

# SAMUEL BAK

## The Fruit of Knowledge



Pucker Gallery · Boston · 1995

FRONT COVER

PERSPECTIVE, 1994

Oil on Linen, 45 7/8 x 35 1/4", BK307

FRONTISPIECE

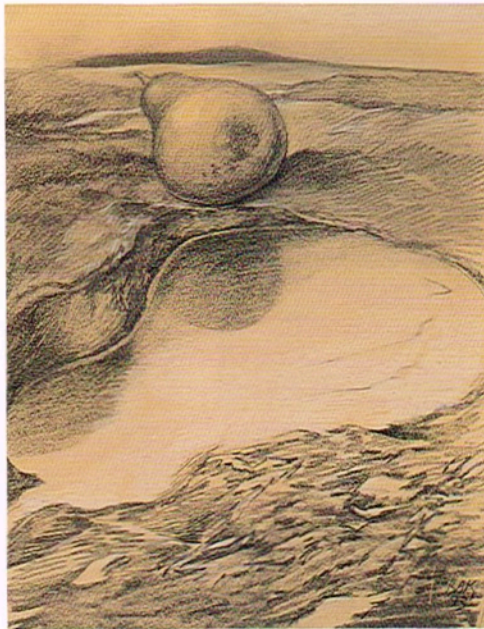
STUDY FOR ELEMENT OF WATER, 1994

Mixed Media on Paper, 12 3/4 x 9 7/8", BK308

# SAMUEL BAK

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The Fruit of Knowledge  
Recent Paintings



8 April - 31 May 1995

**PUCKER GALLERY**

171 Newbury Street  
Boston, MA 02116-2897  
(617) 267-9473 FAX# (617)424-9759



2. NIGHT-PEAR, 1994

Oil on Linen, 21 7/8 x 18 1/4", BK280

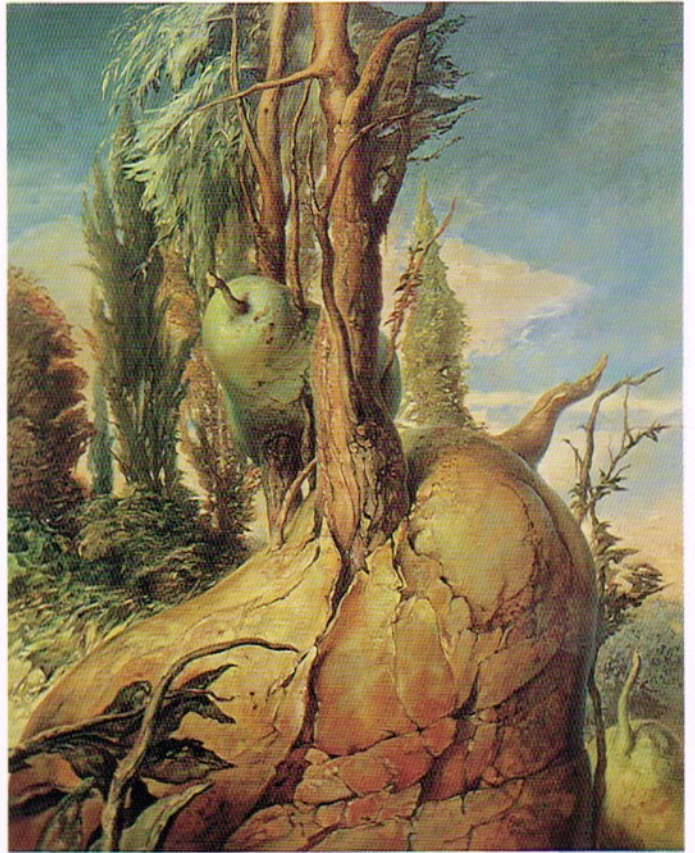


3. KEEPER OF SECRETS, 1994

Oil on Linen, 21 7/8 x 18 1/4", BK281

### THE FRUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

First, there is the overwhelming sadness. The tortured pears, their shattered skins crumbling and breaking to reveal the small and fragile pears at their very core, convey an almost unspeakable sorrow. The experience of the Holocaust and its aftermath is the always present memory behind Bak's work. Second, there is the beauty and richness of the aesthetic experience. With his beautiful glazes, precise handling and references to the art of the past, Bak clearly and consciously participates in and even celebrates the Western artistic tradition. Third, there is the nagging problem of iconography. What do these pears represent? Why paint so many "portraits of pears"? The viewer of Sam Bak's most recent series of paintings is left with three seemingly unrelated - even irreconcilable - responses, which suggest a host of deeper questions: how can art, as sign



4. CYCLES, 1989-94  
Oil on Linen, 32 1/4 x 25 3/4", BK295



5. OPEN PASSAGE, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 5/8", BK291



6. PROJECTION, 1994

Oil on Linen, 25 1/2 x 21 1/4", BK288



7. TEMPORARY PERMANENCE, 1994

Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 3/4", BK292

and symbol of the highest aspirations of Western culture, describe or respond to the horror of experience that seems to invalidate those aspirations? What is the function of art in the present day?

On the one hand, Bak embraces the traditional aims of "Art." His paintings are beautiful objects, carefully crafted with an exquisite refinement of color and touch. His work engages with past masters through visual quotation and play; the green curtains in *Lucky Performance* remind the viewer both of Alberti's definition of painting as a window and Raphael's witty use of similar green swags of cloth in the Sistine Madonna. Some of his works seem to be, at least on one level, commentary on the Western system of illusionism; in *Perspective* the recession of a row of pears into the illusory three dimensional space of the painting foregrounds the three primary optical tricks for creating depth: following the angle of linear perspective, diminishing size, and the hazy blue tonality of aerial perspective. His punning titles address the viewer directly, creating a complications relationship between maker and viewer. In all of these ways, Bak continues, celebrates and plays with the traditions of Western art and culture.

And yet there is another, seemingly contradictory, story being told in these images as well, a story imaged in pain-filled "portraits of pears." The experience of viewing the paintings is one of emotion and perplexity. The repeated symbol seems to hold a precise meaning, but it is one that is elusive, almost frustrating. How are we to understand this open symbol?

First, there is the evocation of the human figure in the shape of the pear, the upright posture, proportion and balance of the fruit seem to mimic the human form. Bak's emphasis on



8. THE PERPETUAL LEGEND, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32", BK304



9. PYRAMID, 1994

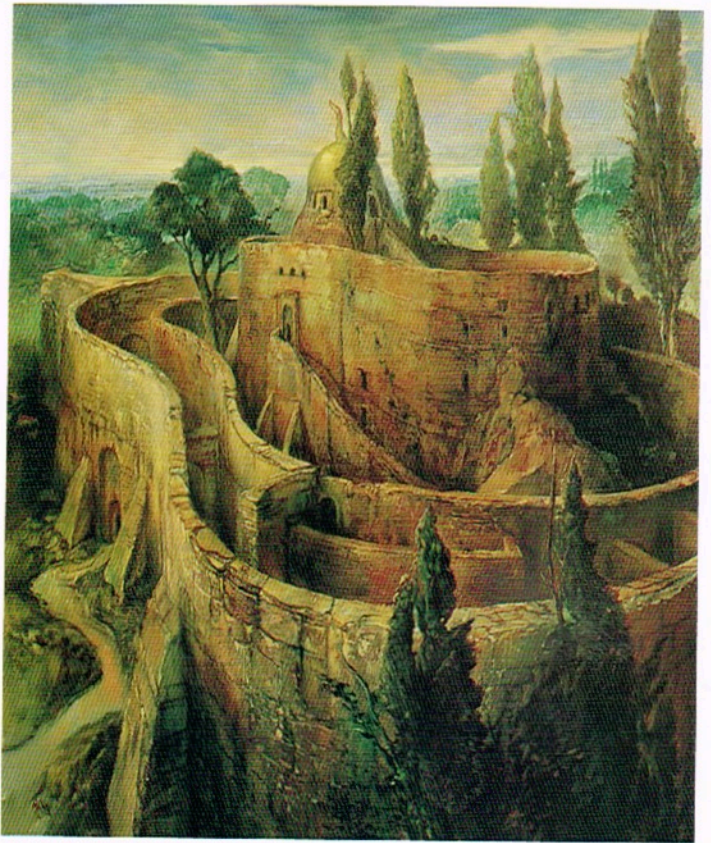
Oil on Linen , 39 1/2 x 32", BK305



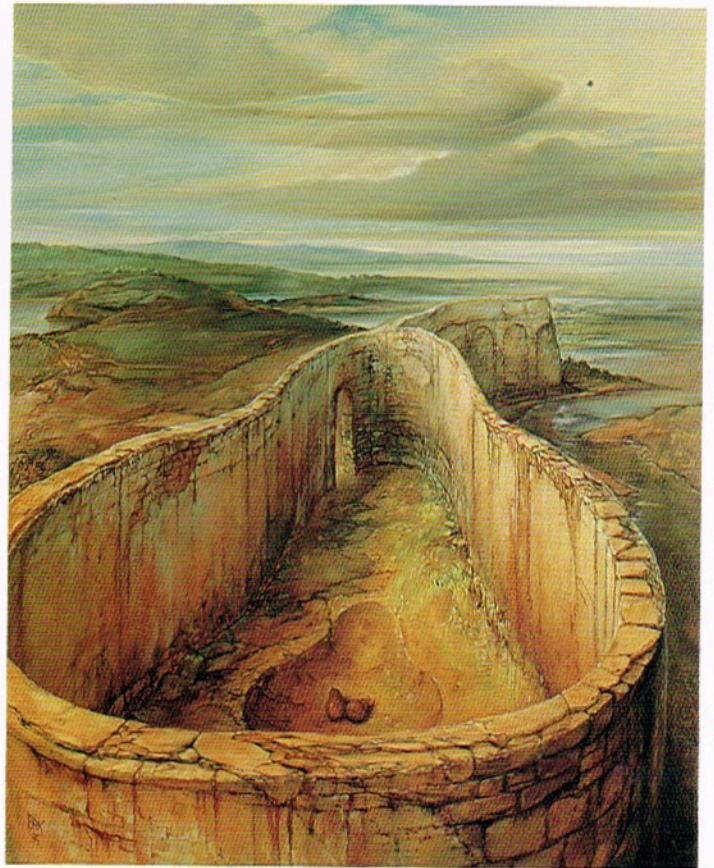
the fragility of the fruit and the dichotomy between interior and exterior creates a universe of threatened pears who are overwhelmed and, at times, destroyed by the world they inhabit. In *After the Perquisition*, the large armored pear has been dismantled, revealing at its center a small vulnerable fruit, already pierced by the armor of its predecessor, while in *Times of Persecution* the broken fruit reveals small red pears, one of which has already been wounded. The pears are subject to forces beyond their control, beyond the explanatory power of the image, providing a powerful metaphor for the fate of people caught up in the destruction of war. As Bak explains, "I hope that the components that make up this painting will somehow convey a feeling or certain memories of the hard times of war-time existence that I have experienced myself, and the war-time terrible images that bombard us constantly, even when we are sheltered and we live very happily in very comfortable spaces on our islands. There are other islands in this universe which are just terrible and they keep those memories always alive."

Second, there is the resonance of the still life tradition. In still-life, baskets of fruit and flowers, in various stages of ripeness and decay, represent the passage of time and the fragility of human existence. They function as *memento mori*, reminders of mortality and human imperfection. Bak's battered and armored pears share this sense of the passage of time and decay and, through their removal from the still life and re-presentation in the form of the portrait, take on an agency and mobility that only serves to heighten the resonance in terms of human life.

Third, there is the idea of the "fruit of knowledge." Bak explains, "As a child I had a feeling that if Adam gave up paradise in order to



10. GATES OF PARADISE, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 1/2 x 21 1/2", BK289



11. PAIR, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 5/8", BK294



12. UNDER THE CELESTIAL DOME, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32 1/8", BK300



13. SILENT PRAYER, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32", BK301



14. PEREGRINATION, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 1/4 x 25 3/4", BK293



15. PEREMPTORY DEPARTURE, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32", BK299



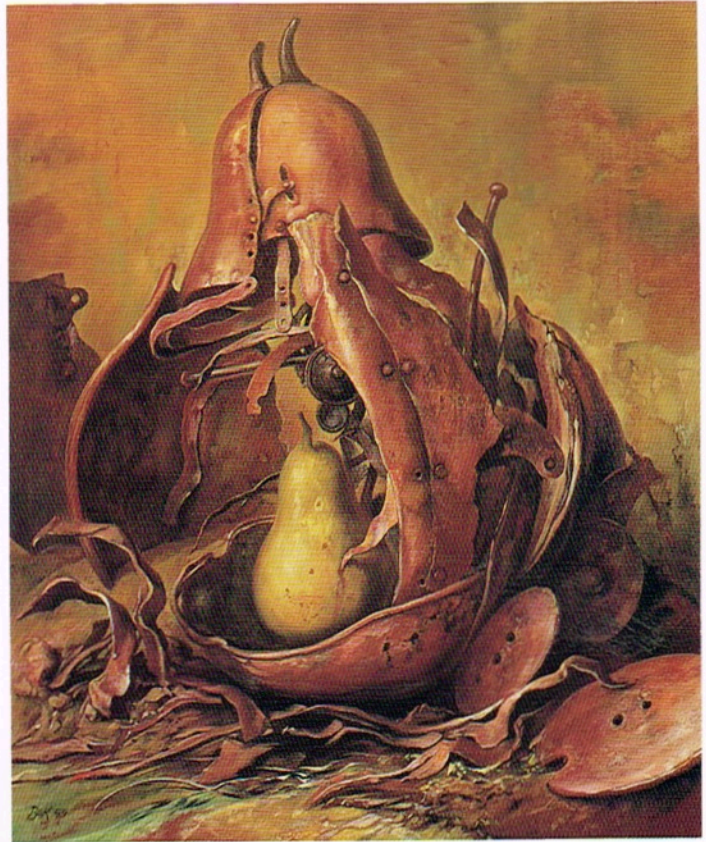
16. PREMONITORY APPEARANCE, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 5/8", BK298

taste the fruit that would give knowledge and a capacity to distinguish between good and evil it must have been a pear. I felt that an apple, which in my childhood memories was usually something very sour, had nothing in common with the sensual, wonderful taste of a pear.” The pear thus stands as an alternative symbol of the Fall of Man and all of its ramifications: the expulsion from paradise into the world of time, the origin of free will, and the capacity to distinguish and choose between good and evil.

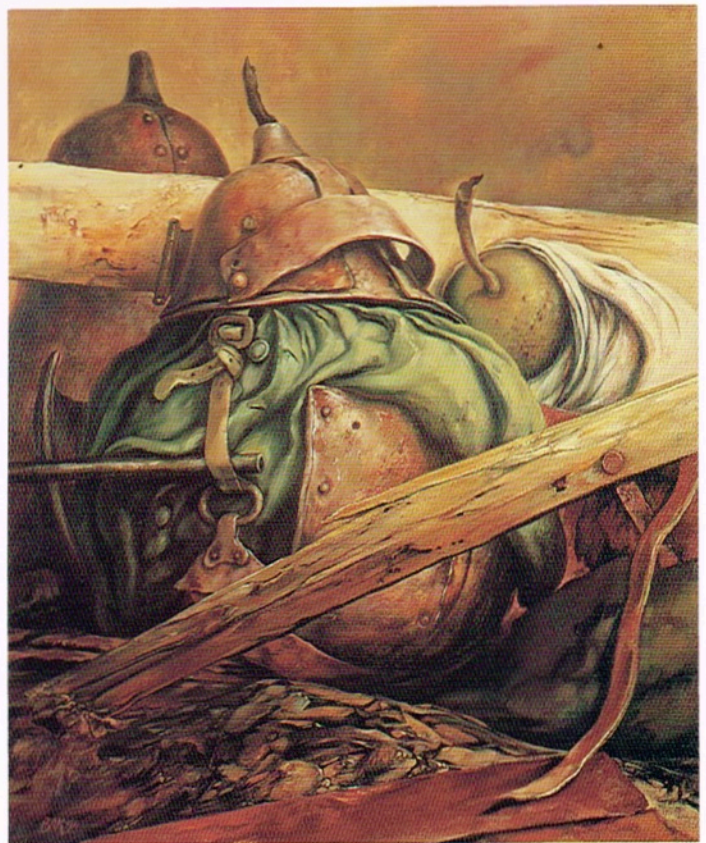
Fourth, there is the experience of perplexity the iconography engenders. Our inability to instantly comprehend these works speaks of the limits of knowledge, the limits of human perception. This symbol, the fruit of knowledge, is only partially available to our understanding and so the experience of the paintings re-creates the elusive nature of knowledge and perspective. Several of Bak’s paintings make visible this sense of the limits of perception. In *Projection*, all the pear can see in the clouds are replicas of its own form, and in *Night-Pear* the moon itself is seen as a pear. As Bak writes, “How very little we can imagine anything which is not a projection of ourselves. So this is somehow a reflection about human limitations.”

Thus, the iconography and the experience of decoding the pear as symbol seem to speak of the limitations of human perception and knowledge, and the tragic consequences of these failures. The memory of the war and the Holocaust ruptures the continuity of culture and the certainty of knowledge. The pear functions as a multi-layered symbol, telling a story of pain and despair.

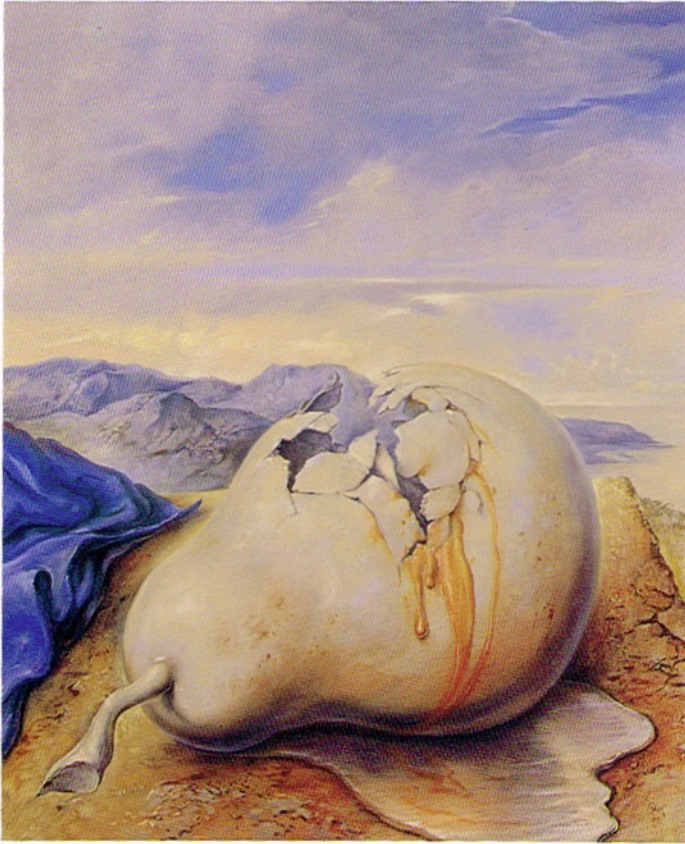
How are we to reconcile these two opposing tendencies in Bak’s art? How does the celebration of culture and art find common ground



17. AFTER THE PERQUISITION, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 5/8 x 21 5/16", BK286



18. DEFENSES, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 3/4 x 21 3/8", BK284



19. PERPLEXITY, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 5/8 x 21 3/8", BK285



20. LUCKY PERFORMANCE, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 3/4 x 21 1/4", BK283

with the devastation of war-time and the tragedy of human evil? Two paintings speak directly to this question: *Perforation* and *Performing Quintet*. In *Perforation*, the canvas looks as if it has been ripped open, revealing whole pears behind the injured pear on the surface; Bak explains, "the illusion of being painted on the flat surface of the canvas cannot exist if there is not something deeper, something which is beyond it." But the answers are not that easy, "art" cannot resolve all the questions raised by the harsh opposition between ideal and reality. In *Performing Quintet* the ripped opening reveals a supporting reality behind the ripped canvas, but that "reality" is itself a representation, a painted canvas. Art cannot fully resolve the tensions between the experience and the imagination, cannot redeem certain memories.

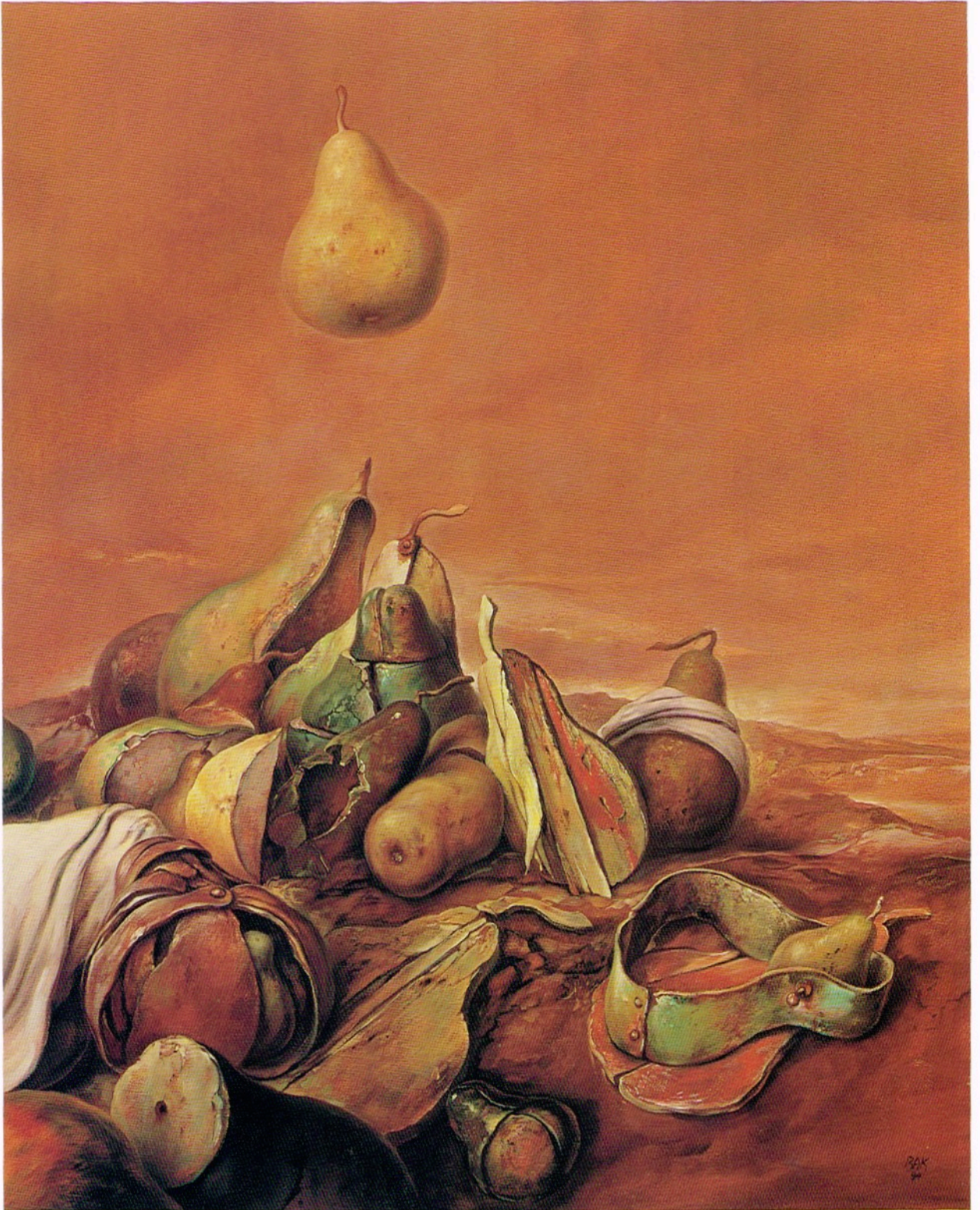
It is this tension that is the lasting value of Bak's work. He provides no easy answers but allows the juxtaposition between pain and beauty, experience and art, limitation and comprehension to become the subject of this series and in doing forces us to confront the possibilities and limits of art.

PAMELA M. FLETCHER





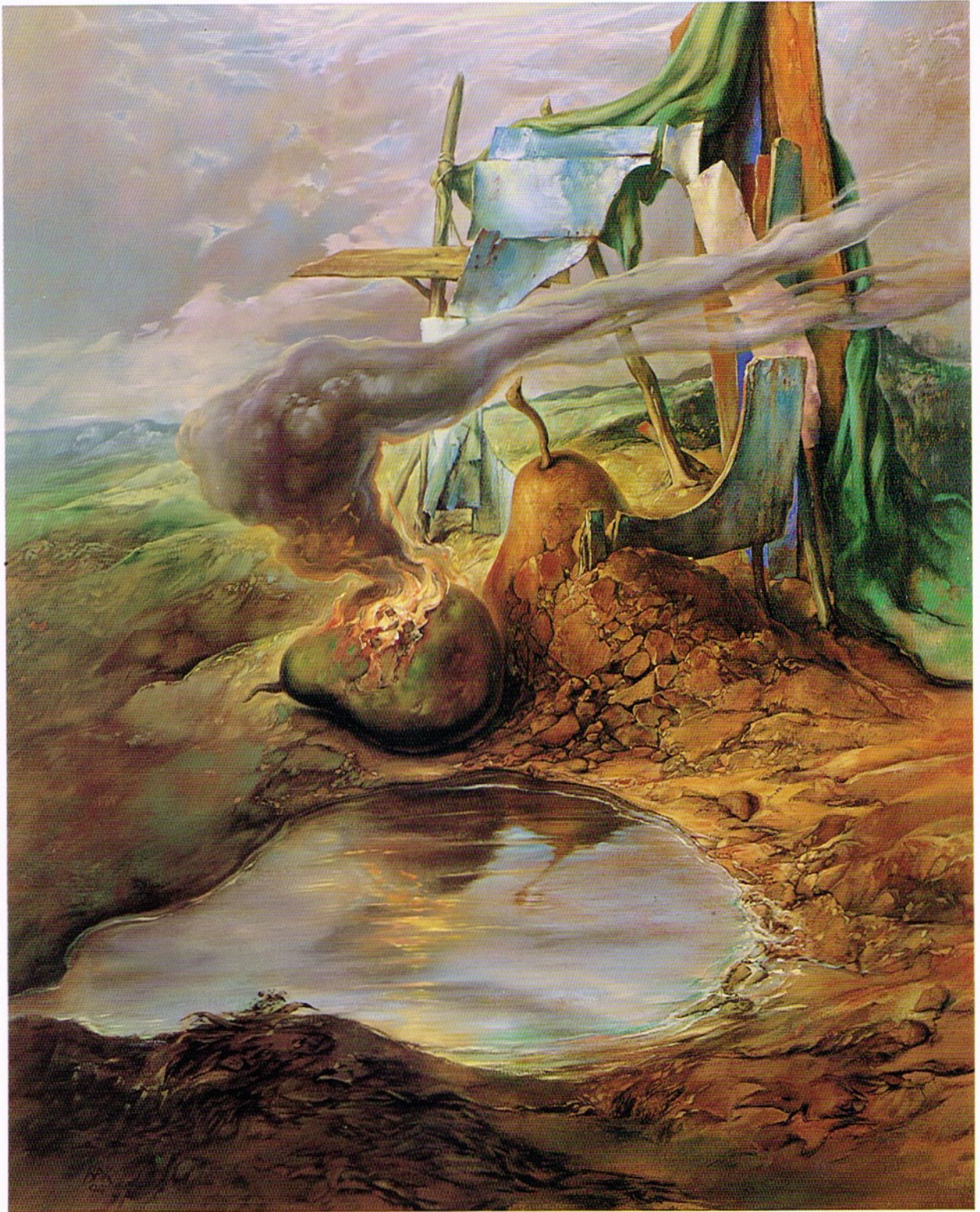
21. PARITY, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32", BK302



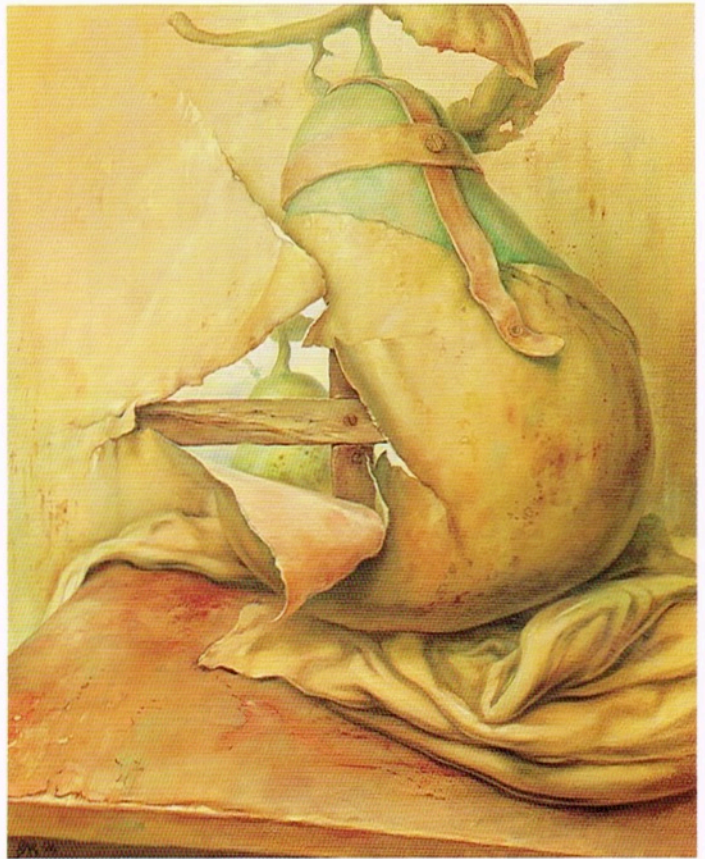
22. NEAR PERFECTION, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 3/8 x 32", BK303



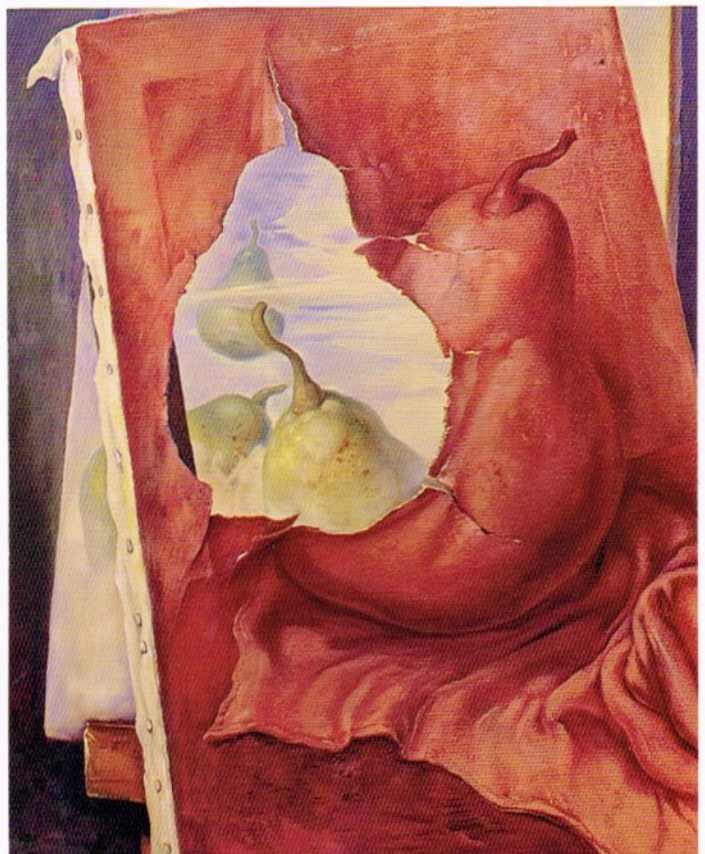
23. PERTURBATION, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 1/8 x 25 5/8", BK290



24. THE FOUR ELEMENTS, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 39 1/2 x 32", BK306



25. PERFORATION, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 3/4", BK297



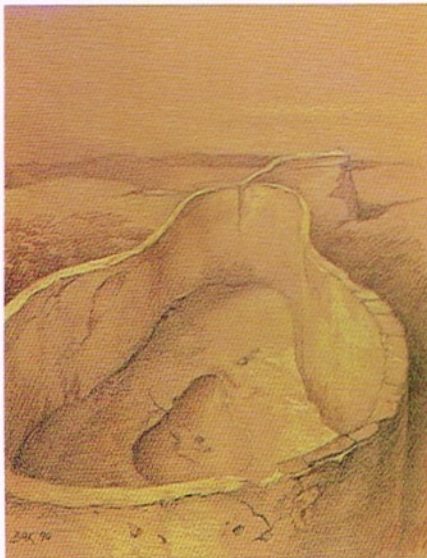
26. PERFORMING QUINTET, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 32 x 25 3/4", BK296



27. STUDY FOR LEGEND, 1993  
Mixed Media on Paper, 12 3/4 x 9 7/8", BK309



28. STUDY FOR PERMANENCE, 1993  
Mixed Media on Paper, 12 3/4 x 9 7/8", BK310



29. PERIPHERY, 1994  
Mixed Media on Paper, 12 3/4 x 9 7/8", BK276



30. IN TIMES OF PERSECUTIONS, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 25 5/8 x 21 1/4", BK287



31. ON THE BRINK, 1994  
Oil on Linen, 21 7/8 x 18 1/4", BK282

## 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.



32. ENVELOPE, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK269

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"  
Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, New York - 1994.  
"FLIGHT: Escape, Hope, Redemption"  
Pucker Gallery, Boston - 1995. "The Fruit of Knowledge"

#### RETROSPECTIVES IN MUSEUMS

Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem - 1963.  
Tel Aviv Museum - 1963.  
Brockton Art Center, Fuller Memorial - 1969.  
Bronfman Center, Montreal - 1970.  
Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass - 1976.  
Heidelberg Museum - 1977.  
Kunstverein Esslingen - 1977.



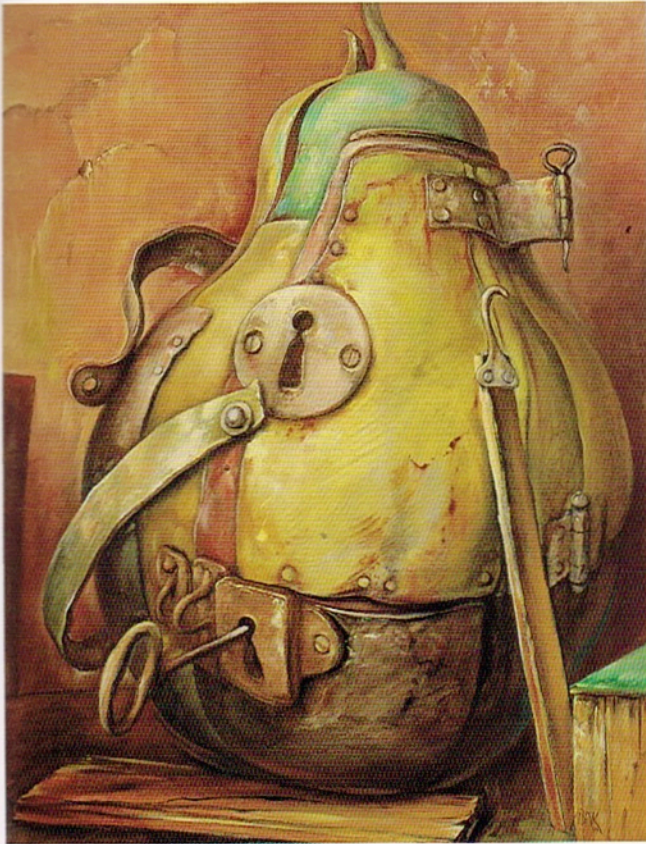
33. STONE MOONS, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK270

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 Judischer Erfahrung" Judisches Museum, Stadt  
Frankfurt am Main - 1993  
"Samuel Bak - A Retrospective Journey: Paintings 1946-1994" Janice Chara  
Epstein Museum/Gallery, W. Bloomfield, MI - 1994.

#### 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.  
"Nachbilder," Kunstahalle, Hannover - 1979.





34. WELL KEPT SECRET, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK272



35. STUDY FOR DEFENSES, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK275

"Bilder Sind Nicht Verboten," Stadtische Kunstst hale, Dusseldorf - 1982.  
"Still Life," Tel Aviv Museum - 1984.  
International Art Fair, Ghent - 1986.  
"Chagall to Kitaj", Barbican Art Center, London - 1990.

#### PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

D rer House, Nuremberg.  
Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg.  
German Parliament, Bonn.  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem.  
Jewish Museum, New York.  
Kunstmuseum, Bamberg.  
Municipality of Nuremberg.  
Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.  
University of Haifa, Israel.  
Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel.  
Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem.  
Vaud State, Switzerland.  
Judisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

#### MONOGRAPHS

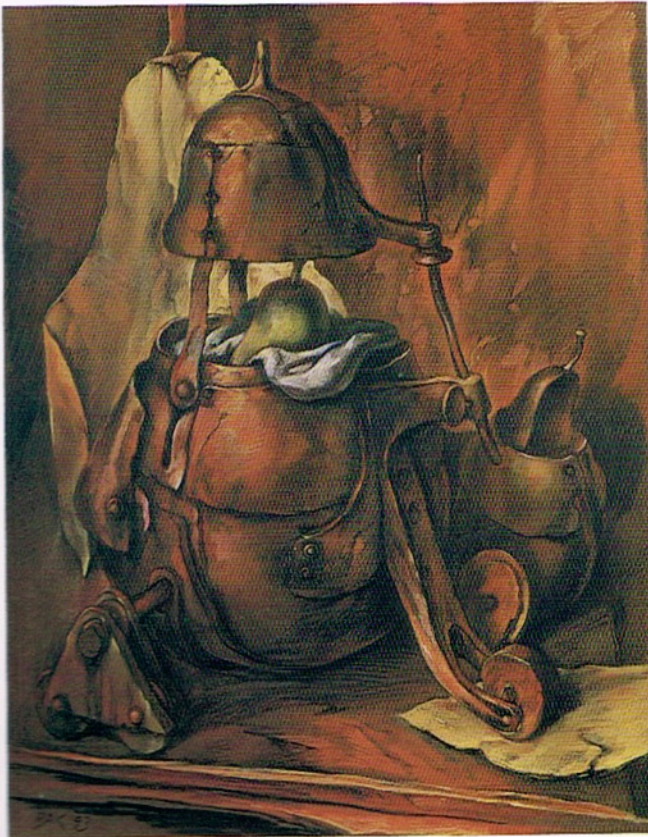
Chess as Metaphor In the Art of Samuel Bak, Jean Louis Cornuz. Boston & Montreux, 1991.  
Samuel Bak, The Past Continues, Samuel Bak and Paul T. Nagano. David R. Godine, Boston, 1988.  
Bak, Monuments to Our Dreams, Rolf Kallenbach. Limes Verlag, Weisbaden & Munich, 1977.  
Bak, Paintings of the Last Decade, A. Kaufman and Paul T. Nagano. Aberbach, New York, 1974.



36. SOURCE OF ENERGY, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK271



37. PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY, 1989  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK274



38. STUDY IN BROWNS, 1993  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK273



39. PEAR SPLIT, 1993  
Mixed Media on Paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4", BK268

## PUCKER GALLERY

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