

REPAIR₂

NEW WORK BY SAMUEL BAK



PUCKER GALLERY ◦ BOSTON, MA ◦ 2020

A

fter more than 50 years—more than half of a century—of working alongside Sam Bak, it would be forgivable to simply accept a new body of his work as a matter of course. Yet, these newest creations awaken a renewed sense of awe, gratitude, and opportunity.

What an explosion of visual challenges, reviving and provoking questions about our capacity to build, destroy, and rebuild. The ordinary objects of hammer and nails are transformed into instruments of memory and responsibility. We are allowed into the arena of moral choices and imagined opportunities, to observe history and its deeds of destruction and devastation. We become alerted to the demand to attempt to repair the misdeeds of the Past and the Present. We are even given the tools to do so.

Will we be up to the challenge?

What a plethora of questions Sam has gifted to us.

Profound thanks for the opportunity to share these works with you. For the first time, we are providing a catalogue in electronic format, so you may engage with each work individually on your screen, and within your mind and spirit. These chaotic times call for even more creative engagement with, and commitment to, the total repair of ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Brother Thomas wrote:

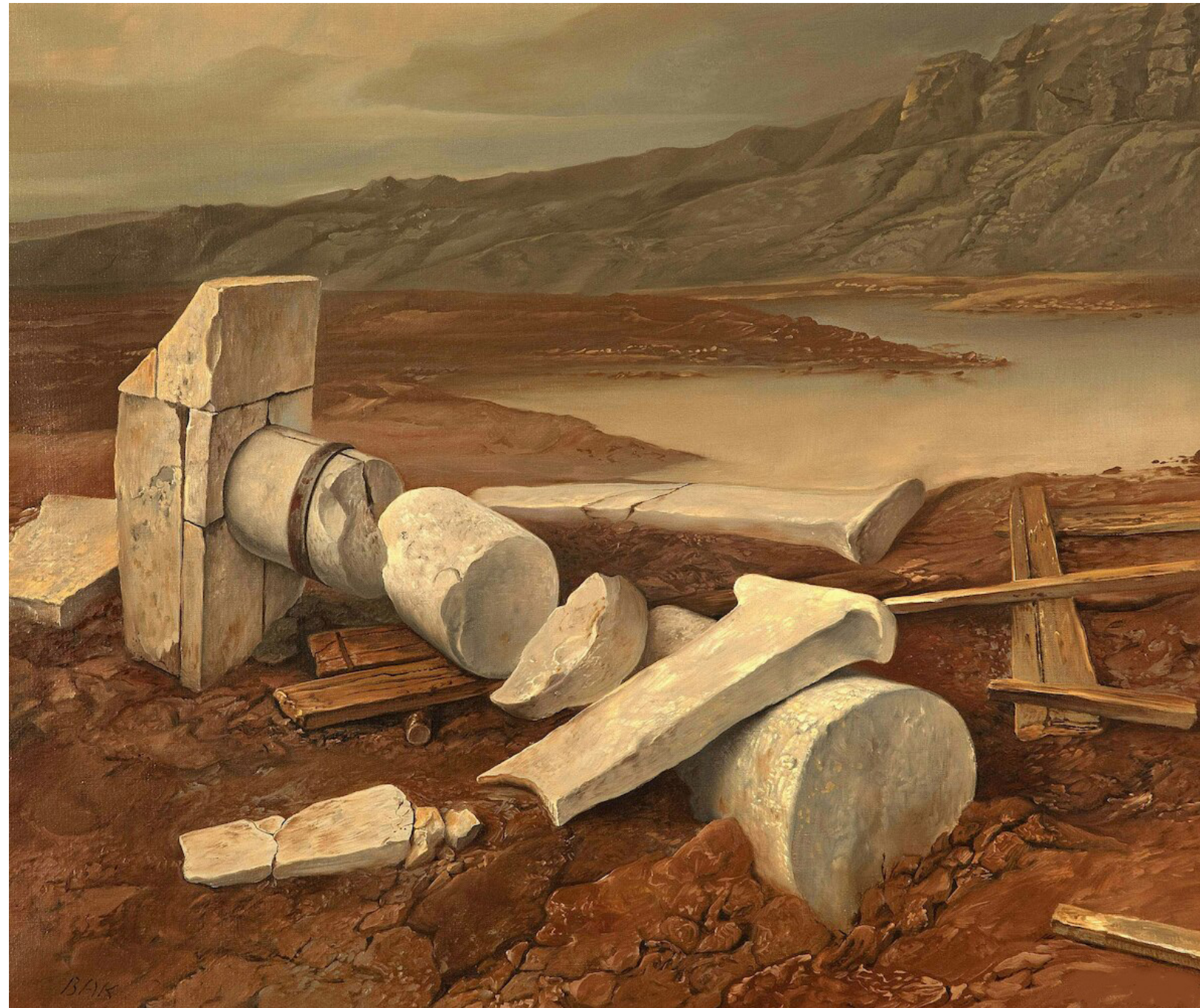
*“We are not really whole until we take on responsibilities
for others, and for the whole world.”*

With great thanks to Sam.

BHP, 2020

Cover:
INVERSION
Oil on canvas
28 x 22”
BK2427

PILLAR, 1971
Oil on canvas
18 1/8 × 21 5/8"



In 1971, Samuel Bak painted a work called *Pillar*, in which a stone hammer and chisel have toppled over, fallen monuments of power in a forsaken landscape. The realities of the year 2020—with its social, health, and political uncertainties—brought the idea of *Pillar* back into the artist's consciousness. Today, the hand of authority asserts itself in ways that many perceive as threatening. A ceaseless chatter in the halls of power, in the media, and among the people heightens the feeling of anxiousness. Voices that wish to sow discord compete with those that seek understanding and change. For Bak, current events hearken back even farther than his hammer painting of

50 years ago to when he was 6 years old and his family housed refugees from German-occupied regions of Poland. They spoke of sinister potentialities that to him sounded like nonsense. These voices repeated the Yiddish expression *hakn a tshaynik* (“chop up the teapot”) to describe unfathomable possibilities that soon became grim realities, while the young Bak, unable to understand current events or metaphorical turns of phrase, envisioned a literal world of destroyed teapots floating untethered around him. The peace of civilized society represented by the teapot would soon be disrupted by the barbarous hammer of power.

RECREATIONAL

Oil on canvas

22 x 28"

BK2441



The notion of the broken teapot is quaint in the face of the actual atrocities of humanity, of horrors that result when people cruelly exert their will over others. In several works in Bak's *Repairs* series, the fragile teapot is destroyed by the forceful thrust of the mighty hammer, the artist using the childhood memory of the chopped-up teapot as a launching point for an exploration of

dominance and destruction. In *Recreational* (BK2441), the shattered teapot is provisionally re-made from broken boards, stone pears, and oversized nails, its question-mark-shaped handle asking "what happened here?" and its agitated sky portending the coming storm of the unimaginable. In an act of insurrection, the delicate teacup and spoon endeavor to restrain the hammer mid-swing.

TOOLS OF SHAPE

Oil on canvas

24 x 30"

BK2465



Traditionally, the nail—symbolic of the individual who accepts their place in the power structure—plays the subordinate role and is directed by the hammer. In *Tools of Shape* (BK2465), an immense hammer crashes near a giant stone nail, a great schism fracturing the earth; shriveled, submerged ghetto buildings cling to the ground as the powerful force strives to banish them into the oblivion of rushing torrents of water. Three hammers stand sentinel

in *Inversion* (BK2427; see cover), while tired nails lean on them or lay prostrate at their feet. Do these guardians watch for danger, do they prevent escape? Are they proxies for the three crosses of the Crucifixion, at which the sins of humanity are punished? Despite their makeshift wood and stone construction, they nonetheless dominate the bleak landscape where a foreboding yellow 'X,' assembled from two nailed-together boards, warns against confronting them.

REPOSITIONED

Oil on canvas

30 x 24"

BK2444



As is typical with Bak, who enjoys unpacking all angles of a metaphor, the potent hammer is regularly usurped by the revolting nails that render it inoperable. The nails pierce the petrified hammerhead of *Repositioned* (BK2444), which—though

massive in scale—is nonetheless broken and slumped, requiring support from other hammers etched in the stone monument.

SOFT LANDING

Oil on canvas
24 x 30"
BK2456



An army of defiant nails, both from land and air attacks, subdues a bright blue hammer in the sky in *Soft Landing* (BK2456), and in *Mobile* (BK2432; see

next spread), the lowly nail impersonates a cannon and takes aim at a band of retreating hammers.

MOBILE
Oil on canvas
15 x 30"
BK2432



STABLE

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2458



When another object masquerades as a hammer, the conventional symbol of might loses its agency. In *Stable* (BK2458), the hammer's claw forcibly removes one bent nail while its head aims at another victim. But these are impotent

gestures because the hammer is in fact a bird whose paper wings (their shape rhythmically integrating with the clouds) prevent it from slamming down, and whose metallic claws scaffold the nail in place.

REMEMBERED

Oil on canvas

28 x 22"

BK2443



Two hammers face each other in *Remembered* (BK2443), where residents of a stony gravesite with beak-like heads join in a familial embrace. The candle of

remembrance burns between them and the vise grip they carry clings tightly to a single nail, perhaps symbolic of the firmly held memories of lost individuals.

WINGING

Oil on canvas

30 x 24"

BK2468



Amidst an exploration of power abuse and destruction, this series of paintings equally acknowledges that the humble hammer and nails are also tools used constructively to erect buildings and create shelter. The lively *Winging* (BK2468) illustrates the fundamental human instinct to build a nest (in this case hammers

function as foundation, support, and branches), and displays the defiant nature of creativity in the face of darkness. A stalwart yellow house sits atop a gnarled tree rooted in the surface of the metal hammerhead, the backdrop a sky-blue canvas painted with birds.

NOMAD

Oil on canvas

22 x 28"

BK2434



In the agile hands of Samuel Bak, and through his layering of visual, narrative, and metaphorical devices, the subject of hammers and nails become a tool to explore contradictory dynamics: dominance/submission, authority/proletarianism, destruction/construction, resignation/rebellion. Linguistically, hammers and nails provide fertile ground for an artist who often visually expresses language in his art (remember the Yiddish *hakn a tshaynik* illustrated in broken teapots throughout his oeuvre). Idioms on the subject abound: “hit the nail on the head”; “I’d rather be a hammer than a nail”; “if all you have is a hammer, everything looks

like a nail”; “fight tooth and nail.” Artistically, the hammer reminds the artist of a favored quote by Michelangelo, who said of his sculpture that it is “already complete within the marble block before I start my work. It is already there; I just have to chisel away the superfluous material.” Despite their complexity and nuance, paintings by Samuel Bak are never filled with superfluous clutter. Within each work lies an experience of discovery and questioning—about a painful past and a fraught contemporary moment—guided by each purposeful formal and contextual element.

ACROSS A TREE

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2396



ALMOST

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2397



APPARENTLY

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2400



CAMOUFLAGE

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2406



CAPTIVATING

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2407



CAPTIVE AND FREE

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2408



REVERENCE

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2450



RUMMAGE
Oil on canvas
20 x 20"
BK2451



TOOLS

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2464



FRAMED

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2416



HARD WORK

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2421



**FROM ANOTHER
YIDDISHLAND**

Oil on canvas
20 x 20"
BK2417



FIXED

Oil on canvas

20 x 20"

BK2414



REMEMBERED

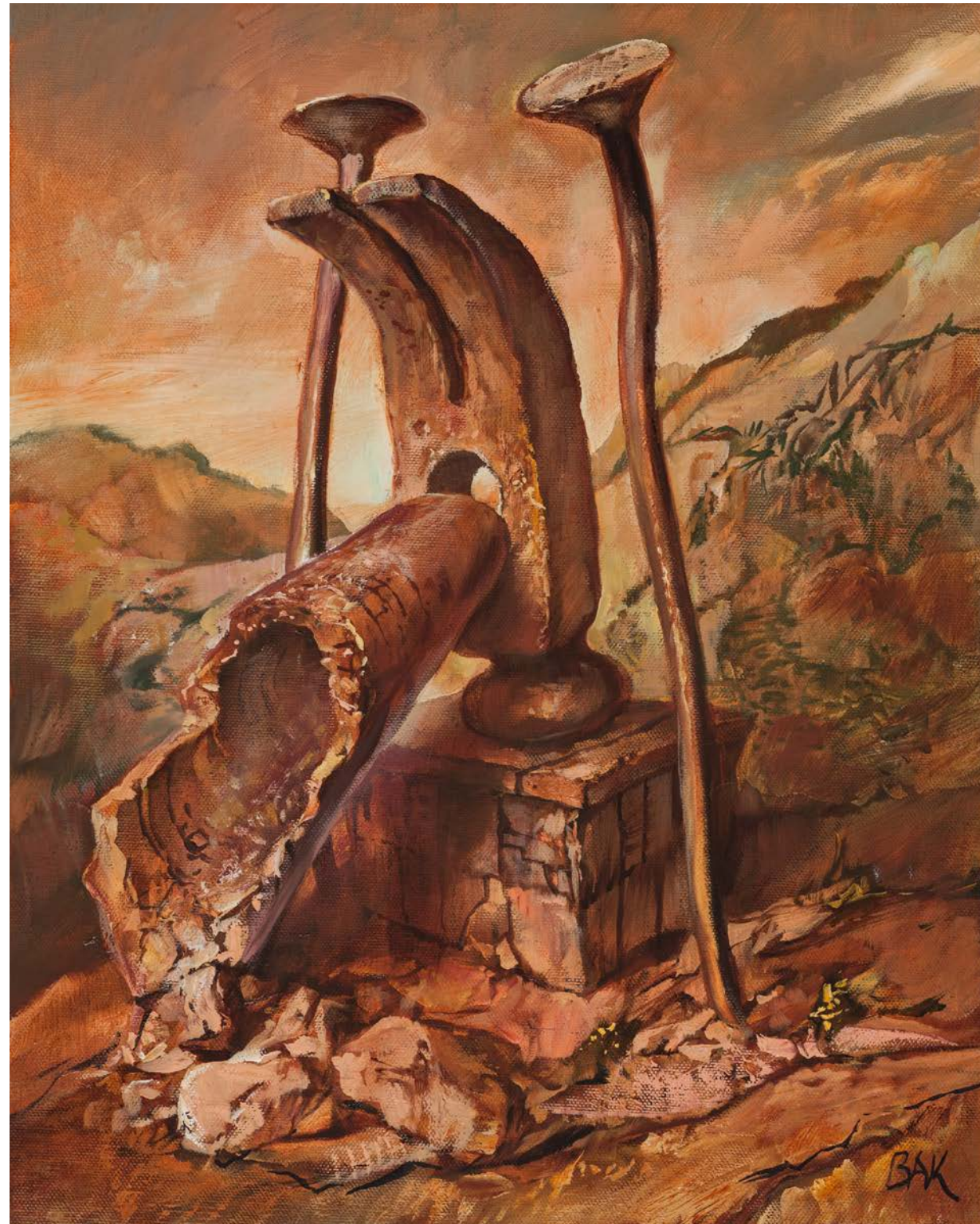
Oil on canvas

12 x 16"

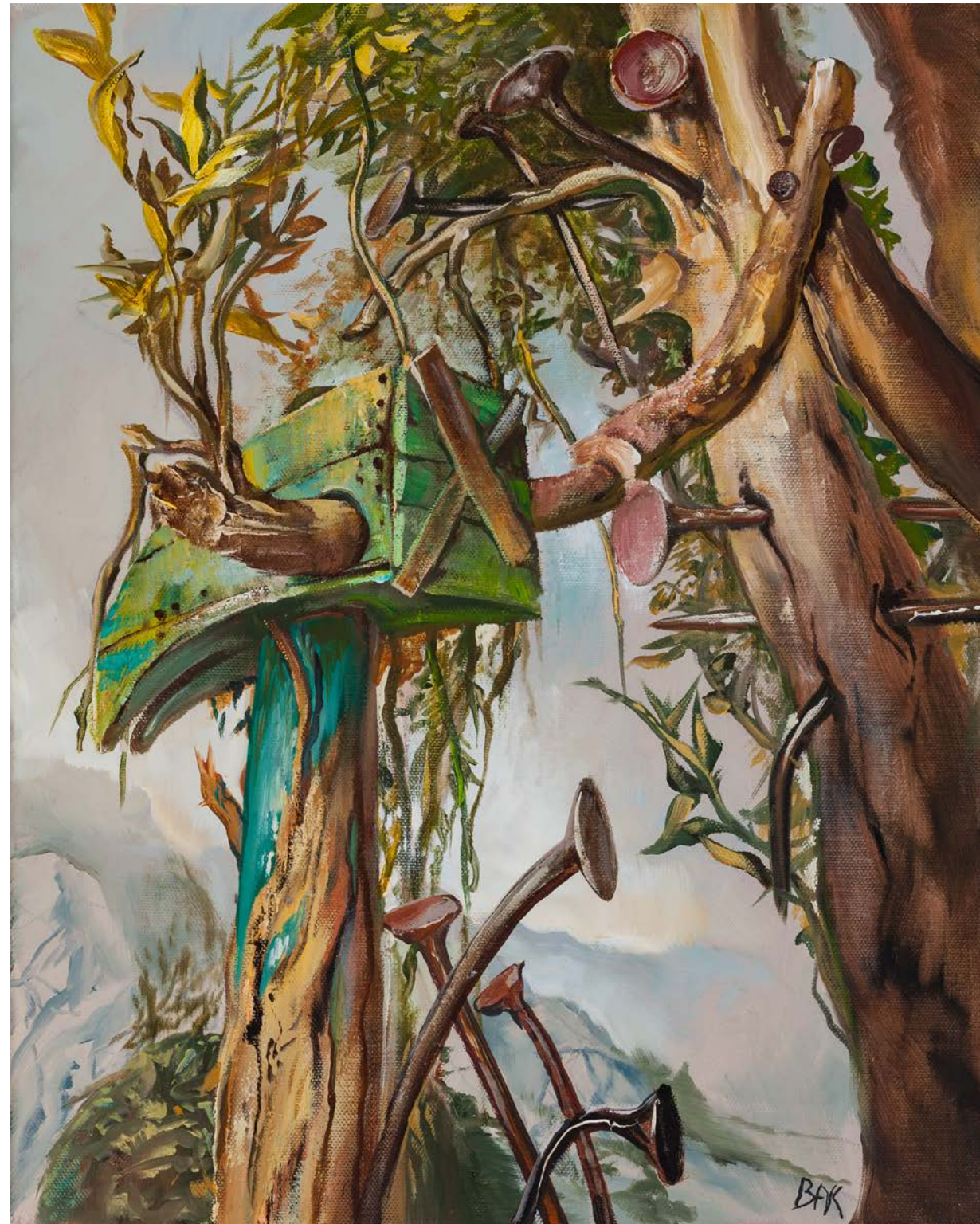
BK2442



BETWEEN
Oil on canvas
16 x 12"
BK2403



VERDANT
Oil on canvas
16 x 12"
BK2467

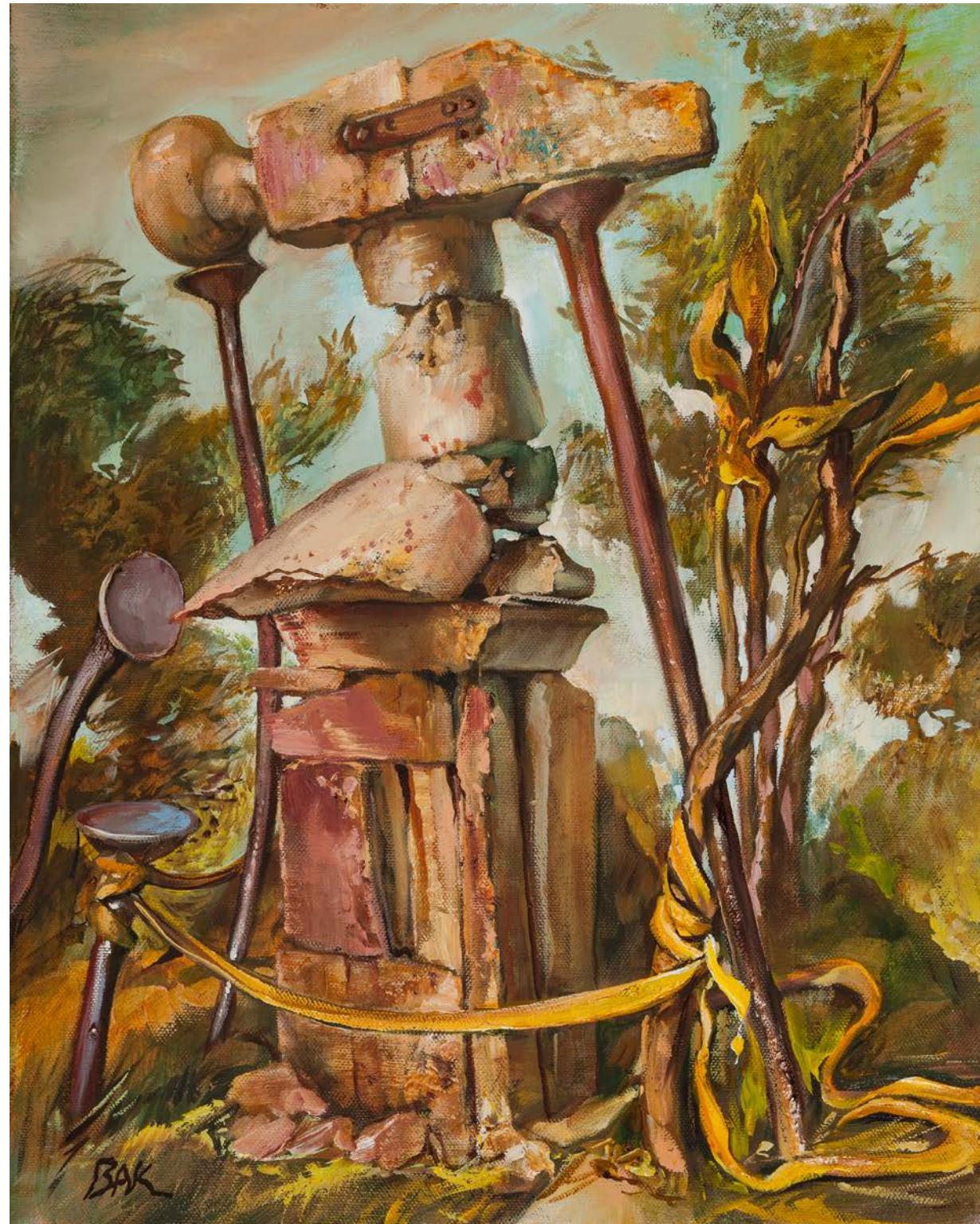


BEYOND REACH

Oil on canvas

16 x 12"

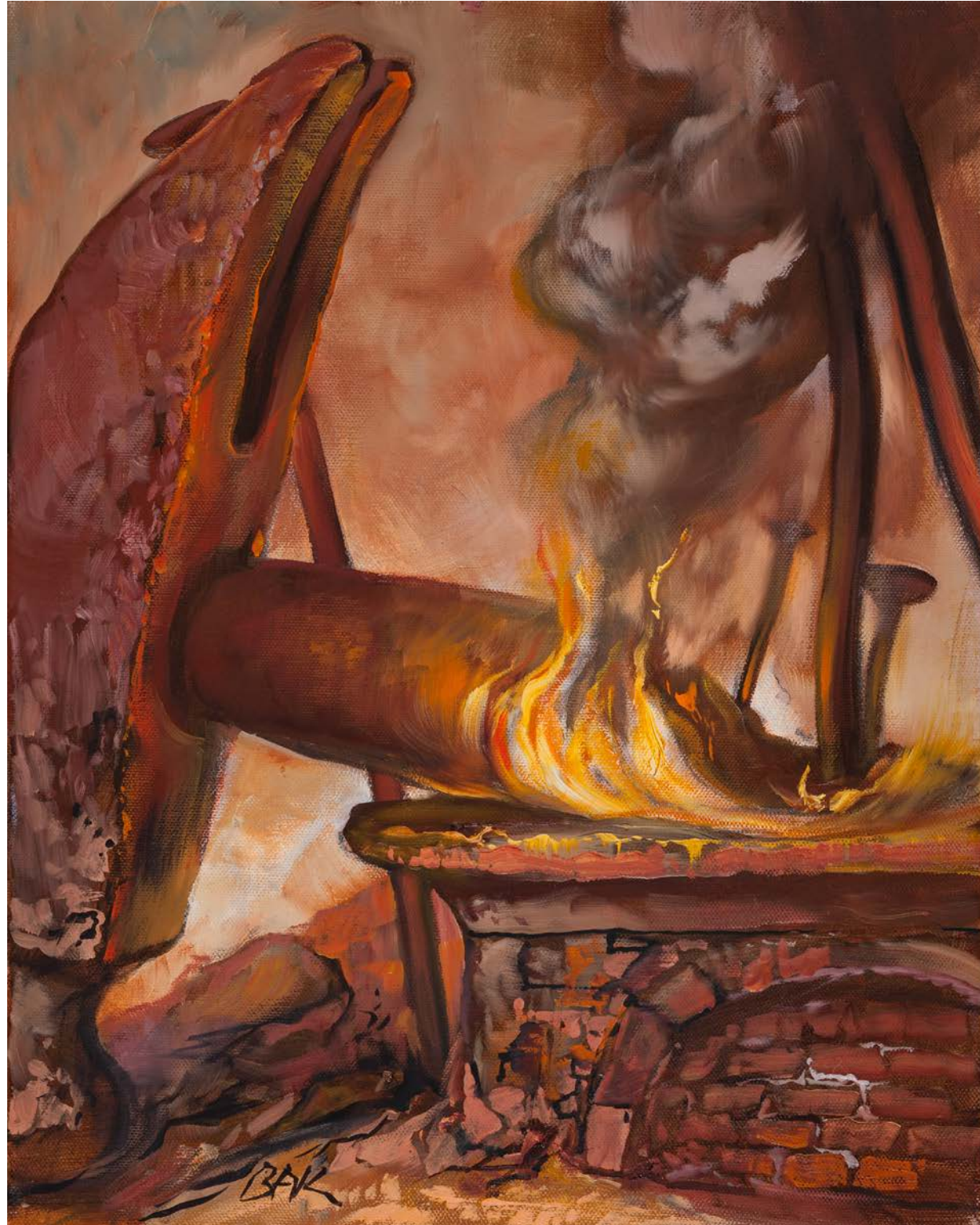
BK2404



AT REST
Oil on canvas
24 x 30"
BK2402



ALTER
Oil on canvas
16 x 12"
BK2398



**IN SEARCH OF
PERFORMANCE**

Oil on canvas

24 x 30"

BK2426



**MOONLIGHT
MAKING**

Oil on canvas
22 x 28"
BK2433



RESTITUTION

Oil on canvas

28 x 22"

BK2447



FROM YIDDISHLAND

Oil on canvas

24 x 24"

BK2419



LOADED

Oil on canvas

24 x 24"

BK2429



ANTICIPATION

Oil on canvas

24 x 24"

BK2399



SYMBIOTIC
Oil on canvas
24 x 24"
BK2460



DISARMED
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2411



IMMEASURABLY

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2423



PERMANENCE

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2438



RESILIENT
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2445



RESTRAINED

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2448



RETAINED
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2449



SEA SIDE

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2452



SMALL ELEGY FOR A BAD IDEA

Oil on canvas

20 x 16"

BK2455



VARIABLES
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2466

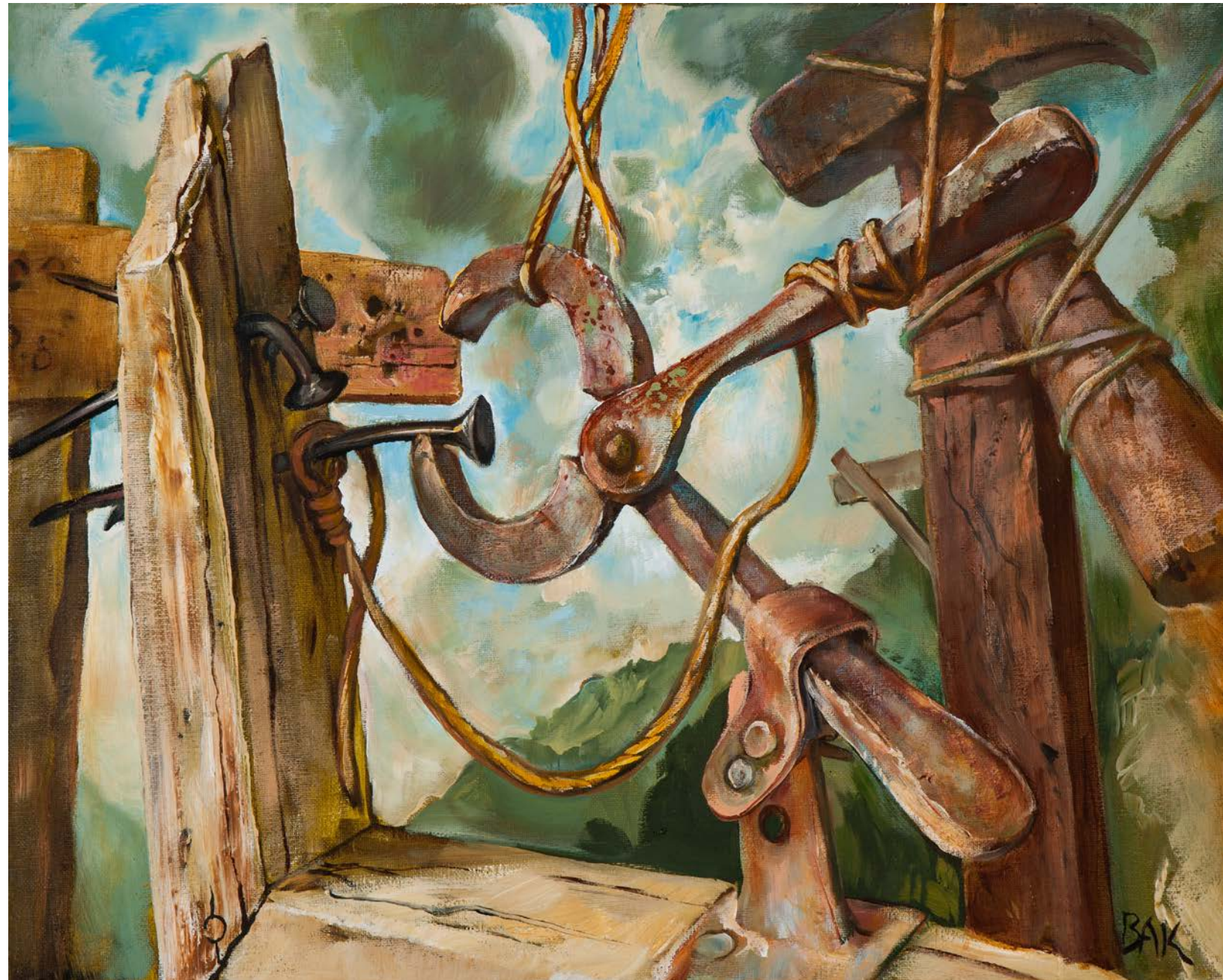


PREDISPOSITIONS

Oil on canvas

16 x 20"

BK2439



SHAPERS

Oil on canvas

16 x 20"

BK2453



SHELTERED

Oil on canvas

16 x 20"

BK2454



CLOUDED
Oil on canvas
18 x 14"
BK2410



MISIDENTIFICATIONS

Oil on canvas

12 x 16"

BK2431



TOGETHER
Oil on canvas
24 x 30"
BK2463



PRESENTATION

Oil on canvas

30 x 15"

BK2440

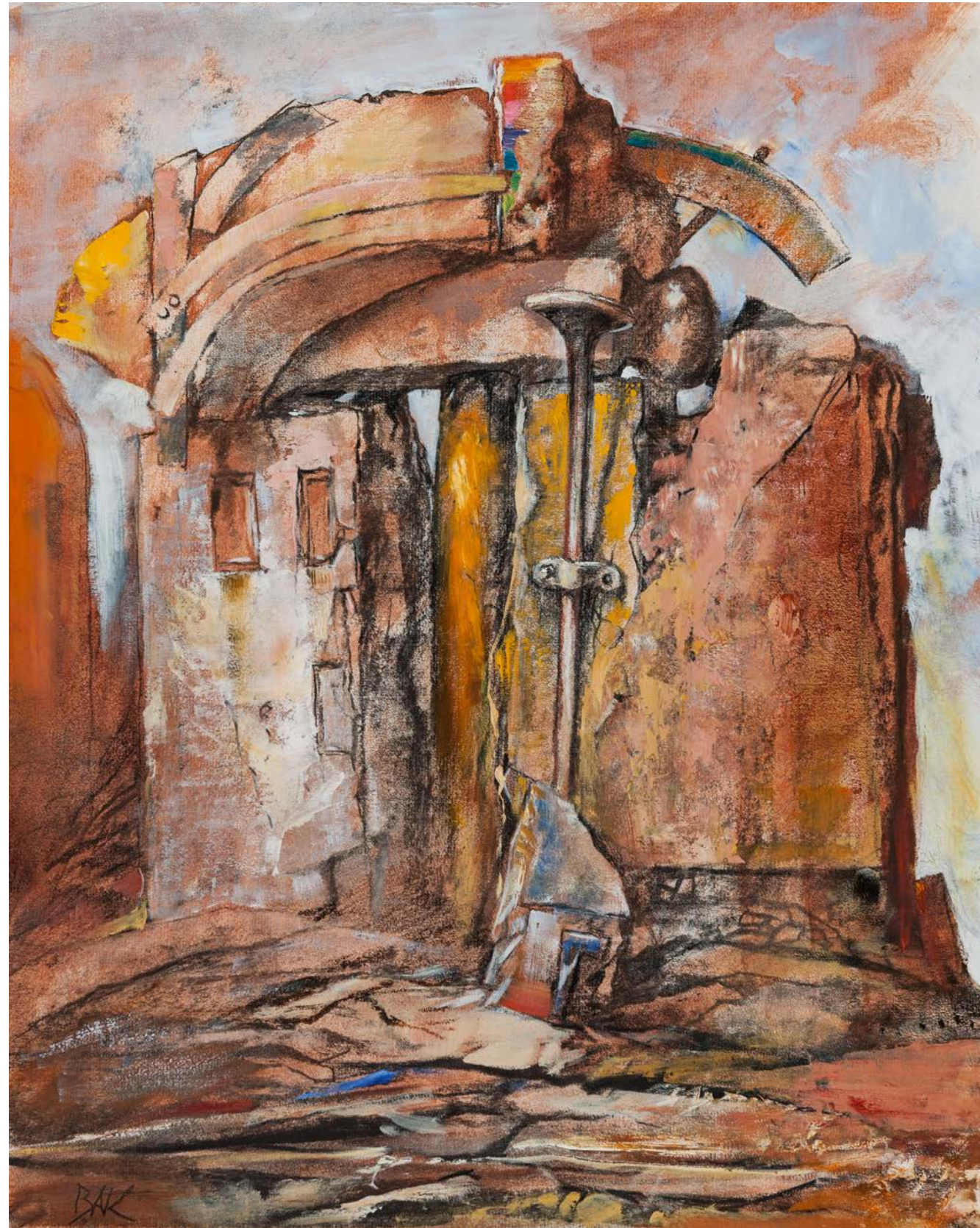


THROUGH THE WALL

Mixed media on paper

25 3/4 x 19 3/4"

BK2462

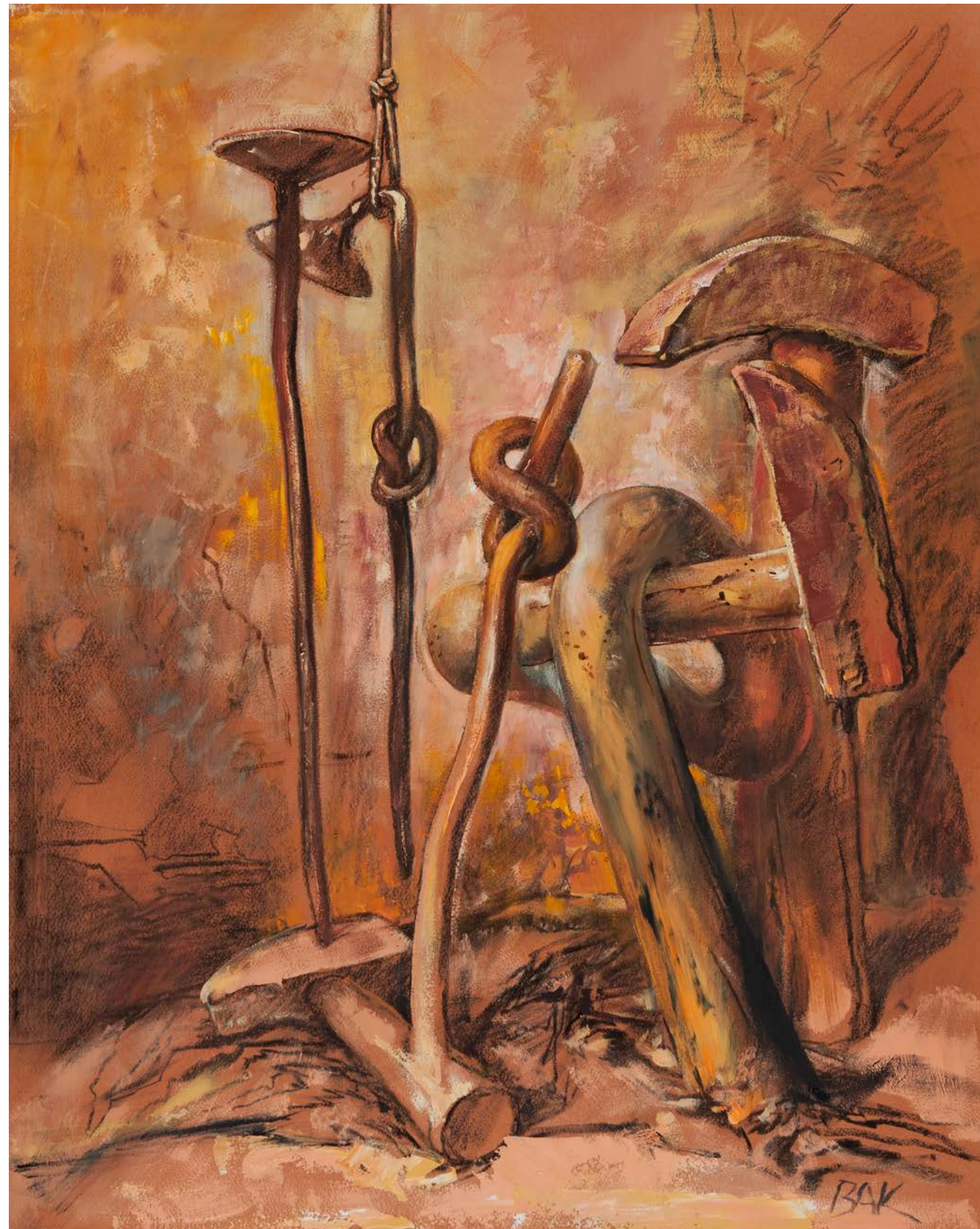


DO NOT FORGET

Mixed media on paper

25 3/4 x 19 3/4"

BK2412



FROM NOW ON

Mixed media on paper

19 x 12 1/4"

BK2418



FIXATION

Mixed media on paper

8 3/4 x 13 1/2"

BK2413



BOUND TO HAPPEN

Mixed media on paper

13 1/2 x 11"

BK2405



OPENING UP

Mixed media on paper

16 x 11"

BK2436

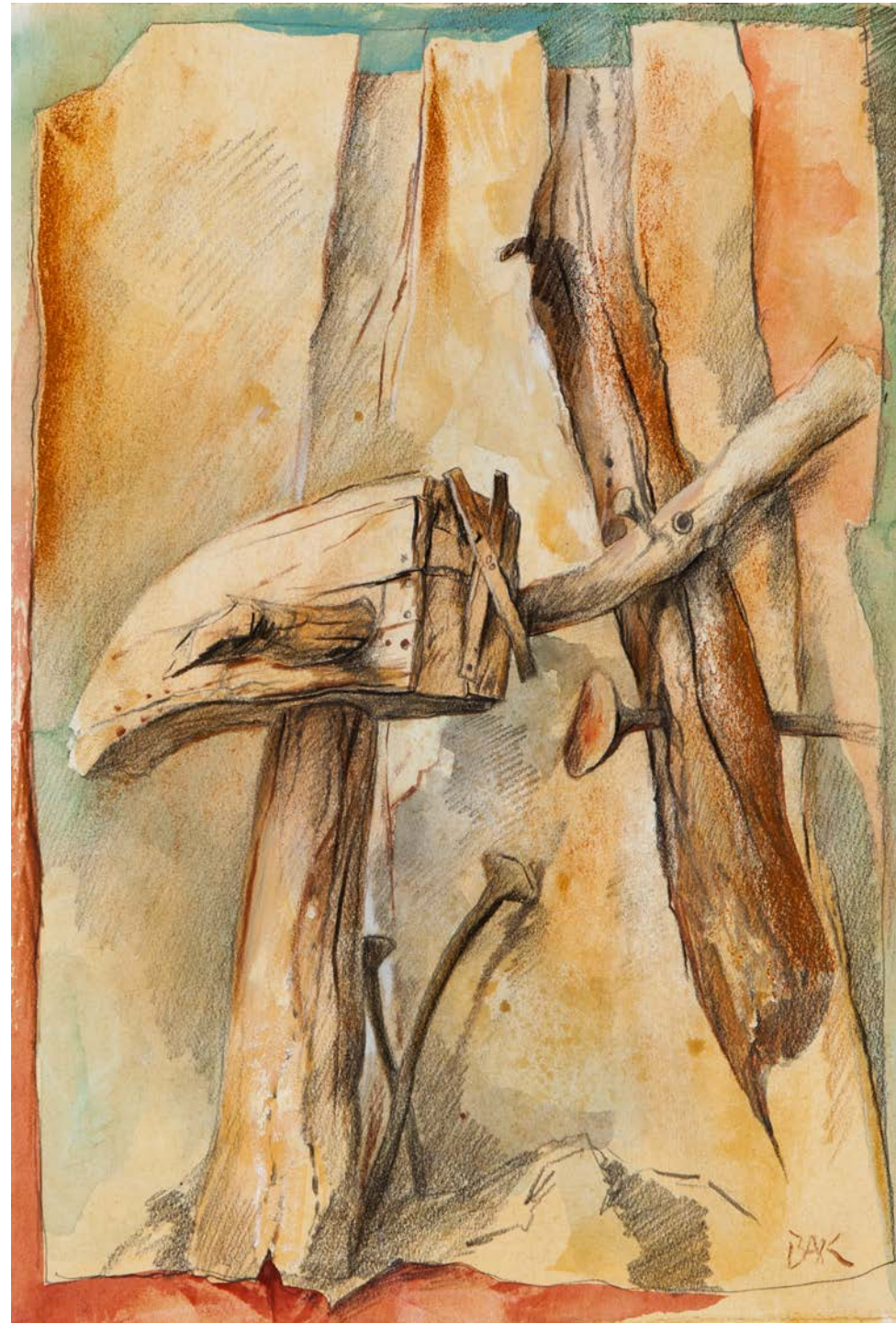


IN AND OUT

Mixed media on paper

16 1/4 x 11"

BK2424

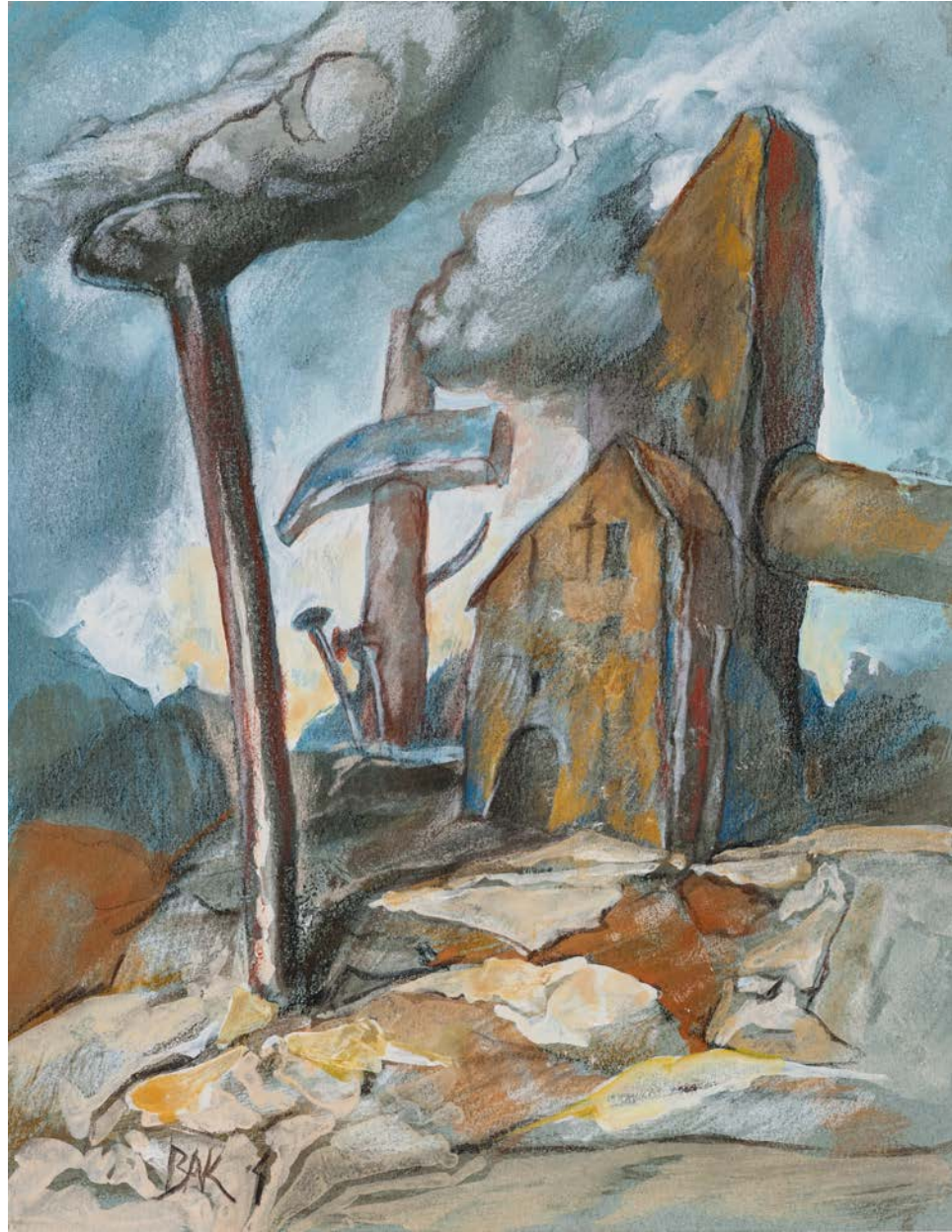


LOW CLOUDS

Mixed media on paper

11 x 8 3/4"

BK2430



RESTED

Mixed media on paper

11 x 13 1/2"

BK2446



LANDSCAPE

Mixed media on paper

11 x 8 3/4"

BK2428

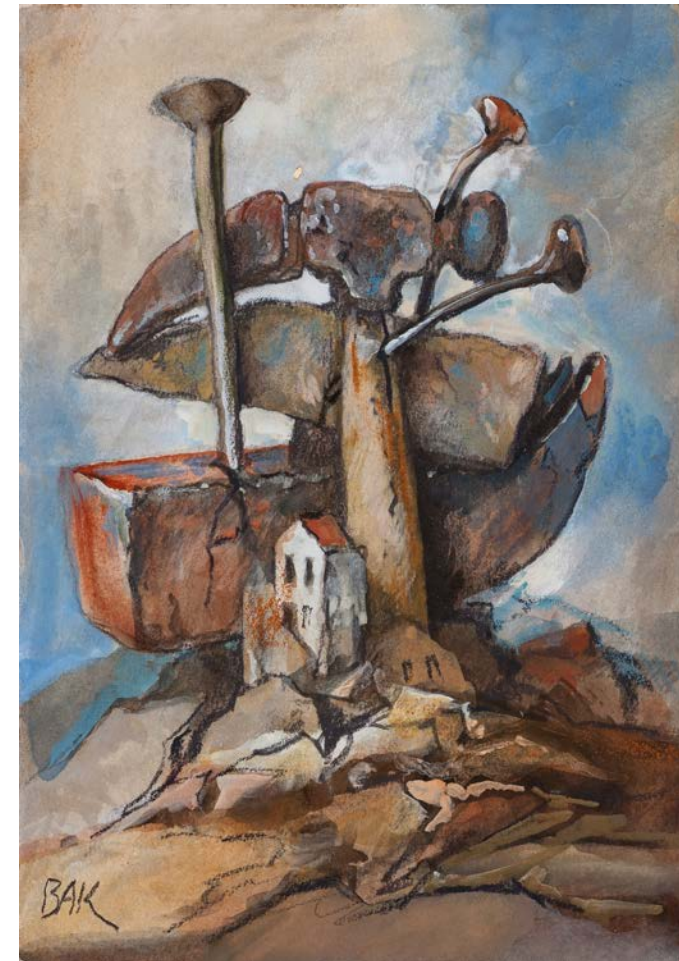


FOREVER AFTER

Mixed media on paper

8 1/4 x 5 1/2"

BK2415

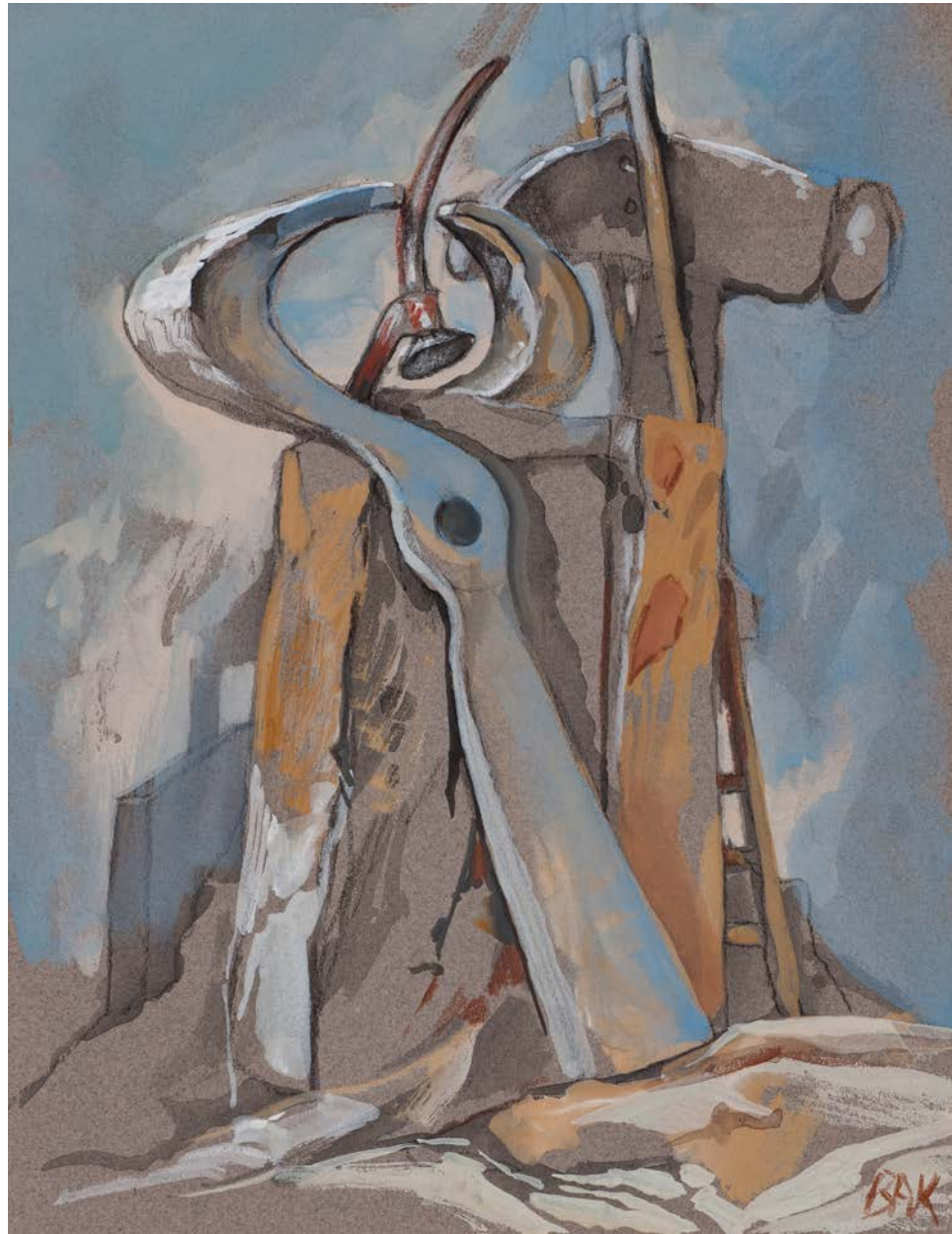


GUESS WORK

Mixed media on paper

11 x 8 3/4"

BK2420



HOMEWORK

Mixed media on paper

10 3/4 x 8 1/4"

BK2422



WITH A BLUE HANDLE

Mixed media on paper

8 3/4 x 11"

BK2469

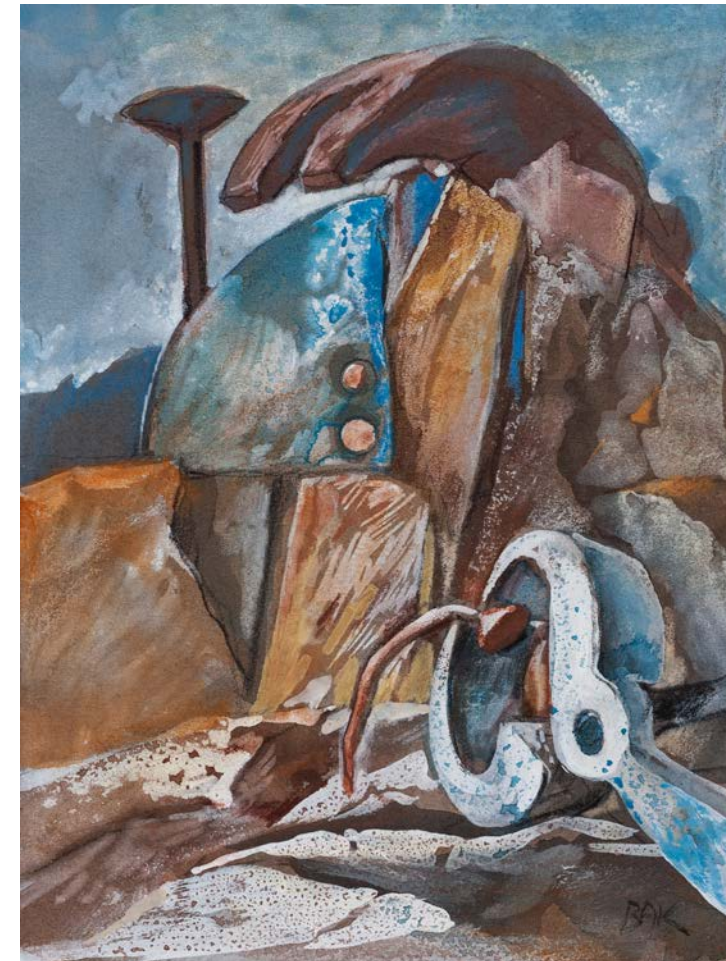


CAUGHT

Mixed media on paper

8 1/2 x 5 1/4"

BK2409



TEMPEST

Mixed media on paper

6 x 10 1/4"

BK2461

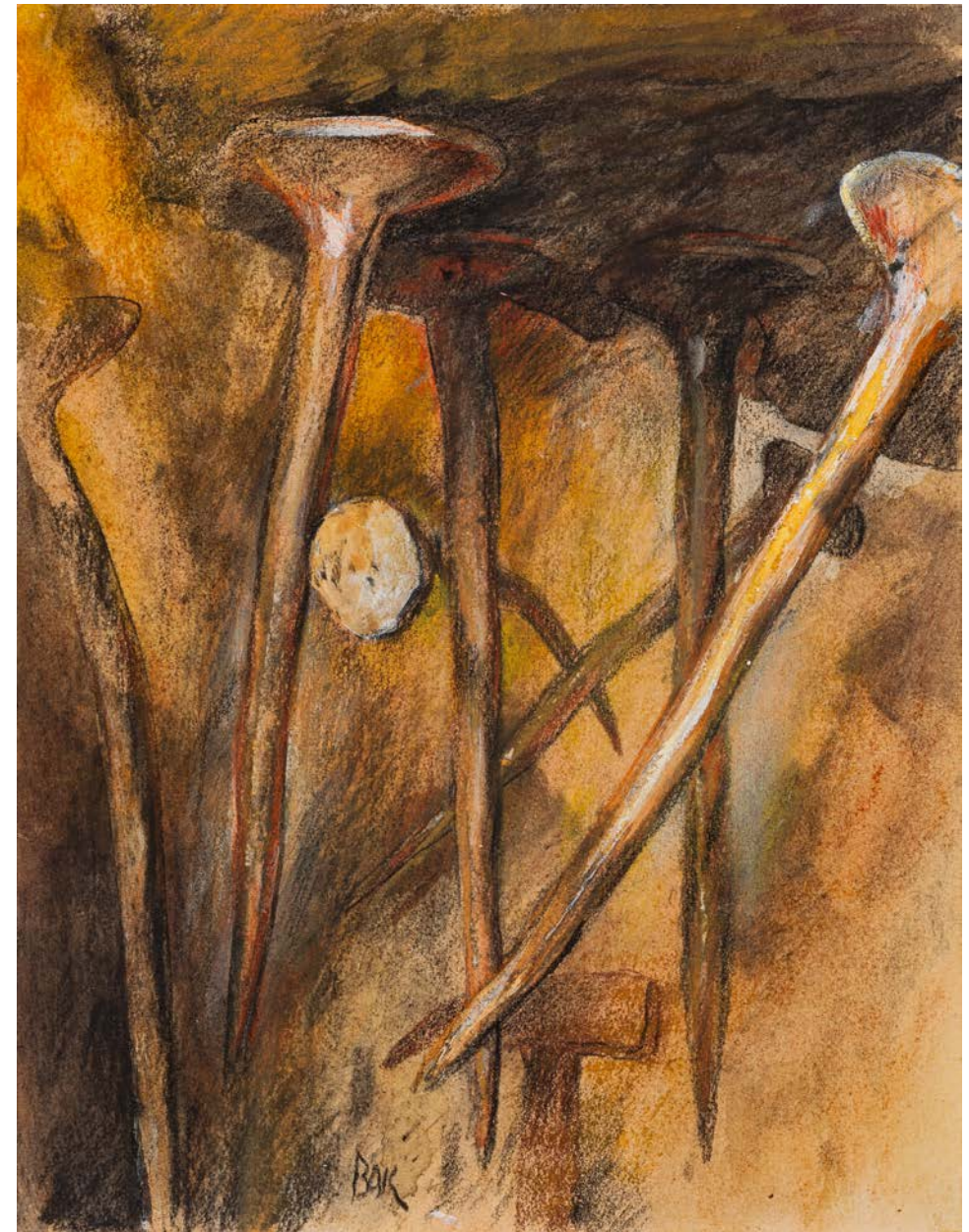


OUT NAILED

Mixed media on paper

11 x 8 3/4"

BK2437



STUDY FOR AN INCLINATION

Mixed media on paper

9 1/2 x 8 1/4"

BK2459



IN FLIGHT

Mixed media on paper

5 1/2 x 8 1/4"

BK2425



AT HOME

Mixed media on paper

8 3/4 x 6 1/2"

BK2401



ON THE MOVE

Mixed media on paper

4 3/4 x 8 1/4"

BK2435



SPROUTING

Mixed media on paper

13 1/2 x 13 1/2"

BK2457



Samuel Bak was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under Soviet and then German occupation. Bak's artistic talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine years old. While he and his mother survived, his father and four grandparents all perished at the hands of the Nazis. At the end of World War II, he fled with his mother to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp, where he enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School in Munich. In 1948 they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. He studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956 he went to Paris to continue his education at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his artistic studies. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings was met with considerable success. In 1961 he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International" in Pittsburg, followed by solo exhibitions at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963.

It was subsequent to these exhibitions 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. Bak's work weaves together personal history and Jewish history



to articulate an iconography of his Holocaust experience. Across seven decades of artistic production Samuel Bak has explored and reworked a set of metaphors, a visual grammar, and vocabulary that ultimately privileges questions. His art depicts a world destroyed, and yet provisionally pieced back together, preserving the memory of the twentieth-century ruination of Jewish life and culture by way of an artistic passion and precision that stubbornly announces the creativity of the human spirit.

Since 1959, the artist has had numerous exhibitions in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States including retrospectives at Yad Vashem

Museum in Jerusalem, and the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. He has lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, New York, and Lausanne. In 1993, he settled in Massachusetts and became an American citizen. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles, scholarly works, and eighteen books; most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*. In 2001 he published his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*, which has been translated into several languages. He has also been the subject of two documentary films and was the recipient of the 2002 German Herkomer Cultural Prize. Samuel Bak has received honorary doctorate degrees from: the University of New Hampshire in Durham; Seton Hill University in Greenburg, Pennsylvania; Massachusetts College of Art in Boston; and the University of Nebraska Omaha.

In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in the city of the artist's birth, on the first two floors of the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. In addition to the more than 50 works already donated by the artist, the Museum will accept more than 100 works in the coming years, and ultimately build a collection that spans the artist's career. The Museum honors Bak's life and art and is a testament to his commitment to educate current and future generations. Also in 2017, Samuel Bak was nominated by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, and subsequently named by the city's mayor as an Honorary Citizen of Vilnius. He is only the 15th person to receive this honor, joining Ronald Reagan and Shimon Peres for

their exceptional contributions to Lithuania. In 2019 The Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan opened at the Holocaust Museum Houston to house more than 125 works donated by the artist; and The Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy as well as the Natan & Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies partnered with Pucker Gallery to create *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak*, an exhibition of Sam Bak's works at University of Nebraska Omaha.

REPAIR₂

NEW WORK BY SAMUEL BAK

GALLERY HOURS

Monday through Saturday

10:00 AM to 5:30 PM

Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

Pucker Gallery is a member of the Boston Art Dealers Association and the New England Appraisers Association.

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PUCKER

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