set in an isolated stony rise of land near a bleak grouping of trees. The mottled lavender sky partially hides the setting sun. One can barely see a clearer horizon in the distance.

The angel between the two portraits is wearing military gear, flyer's goggles, a helmet and boots. Bak attaches the angel's staff to the staff on the portrait of the seated soldier whom the angel protects. This angel with metal wings is "real," and he guards an "image." The angel on the right is an "image." Most of his body is painted on a wooden slab nailed to two posts. His boots are real objects standing firmly on the ground under his painted two-dimensional body. Was this blue angel once real and whole? The resting figure on the right is missing one boot. Perhaps he contemplates "stepping into the shoes" of his guardian angel.

Bak creates a relationship among the four figures: who is angel and who is guardian? He deliberately confuses and juxtaposes the real and the unreal. The painting challenges us to be the guardians of both the physical and the spiritual in the world.

This "floating still life" is one of a number of optimistic and hopeful works Bak has recently created. The broken vessels, which he earlier portrayed as mired in landscape settings, have been liberated and set free. They are floating on a heavenly course.



To Remember, 1989

mixed media on paper, 20" x 20"

There is a Jewish mystical tradition that in creating the world, God allowed fragments of himself to become human beings. Those pieces yearn for reunification with their divine essence. In Hebrew they are called, *Kaylim nishbarim*, or broken vessels. In this painting, Bak's broken vessels (humanity) are demonstrating a desire to have their souls reunited with the source of life. They pursue a cosmic restoration and a *tikkun olam*, a repairing and redemption of a shattered world.

The message is not obscure. It is as simple as ABC or the aleph, bet, and gimel which remain on a broken half of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments, which somehow have remained intact, are those which refer to the relationship between people and God. Bak presents those three commandments hopefully and optimistically. They are bathed in a warm heavenly light.

In the foreground the tablet half floating before us has no reference to the second five commandments which deal with relationships between people. The commandments have been obliterated. What remains is the reference to the six million Jewish martyrs of the Holocaust. The stone is smoky gray, having been through fire like the ruins of towns below.

We are admonished to remember both what was and what can be.





Collective Memory, 1986

oil on canvas, 31 7/8" x 39 1/4"

It is only after looking at these massive profiles for a time that one notices the small, contemplative, lonely observer standing nearby. He is trying to join the faces by looking in the same direction, trying to see what they have seen, and know what they have known. The profiles represent memory going back through the ages. One man's head is actually the fragmented top of a clock. In the foreground the large bent hands of time are restrained by rocks.

Each period of history has a story to add to our collective memory. The profile closest to the foreground and thus representative of the most recent mass of human experience joining history, has not yet metamorphosed completely to stone. The brain is already stone gray matter; the ear is in process; but blood is draining down the face, which still has some human color left in it. This young generation is in pain and still bleeding. Memory of the Holocaust has not allowed this young generation to join totally the ages past and thus blend into the serene blue-gray of sky and history.

Bak challenges us with a paradox: only the passing of time can heal the wounds and ease the pain of suffering, but humanity must remember the pain to grow and progress to a nobler future.

Is this, perhaps, his prayer? Is the observer prayerful? There are profiles of ten other heads, and ten is the number of men required by Jewish tradition for a prayer quorum.

Hiding For a King, 1990 oil on paper, 25 1/2" x 19 3/4"
(Photo—back cover)

The game of chess has been a vehicle for Bak's expression of his inner vision since he was a young teenager. At various periods of his life he has been moved by emotion to use this ancient game as a theme. Bak's first chess painting was done in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany following the horrors of the Holocaust. The artist now tells about a friend, a man whose wife and daughters had been killed by the Nazis, and who spent every day in the camp at a chessboard, creating and solving chess problems. Bak gave his first chess painting to this bereaved survivor who would later marry Bak's mother. Bak recently wrote, "The unjust, unpredictably wild world in which we lived seemed to me already there, a strange place for the logical, rational, scrutinizing set of rules that define the struggle for power in chess."

Hiding For a King is part of a recently compiled group of paintings which use chess as a metaphor. In this earthy work, Bak fragments the chessboard, a usually steady surface on which chess pieces move. The small squares are shown as banners, as shields, as frames for silhouettes of chessmen. Bak wrote, "Values change, directions change and borders are not defined as clearly as we would have them. Things break, they are never complete. The powerful fall to pieces, the weak become stronger and more dangerous."

The most complete and unblemished chess piece in this painting is the Queen, standing behind a transparent square. Her entire shape is clear and unbroken. Two chess pieces are shown in the foreground. Were they once pawns, those numerous foot soldiers, weak and expendable? One is severely broken, splinted together and emerging from a wrapping which was dropped. It is an echo of the second piece, unmistakably a wrapped phallus. Bak has offered the possibility of the Queen as "powerful, castrating mother."

What about the King? The chess King is usually symbolized by a crown or a cross. The red crown on the left and the cross nailed to a square, hint of an unseen king. In Jewish mysticism, the King represents God and Bak continues this symbolism. The King/God is always withdrawn and hidden. He appears powerless because one cannot see Him operating in the world. However, the contraction and hiding of the King/God is what allows humanity to have the room to be able to choose between good and evil. The choice is ours.

About his chess paintings, Bak has written, "From a purely painterly standpoint, this is a theme which allows me to recreate a three dimensional world into which I can inject a game of colors, light, shadow, atmosphere and different moods. All this serves as a framework that contains metaphors of existence, struggle, victory or loss."

Samuel Bak was born on August 12, 1933 in Vilnius, at a crucial moment in modern history, in which fateful events lay ahead for humankind. Bak's talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine. After the end of World War II, he was placed in the Landsberg Displaced Person Camp. At this time, he was enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School, Munich. In 1948 he immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. After completing both his studies at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and his army service, he went to Paris in 1956. There he continued his studies at l'Ecole des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his studies.

In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International" in Pittsburgh. And, in 1963 two one-man exhibitions were held at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums. It was subsequent to these exhibitions, during the years 1963-1964, that a major change in his art occurred. There was a distinct shift from abstract forms to a metaphysical figurative means of expression. Ultimately, this transformation crystallized into his present pictorial language.

In 1966 he re-settled in Israel. He lived in New York City (1974-1977) and in Paris (1980-1984). Since 1984, Samuel Bak lives in French-speaking Switzerland.

From 1959-1991 Samuel Bak has participated in over 60 solo exhibitions at private galleries in New York, Boston, London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Zurich, Rome and other cities around the world.

Since 1979 large retrospective exhibitions were held in the Museums of Heidelberg, Nuremberg, Bonn, Dusseldorf, Esslingen, Wiesbaden, Landau, Braunschweig and Bamberg. Recently, a special exhibit entitled "Bak and Durer" was shown at the historic Durer House Museum in Nuremberg.

In the years 1980-1984, a travelling solo exhibition was organized by "Ommanut La'am" of the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Education for over 30 cultural centers in Israel.

In the United States and Canada, exhibitions of Samuel Bak's work have been presented, since 1969, at the: Brockton Art Center, Massachusetts (1969); Sady E. Bronfman Center, Montreal (1970); Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University (1976); Koffler Art Gallery, Toronto (1989). In 1975, an important group of his work was shown at the Jewish Museum, New York in the exhibition of the Jewish Experience in Art of the 20th Century. In 1990, his work was included in a related exhibition at the Barbican Center, London. Opening October 5, 1991, at Pucker Safrai Gallery in Boston, *Chess as Metaphor*.

Biography courtesy of Pucker Safrai Gallery



Hiding For a King, 1990