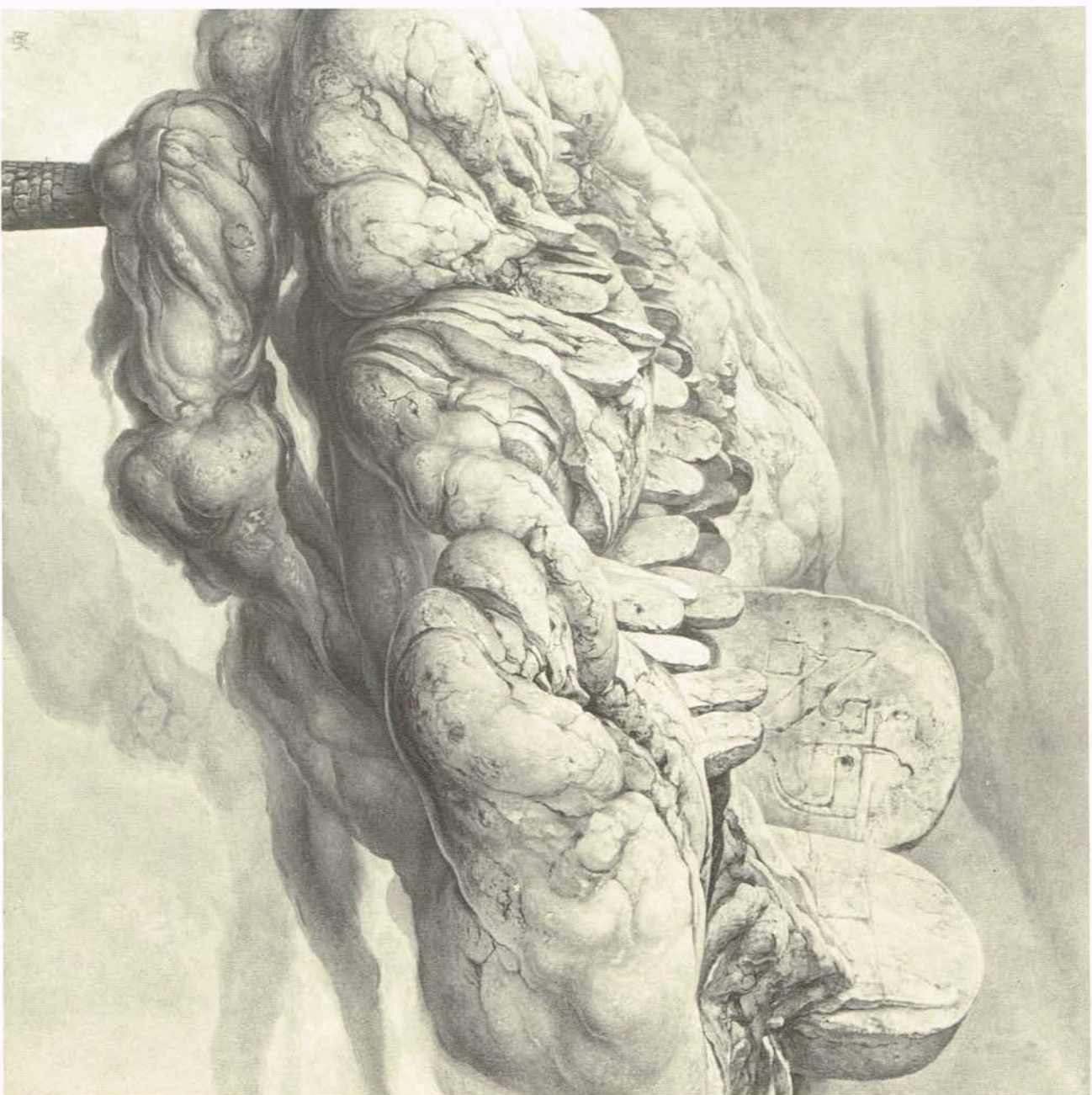


**LANDSCAPES
of
JEWISH
HISTORY**



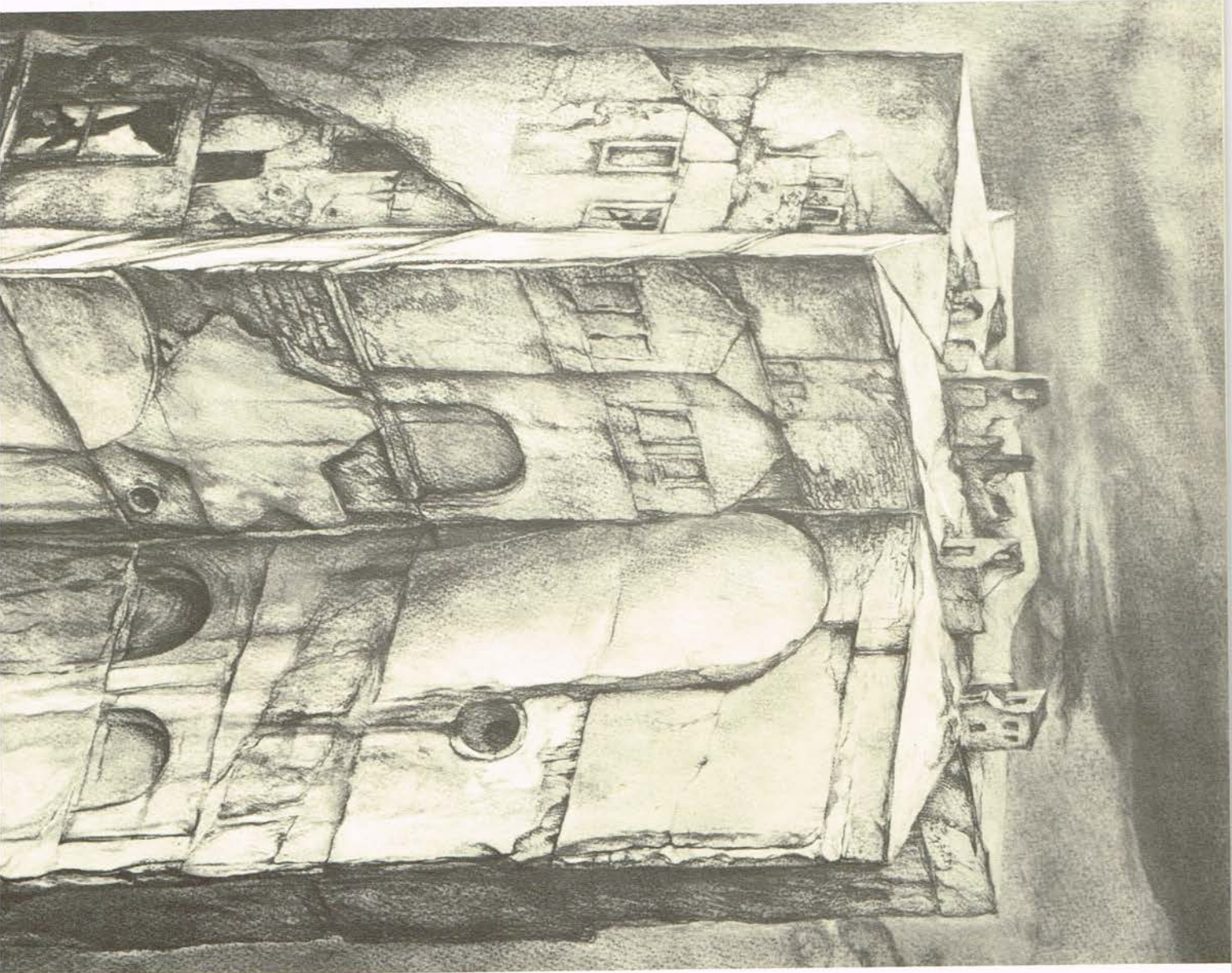
SAMUEL BAK

(cover)
Smoke
oil
23 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.

The works in this exhibition
were executed from 1975 to 1978.

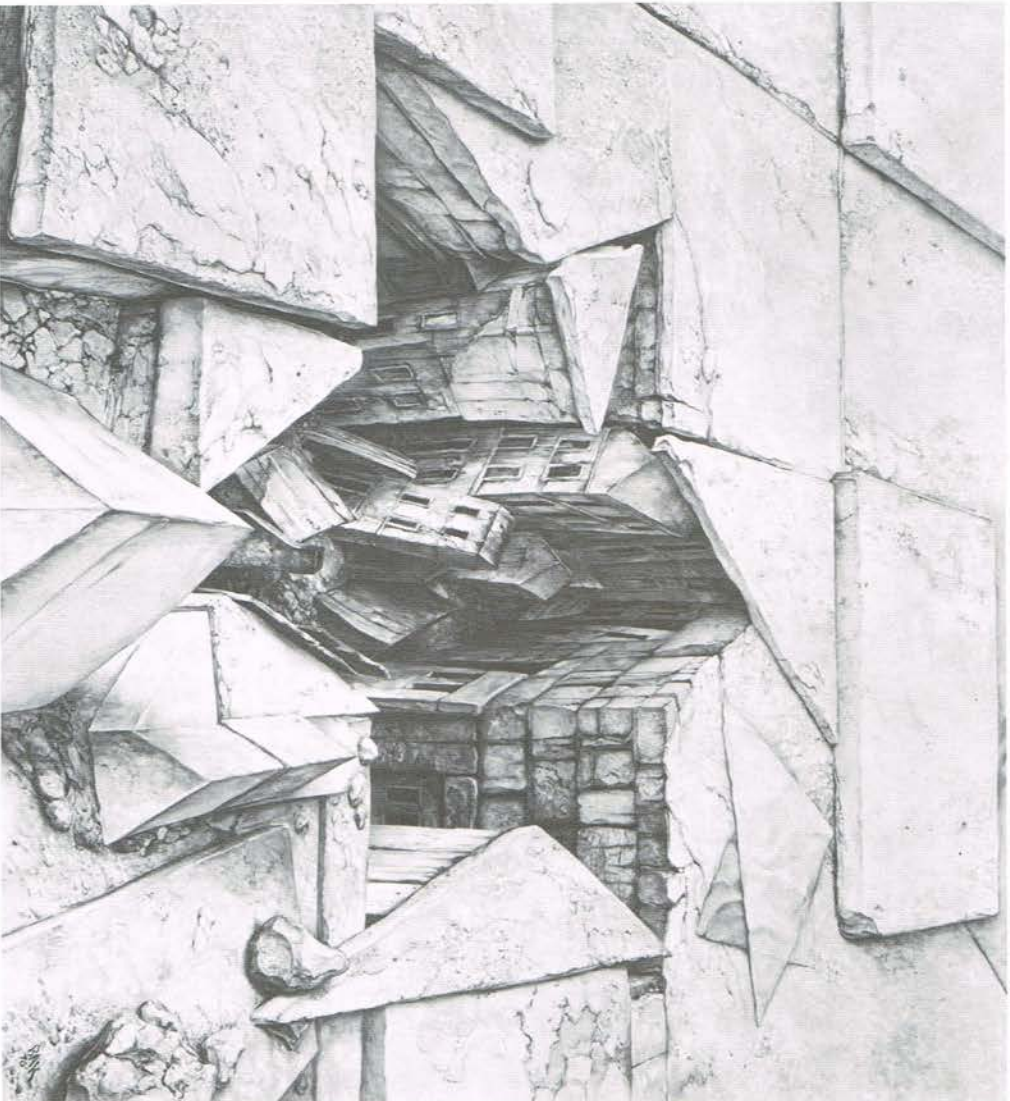
OPENING
23 June 1979
6 - 9 pm

The exhibition
is under the patronage of
Michael Bavly, Esq.
Consul General
State of Israel



The Pillar, (detail)

photos: fine arts photography, george vasquez
design: nagano
© pucker/safrai gallery, inc. 1979



The Ghetto
oil
52 x 48 in.

BAK: ARCHITECT OF METAPHOR

I saw myself as a small boy in the icy and wind-swept city, trying to understand the anguished faces of the grown-ups around me.

At one point I saw myself painting, and then cutting out in fabric, the yellow star that had to be sewn onto my parents' clothes and mine, by order of the Nazi conqueror . . . I was not then aware of the nature of the events that were taking place . . .

The ghetto became an underground city, confined to a small, claustrophobic space by a hostile and indifferent neighborhood. Homes were torn up by the roots. Heaps of rubble stretched forth in an infinite wave. Memorials for those souls who had left their homes forever. Imaginary, pathetic, virtually impossible projects for their commemoration. Landscapes of Jewish history, filled with pain and destruction.

Samuel Bak, 1979

It is rare to come upon an artist whose words resonate as tellingly as his images, who paints with words as eloquently as he does with his brush. (Writing in a language several times removed from his native Polish, Bak reminds us of his countryman, Joseph Conrad.) Rarer still to find today an autobiographical body of work that does not entreat us to consider the idiosyncracies of its author, to review with him the psychological fantasies of the self in the form of surreal universes or esoteric terrains of the absurd. Not that Bak has disdained the private vision of the surrealists from whom he has gained nourishment. When he turned to representational painting in 1964 it was De Chirico, Dali, and Magritte whose mode suited his.

Indeed, Bak paid explicit tribute to Magritte in his 1972 work **Homage to René**, in which a door standing free in a landscape opens to reveal a giant lit candle in a darkened room. An axe is stuck in the door, but its wielder is gone. Those strange juxtapositions, the irrational and shock elements of that period seem to have become something else in the recent works. In fact, the surrealist that Bak certainly was has given way to a kind of symbolic realist concerned less with irrationality than with metaphor, morality, and the truth of memory and history.

Fifteen years ago Bak decided to abandon "a certain type of lyrical landscape painting, fashionably abstract in manner" in order to "define and develop a different form of expression in which the realistic representation of an imagined world would echo the private and collective experience of our common Jewish past." With these recent works he has achieved that goal. Surrealism was the open highway that he took to arrive at his past, and now that he has inhabited that haunted time, he explores its silent streets and alleys like a returned native.

In the course of this long sojourn in that moment of some forty years ago Bak has constructed from the scraps and blocks of memory a testament of images whose single admonishment, in one way or another, is: "Remember". The extraordinary series of works based on the symbol of the Star of David continues the testament. The star and ghetto, inseparably and inevitably doomed, become the dual theme of what seems an unending train of permutations.

From the almost literal portraiture of the ruined **p.4 Synagogue**, whose roof line and jutting beams suggest the triangles of the star, to the apocalyptic image of **p.4 The Pillar**, monumental in its isolation as a star-shaped abandoned metropolis, Bak sees and re-sees, forms and re-forms the symbol of his personal grief into greater evocations of both the actual and the imaginative experience. The simple star seems to acquire a mutational life of its own: a solid, concrete Babel-like tower set against an evening sky in **The Pillar**; a negative image — a suffocating pit — in **p.5 Around the Ghetto**; and finally a receptacle for incinerating desiccated homes likened to a pyre of empty cartons in **Small Town**. Like a kind of metaphoric symphony, **Projects for a Memorial** proposes a cluster of variants — column, sarcophagus, enclosure, and grave — all having in common their

mutual disrepair and decay. As architect of such a memorial, however, Bak seems to anticipate in return not the slightest possibility of redemption, not even a nod of consolation. From fragments of stone and the mortar of memory he rigs only an unfinished accounting of history.

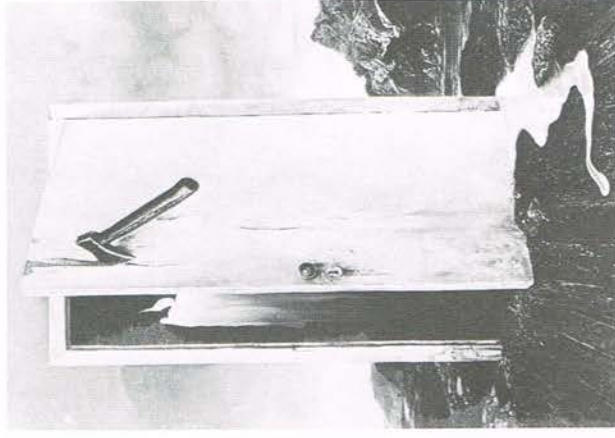
In **Lord Jim** Joseph Conrad holds that "a meticulous precision of statement (is sufficient to) bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things." This observation seems almost to have been written specifically for Bak. For it is through his utterly concrete and tangible re-creation of structure and texture; atmospheric light and meteorological mood (a sunless half-light alternates with the eerie illumination of an impending storm, but without the cleansing promise of rain) that we are persuaded of the reliability of Bak's memory and the accuracy of his reporting.

Part of that memory, apart from the indelible stamp of his experience in the holocaust, is the finest tuned instrument at his command: his understanding of nature. How does a broken boulder look? What is the feel of a cypress in a walled garden? The density of a cloud against the transparency of sky? The undulating light that skims across a sparsely vegetated plain? And how can these elements, hard-won by years of observation, be melded in the crucible of the artist's imagination to yield the alloy of poetic truth that rings truer than the seamless totality of Facts?

Bak shares with Leonardo the acuity of observation that makes possible so convincing a rendering of his imaginary world into a material image. One could believe that it was he, and not Leonardo, who made, five centuries ago, the following notation of a natural phenomenon:

"I saw a cloud in the shape of an immense mountain covered with fiery stones, for it was tinged with red by the sun on the horizon. This huge cloud . . . stood motionless: such was its immensity that its summit contained the sun's light for one hour and a half into night."

In **Smoke** it is as if Bak had simply painted the metaphor of Leonardo's notation in place of the observed event. The central image of that metaphor composes itself, in Bak's hands, into the twin Tablets of the Decalogue, which serve, like the Star of David, as the theme for a new cycle of works.



Homage to René, oil



Magritte: The Sense of Realities, oil



Ancient Smoke, oil

One needs only to read the book of *Exodus* to understand how Bak's inclination to paint in thematic cycles is wholly consonant with the structural form of the Bible: Filled with cadences of repetition, its narrative engine runs on the fuel of the theme and variations. The Ten Plagues, for example, can readily be seen in form as an analogy to Bak's series of metamorphoses on the theme of the Tablets. For the story of the plagues is an artful elaboration to emphasize a single idea, the stubbornness of Pharaoh. Each catastrophe convinces him to let the people go, and as the plague ends, he "hardens his heart" once again, thus inviting each subsequent plague. The account of the giving of the Law of Moses, too, is not a simply enacted matter, but a repeated drama. First, the voice of God to Moses, telling of the laws. Next, the re-telling as "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord". Then "Moses wrote all the words of the Lord". Then the summons to ascend the mount to receive the "tables of stone". A sojourn of forty days and forty nights. The descent follows, with the discovery of the golden calf and his people dancing. Moses breaks the tablets in anger. After the reconciliation Moses is commanded to "Hew thee two tablets of stone like unto the first" This time with blank tablets in hand, he once again ascends mount Sinai, once again receives the law, stays forty more days and forty more nights, and re-enacts the descent to give the law again to his people.

Bak's fantastic variations on the tablets carry more than a few steps further the Biblical device of repetition. The paintings and drawings embody the explorations and illuminations of an exquisite mind; the inventions of a poet-philosopher; the revelations of a visionary devoted not to speculations of the future, but to profound reflections on the tragic past.

An earlier painting titled **Ancient Smoke**, in which smoke from chimneys petrifies in clouds in the sky, is the antecedent for the present **Smoke**. In the newer, emissions from the chimney of the crematorium petrify into a quarry of headstones, a cumulus graveyard surmounted by the thunderhead of the Tablets, graven with "10", or "Thou shalt not". The Tablets are blank in the **Summit**, but a pointing cloud calls our attention to a bullet hole where there should have been a text. By comparing this painting to the drawing

p.9 **Study for the Summit Theme**, it is possible to see the workings of the artist's mind. Although complete and effective, realized as a solid, monolithic interpretation of the idea of the Tablets as an integral part of the

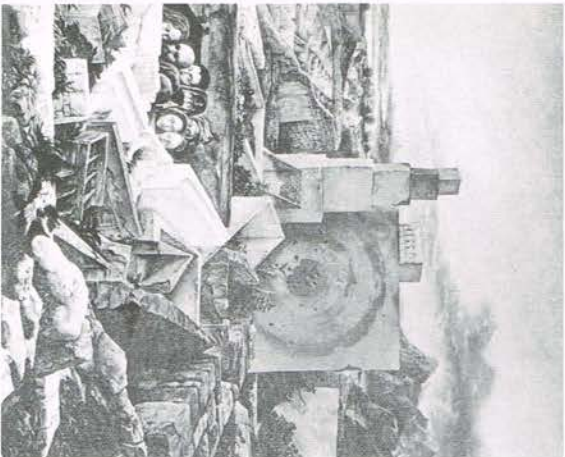
mountain, the drawing is clearly a step towards the final idea. In it the space is relatively shallow, with a single dark foreground ridge whose movement echoes that of the main peak. The sky is cloudless; the two "yod's", engraved in one Tablet as the abbreviation for God, repeat in miniature the paired shapes of the rocks below and the Tablets themselves, which stand here in the same plane. In the painting, the added background ranges deepen the space, as does the cloud-filled sky. The angled tablets and the more aggressive terrain, the more horizontal foreground ridge that opposes the thrust of the central mountain and Tablets, placed off-center in the square format, combine to produce a work in which the parts push and pull against each other, creating a vital tension which enhances the drama of the subject. One may ask, also, who has painted rocks like these since Giovanni Bellini?

Three works show the Tablets floating in air: "**Lo**" **Against Blue Space**, **From One to Ten**, and **Traces of Recent History**. It is difficult not to recall Magritte's **The Sense of Realities**, with its great boulder floating inexplicably over a calm landscape and under a crescent moon. The comparison affords us an opportunity to examine the differences between Bak and his predecessor: They can be seen as artists of mystery, Magritte's being a closed mystery while Bak's is open. Magritte gives few clues to the meaning of his visual enigmas beyond a title, which often enough is not intended to reveal, but to confound even further. Bak, on the other hand, in addition to his revelatory titles, fills his work with the most legible symbols: they are meant to be read and recognized, for his aim is to tap, ultimately, all our springs of knowledge, emotion, and sensation. The floating Tablets signify, probably among other things, the spiritual origins of the law; while the breaking up of the stones refers to the Biblical event as well as the metaphorical disintegration of morality in our era. The meanings are surely multi-leveled, some simple and some complex, but meanings nevertheless.

The sixth commandment, *Thou shalt not murder* (as translated in the Jewish Bible), is the subject of **Traces of Recent History**, **Monument in Yellow** and **Variation on the Izcór*** Theme. In them the yellow star and bullet holes are combined with the ruined Tablets with

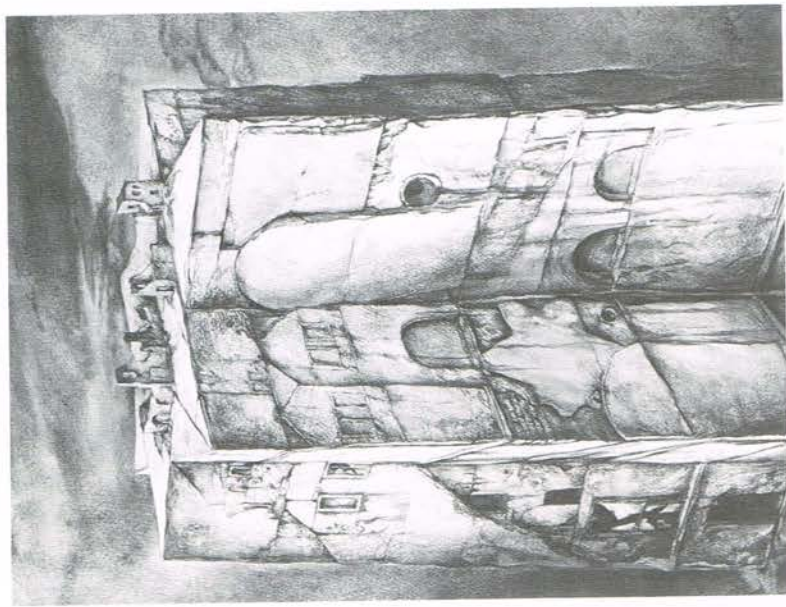
p.11

*Izcór (or Yzcor) — Hebrew: "He shall remember." The opening word of the prayer in commemoration of the dead recited in Ashkenazi communities on the last days of the Three Festivals and on the Day of Atonement.



Targets, oil (detail)

The Pillar
pastel
25 1/4 x 19 1/4 in.

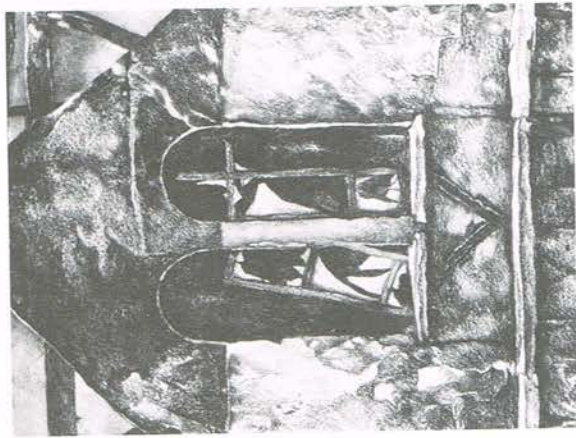


an explicitness that makes their meaning unquestionable. The dark shapes of the crematoria of **Monument in Yellow** repeat the shape of the Tablets; the cold white chimney belches smoke in **Izcor**. But it is still left to the viewer to make the connections of one thing with another: and that effort involves the viewer in the works as if he were party to a conspiracy of understanding.

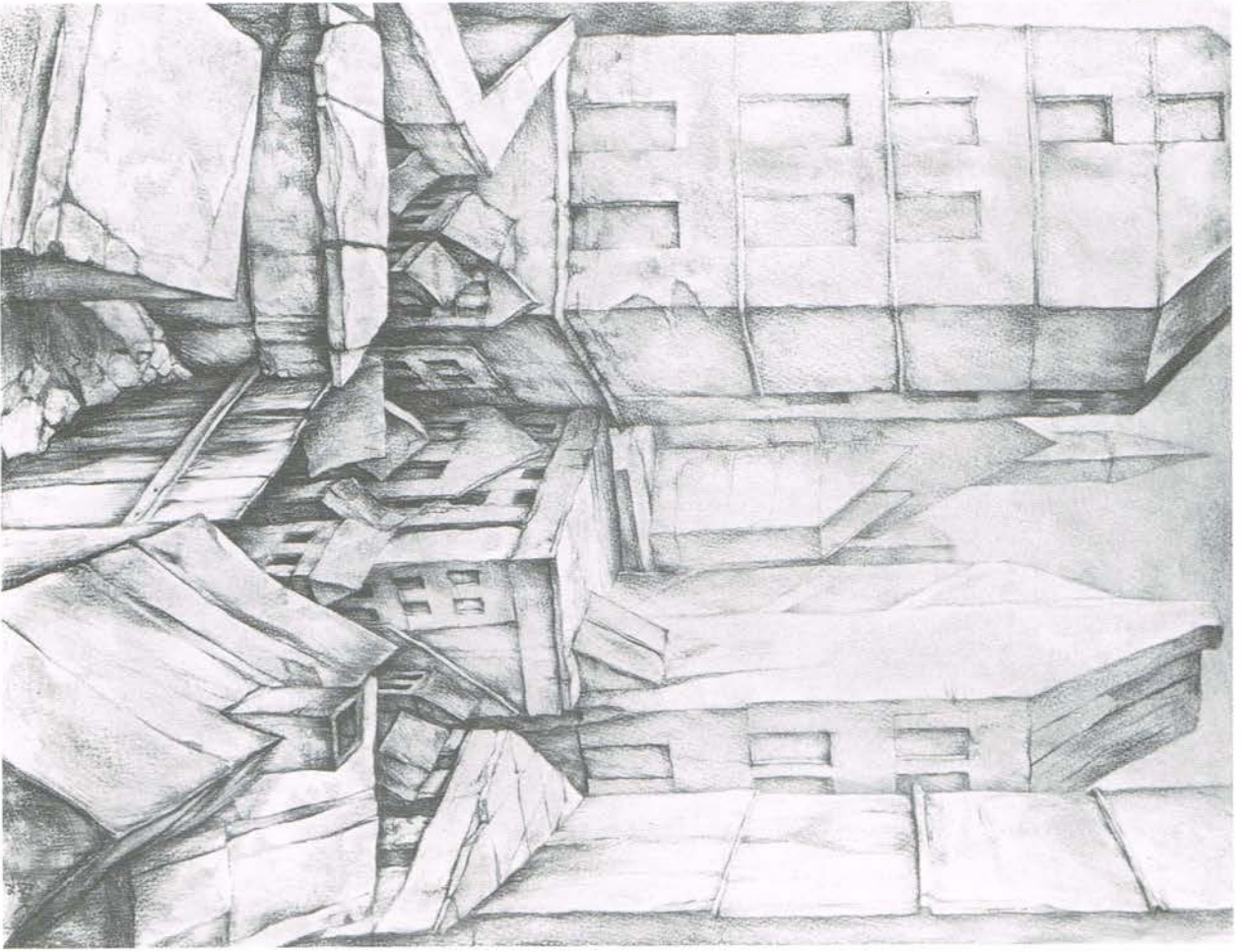
Bak's imagination seems a gift of boundless proportions as he moves from one idea to another, here seeing the Tablets as walled enclosures (as in **Secret Grove and Pardes**) protecting untended gardens in a landscape of bleak boulders; there constructing *stela* which, in **Cultures**, remark on the impact, universality, and death of empires, and in **Cornerstone** become a literal embodiment of The Word of God. The latter, in its masterful rendition of relief sculpture and sheer ingenuity in arranging abstract forms within closed spaces comes close to a rebuke of someone like Nevelson, whose assemblages occasionally approach the arbitrary.

Each drawing, each painting among these landscapes of Jewish history invites a thorough reading. Bak is not niggardly with his gifts. The richness of his execution, the conviction of verisimilitude that he conveys could be the subject of an entire essay. For these uninhabited plains and valleys, these destroyed Tablets and deteriorating structures are paradoxically constructed with the utmost care by this architect of metaphor. And to what end? These are not the edifices of optimism. Even in **The Promise** the irony of the title is evident as our hopes are leveled by the scene: the Tablets lying broken and unburied in open graves, the hastily propped up sign of The Sign, a painted rainbow, serving as a headstone for the graves. The Promise is surely as broken as the rainbow itself. The final chilling touch is added by the realization that this small painted arc is the cousin of the central motif of a painting Bak did twelve years ago: **Targets**. It is not hope, then, that Bak brings us in this rainbow and these works. It is truth, and the despair to be found in it.

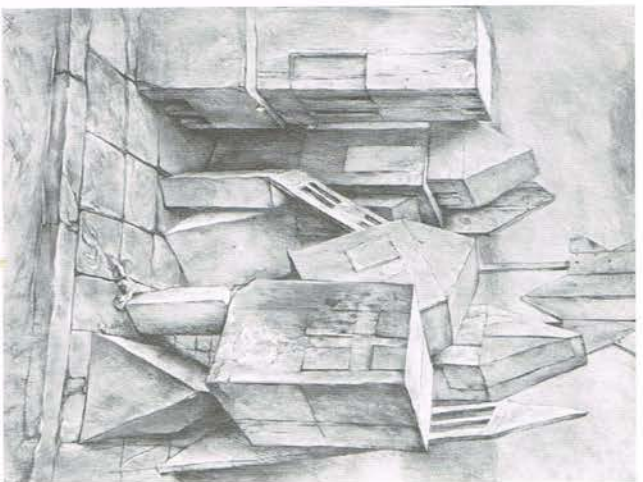
—P.T.N.



Synagogue
pastel
20 1/2 x 15 1/2 in.



Under a Yellow Star
pastel
19 x 24½ in.



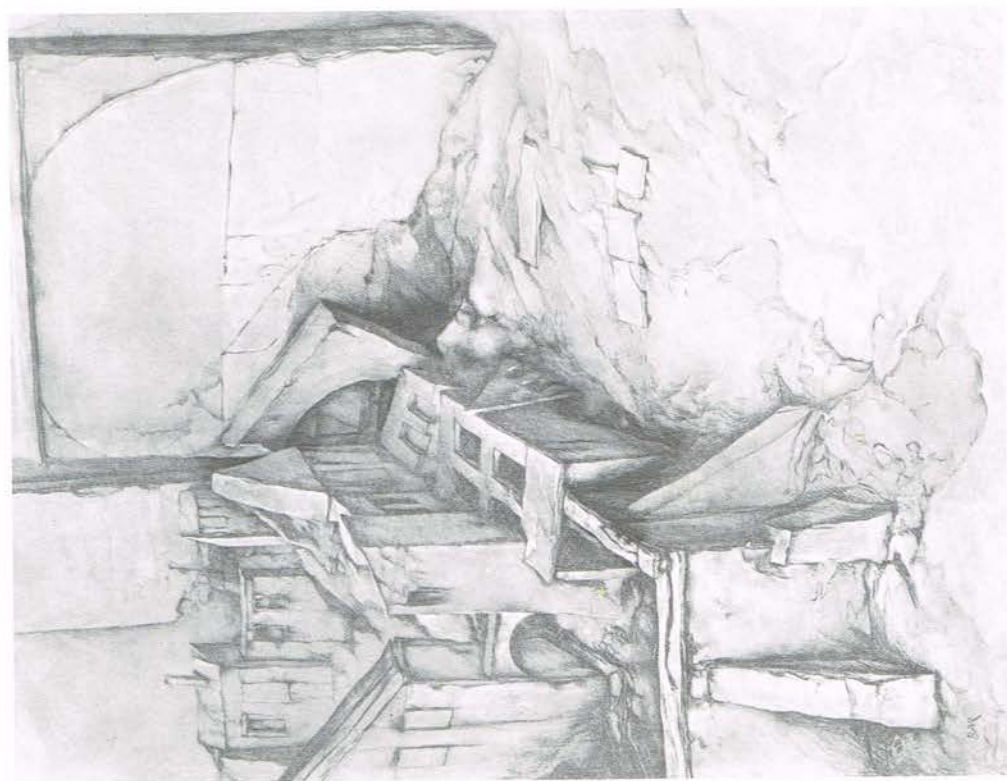
In Memory of Ponari
charcoal
18 x 24 in.

Around the Ghetto
pastel
22½ x 17¼ in.

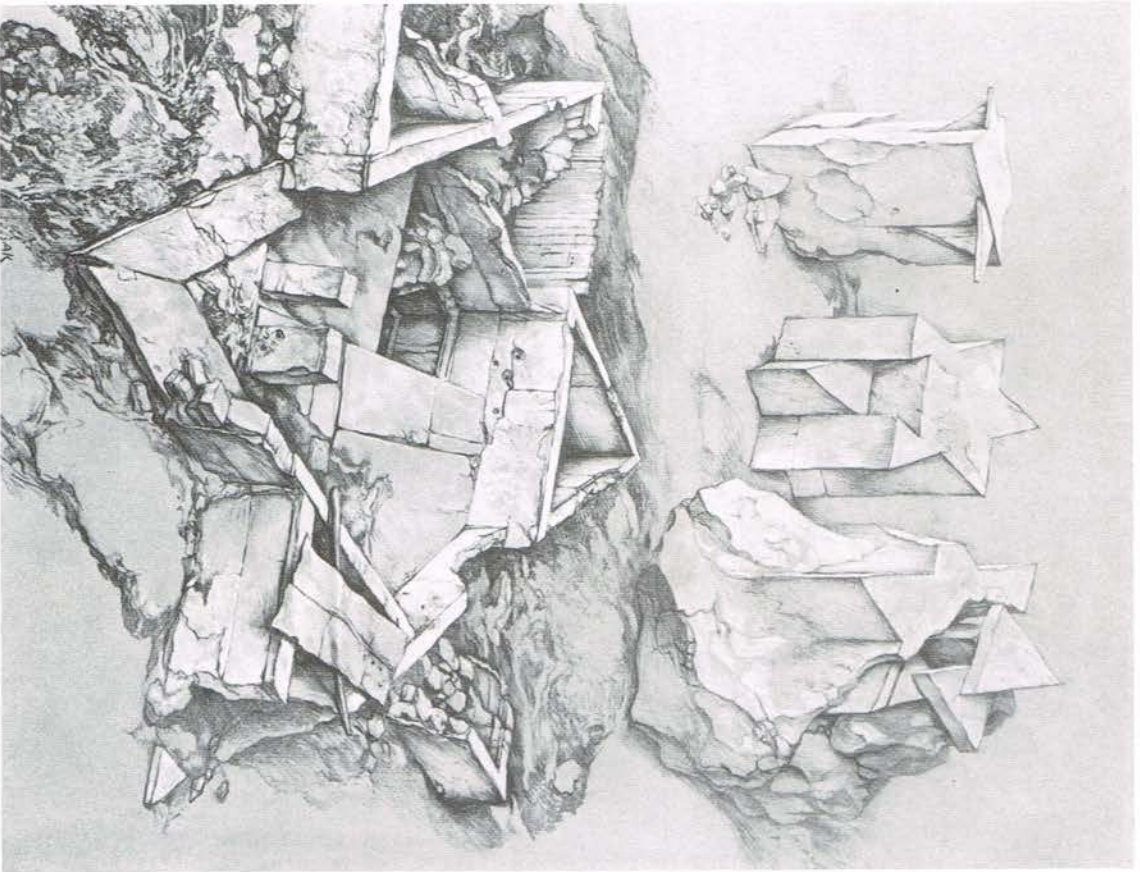




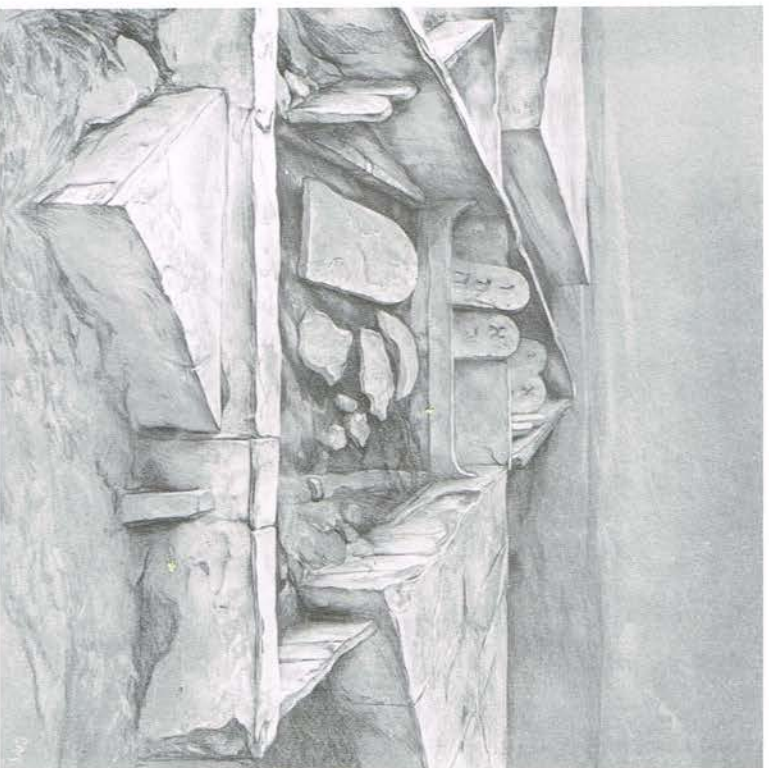
Small Town
pastel
25 x 19 1/4 in.



From Aleph to Beith
mixed media
20 x 26 in.

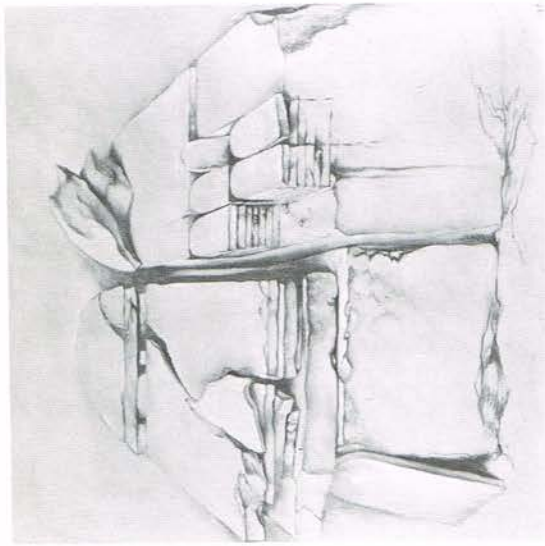


Projects for a Memorial
(Star of David in Desert)
pastel
19 x 24 1/2 in.



Project for a Ritual Space
mixed media
20 x 20 in.

Fundamental Law
pastel
 19 x 19 in.



maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

5. HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

6. THOU SHALT NOT MURDER.

7. THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

8. THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.

9. THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOR.

10. THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.

And God spake all these words, saying I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

1. THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.

2. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

3. THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

4. REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy

midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and got him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.

EXODUS 24: 15-18

And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: the tables were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other side were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.

EXODUS 32: 15-17

And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the (golden) calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.

EXODUS 32: 19-20

And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest. . . . And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up unto mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone.

EXODUS 34: 1-4

And the Lord said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

EXODUS 34: 27-28

And all the people saw the thunders and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.

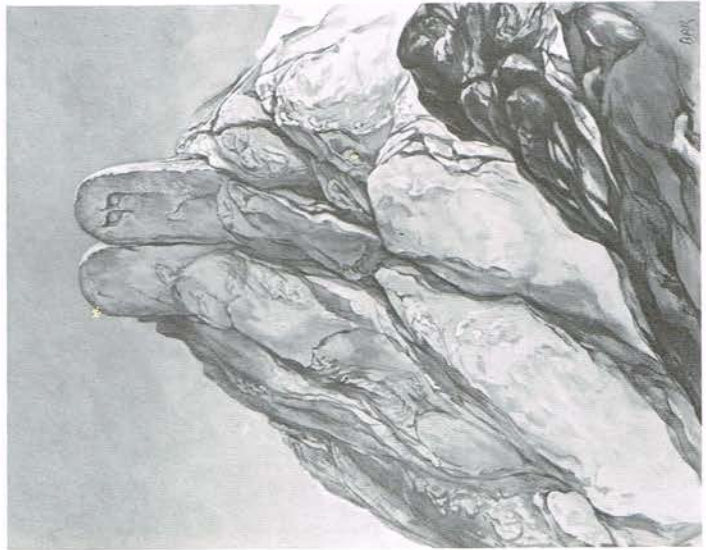
EXODUS 20:1-21

And the Lord said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them.

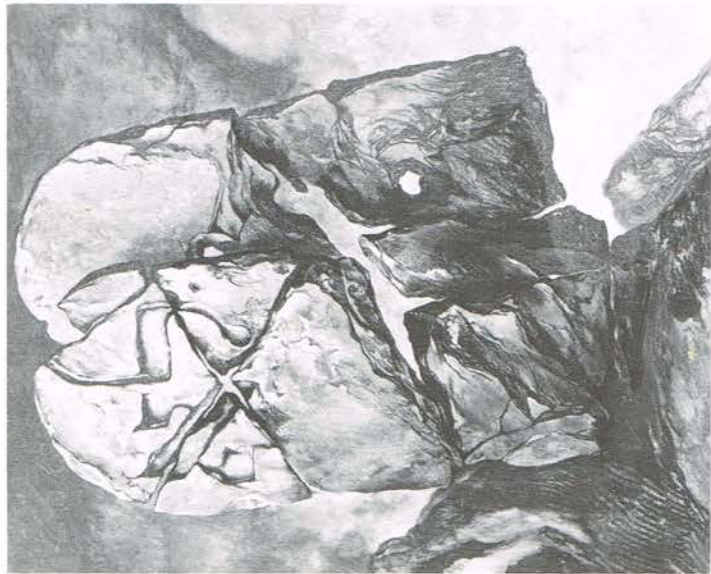
EXODUS 24:12

And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the Lord abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the

Study for the Summit Theme
mixed media
19 x 23½ in.



Summit
oil
23½ x 23½ in.



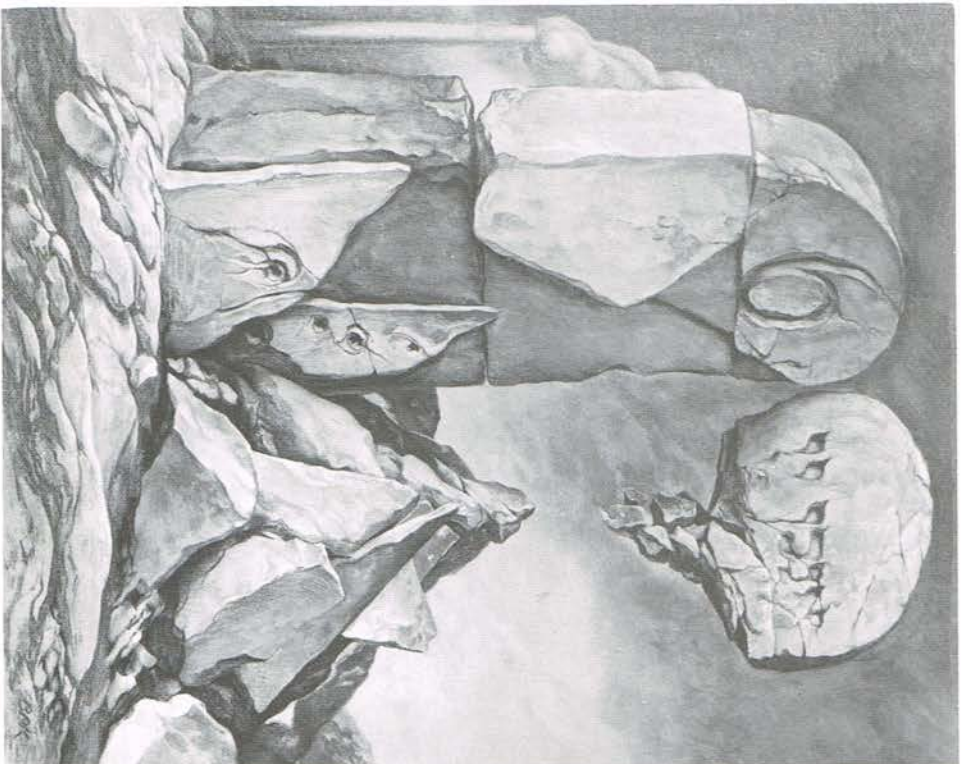
"Lo" against Blue Space
mixed media
19 x 23½ in.



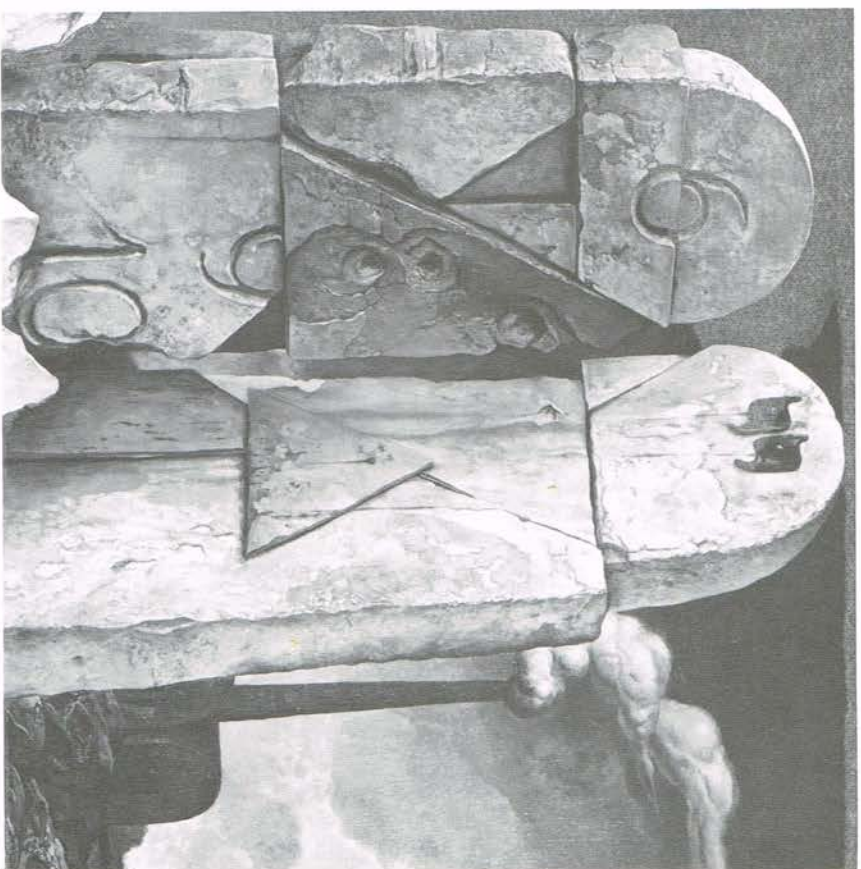
From One to Ten
oil
19½ x 19½ in.



Traces of Recent History
oil
23½ x 23½ in.



Variation on the Izcor Theme
mixed media
 19 x 23½ in.



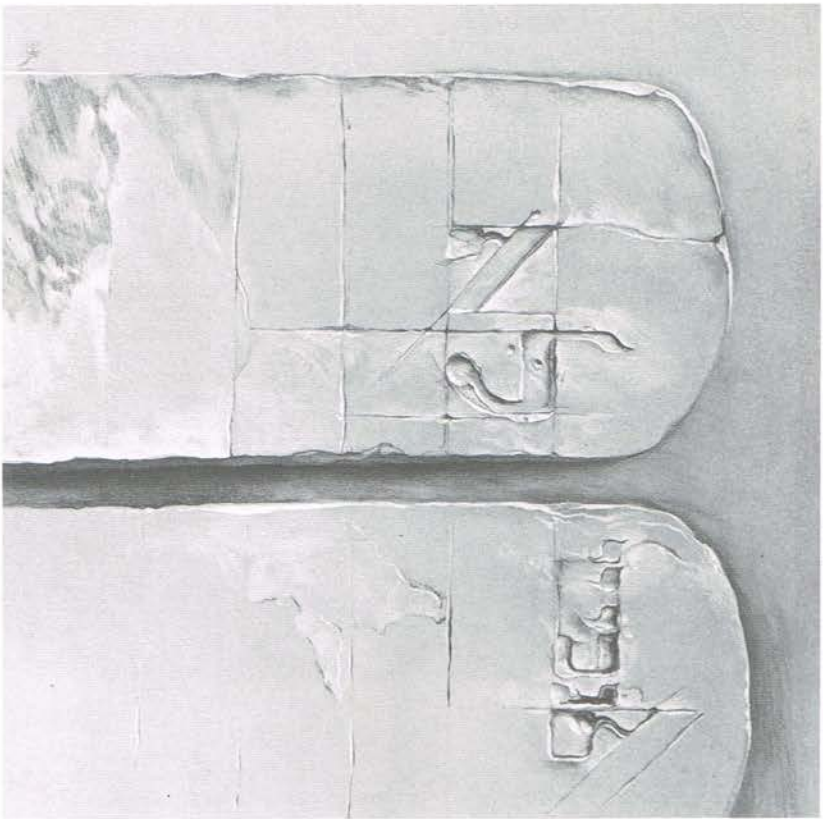
Monument in Yellow
oil
 23½ x 23½ in.



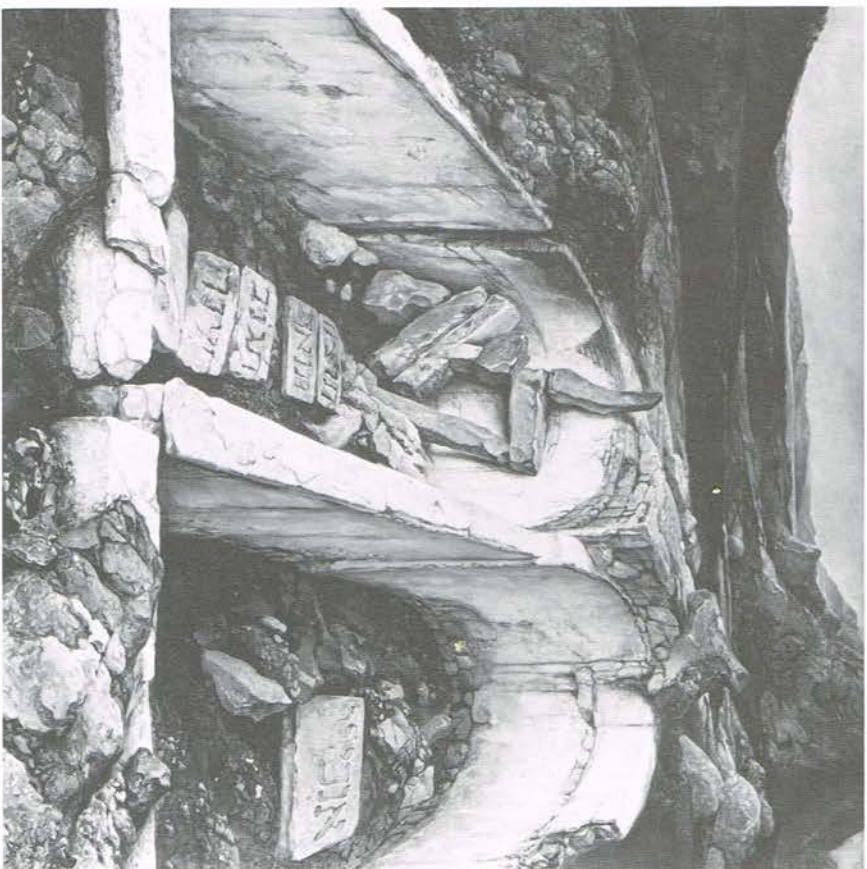
Secret Grove
oil
31³/₄ x 31³/₄ in.



Pardes
oil
23¹/₂ x 23¹/₂ in.



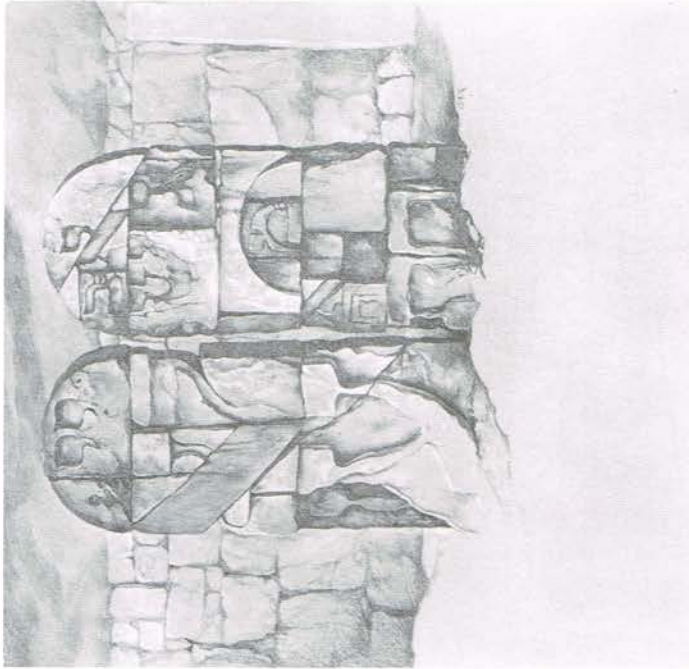
Important Words
mixed media
20 x 20 in.



At the Bottom
oil
23 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.

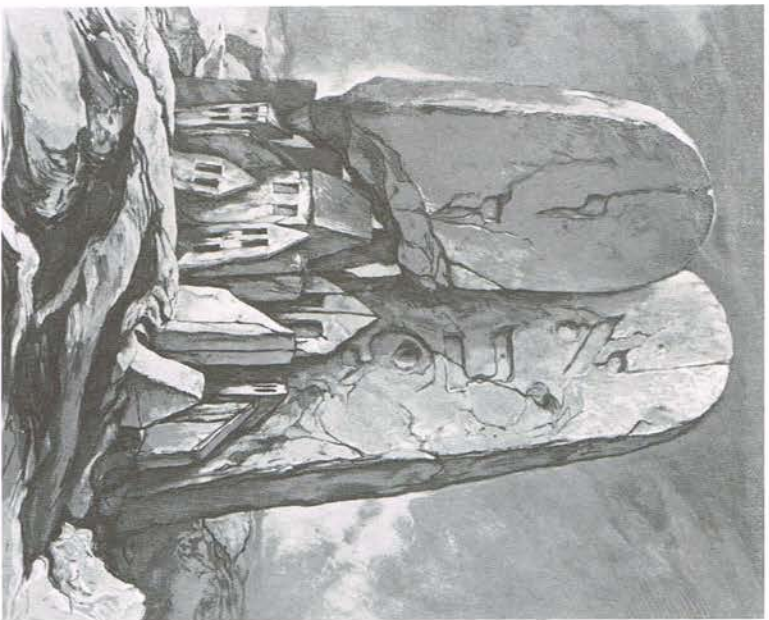


Cultures
oil
16 x 16 in.

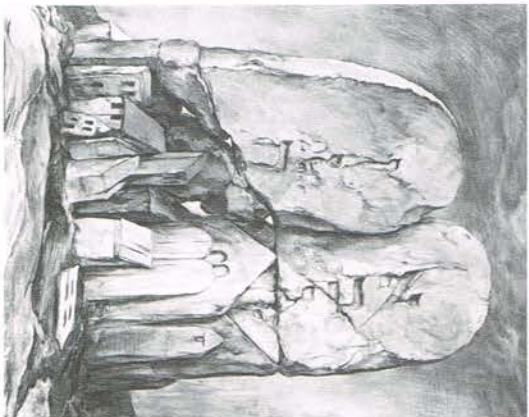


Cornerstone
pastel
19 x 19 in.

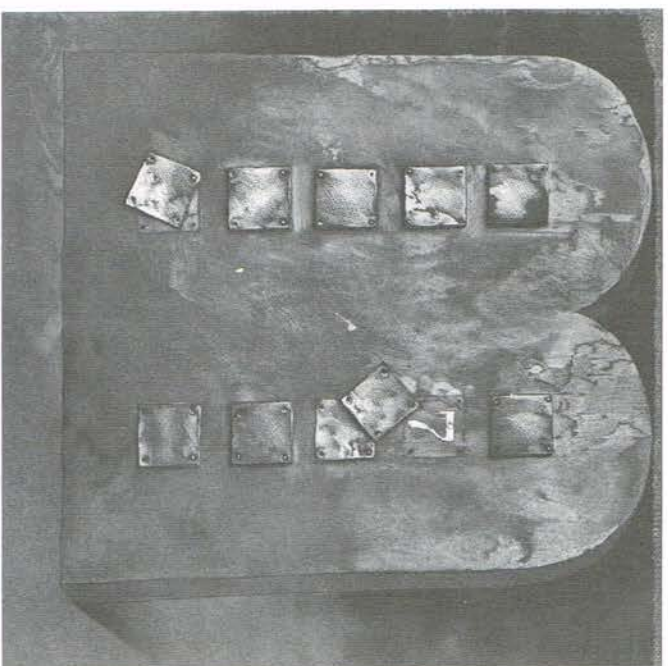
City of Jews
serigraph
23¾ x 19 in.
edition: 150



Study for the "City of Jews"
mixed media
18½ x 23 in.



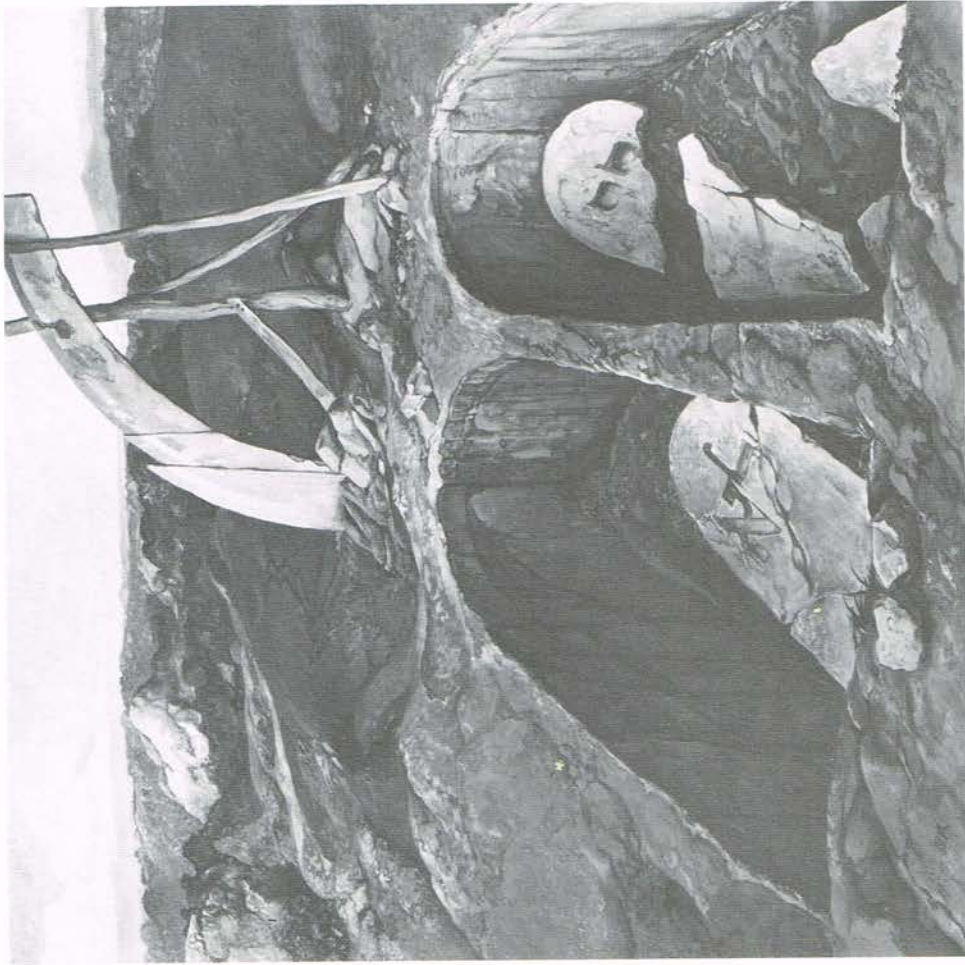
The Color of Passion
pastel
19 x 19 in.



Reparation
oil
16 x 16 in.



The Promise
oil
16 x 16 in.



From Aleph to Tov
oil
23½ x 23½ in.

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SAMUEL BAK biography & exhibitions

- 1933
Born August 12th in Vilna, Poland
- 1940-1944
Under German occupation: ghetto, work-
camp, refuge in a monastery.
- 1942
First exhibition of drawings in the ghetto of
Vilna.
- 1945-1948
D.P. camps in Germany: studies painting in
Munich.
- 1948
Emigrates to Israel
- 1952
Studies at the Bezalel Art School, Jerusalem
- 1953-1956
Army service.
- 1956
Awarded grant by America-Israel Cultural
Foundation to study in Paris.
- 1956-1959
Lives in Paris and studies at the Beaux Arts
Academy
- 1959-1966
Lives in Rome.
Galleria Schneider — 1959, 1961, 1965, 1966.
Galleria Liguria — 1963
- Participates in several international art
exhibition in Italy and abroad.
- 1961
Invited to exhibit at the Carnegie Interna-
tional, Pittsburgh.
- 1963
Travels to Israel.
- Bezalel National Museum, Jerusalem.
Tel Aviv Museum.
- 1965
L'Angle Aigu, Brussels;
- Alwin Gallery, London.
- 1966
Re-settles in Israel.
Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv.
- 1967
Roma Gallery, Chicago.
- Participates in the exhibition:
"Image and Imagination", Tel Aviv Museum.
1968
Modern Art Gallery, Jaffa.
- 1969
Pucker/Safrai Gallery, Boston;
Brooklyn Art Center, Fuller Memorial.
- 1970
Bronfman Cultural Center, Montreal.
- 1971
Hadassah "K" Gallery, Tel Aviv.
- 1972
Pucker/Safrai Gallery, Boston.
- 1973
Hadassah "K" Gallery, Tel Aviv.
- 1974-1976
Lives in New York.
- 1974
Aberbach Fine Art, New York.
- 1975
Participates in the exhibition:
"Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th
Century", Jewish Museum, New York.
- Aberbach Fine Art, New York.
Pucker/Safrai Gallery, Boston.
- 1976
Retrospective exhibition:
Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Boston.
Berger Gallery: Pittsburgh.
- 1977
Heidelberg Museum
Kunstverein Esslingen.
Ketterer Gallery, Munich
- Retrospective exhibition:
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.
- 1978
Retrospective exhibition:
Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf.
Retrospective exhibition:
Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn.
Amstutz Gallery, Zurich.
Vonderbank Gallery, Frankfurt.
Hadassah "K" Gallery, Tel Aviv.
Debel Gallery, Jerusalem.
Goldman Gallery, Haifa.
First retrospective exhibition in Israel:
University of Haifa.
- Aberbach Fine Art, New York.
1979
Pucker/Safrai Gallery, Boston.

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