



Figuring Out

New Work by SAMUEL BAK

Pucker Gallery | Boston

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Can art offer any consolation to an imagination troubled by the brutalities that have consumed much of our attention during the past hundred years? Art may reflect reality, but reality may subdue the impact of art, and the task of achieving a balance between the two is a constant challenge as we study the new series of paintings by Samuel Bak called *Figuring Out*. They offer us a spontaneous journey into the past and present of modern history, but since art does not explain itself, the works demand the intervention of a responsive audience.

Bak reminds us of this essential role in one of the most impressive creations of the series, *Beholder* (BK2577; p9). As we enter its visual space, we should instantly appreciate the value of having a detailed familiarity with Bak's earlier work, since it helps us to "figure out" the identity of the figure who is doing exactly what we are doing—looking at a painting. His cap tempts us to believe that we have seen him before, but his bandaged palm is the defining clue. He appears to be an adult version—he is taller and looks older—of the Jewish boy with his hands raised in a famous photo from the Warsaw Ghetto.



Beholder

History in the form of German cruelty may have caused him to perish, but art has preserved him, and as the suitcase next to him testifies, he has been on a long journey. In Bak's earlier *Self-Portrait from Landscapes of Jewish Experience* we see him facing us, arms spread out cruciform with stigmata wounds visible in his palms, victim of a Christian culture ironically devoted to love, faith, and salvation. His wound now healing, he has gained a new destiny in the realm of art, as he wonders whether its creative power has left a legacy to modify if not to redeem the painful memory of his terrible fate in time.

And since we can never "know" what that experience was like, we are forced to depend on our imagination to appreciate the meaning of his persisting presence in Bak's visual world. Instead of a knapsack, this messenger from the dead carries a different burden on his back: the façade of a building, one of many destroyed in the Warsaw Ghetto where he was rounded up. The ruins of memory are his traveling companions, so what must he be thinking as he gazes at the hook and crane in the painting before him? Do they suggest new construction for a rebuilt future, or are they simply there to remove the rubble of a destroyed community, some of whose remains occupy the lower regions of the work. As we meditate on his thoughts, we are forced to confront our own, reflecting on a visual landscape much larger than the one he is beholding. Questions abound, while answers remain elusive, creating a dynamic tension between the "seer" and what is being seen.

Why, for example, is the frame broken, revealing a glimpse of a natural sky beyond the painting's own visual space? Are we invited to consider the limits of artistic representation, whose constant imagining and re-imagining of certain imagery can never capture the scope and depth of human (and inhuman) events that time and memory besiege us with? We are left to figure out the significance of the discarded canvas that the work's "beholder" cannot see. Is the abstract turmoil of its surface a confession that art's failure and art's triumph are also twin companions in the artist's constant battle to recapture the unachievable? And it would be irresponsible not to add that when the same figure re-appears in the different medium of a charcoal and pastel drawing, its surface virtually drained of color, his thoughts and our thoughts of him enter a different universe of apprehension, inspired by the work's unambiguous title: *Unknown and Lost* (BK2620; p8).



Unknown and Lost

Bak is no stranger to these dilemmas. The struggle to encompass the burden of Holocaust reality is dramatically evident in *Coming Along* (BK2580; p4), in which an ancient sage points a finger—perhaps with mocking intent—at his companion’s futile effort to preserve items of Holocaust reality while ignoring a central icon of that catastrophe, the crematorium chimney, whose swirling flames can never illuminate enough the sinister truth hidden in that image. Or is the old man simply warning the younger one that whatever his intentions for his bag of icons of destruction, he will “come along” with him to remind him of the mysteries of annihilation that it conceals?



Coming Along

In numerous earlier works those mysteries were allied to a vital if unanswerable question: “What hath God wrought?” In the cluttered landscape of *Mutual Help* (BK2595; p32) the question has changed to “What have men wrought,” and we are forced to ask whether we are witnessing a common human effort at an uprooting or a replanting, though it is possible that we are invited to consider the need for both. The furling smoke and the small patch of red suggest that we may be present at a ritual of burning, a symbolic excavation and demolition of a decaying past which leaves open the nature of the mighty task of “replanting” for a more promising future that lies before them. The tiny figures struggling in the tangled landscape leave us wondering how much “mutual help” will be required to achieve that formidable goal.



Mutual Help

To assist viewers who may feel anxious about the demands of symbolic interpretation, Bak also includes paintings that leave no uncertainty about the kind of reflection his imagery inspires. *The War is Over* (BK2628; p34) is one of the many ironic titles that appear in this series, since once



The War is Over

we enter its archway into the past we renew our acquaintance with the memory of a loss that never ends. The destruction of Jewish life wrought by the crematoria of the German deathcamps offers crushing (here literally) evidence of the ruins they caused in communities all over Europe. In the past Bak usually kept their cylindrical shapes upright, but here the crumbling chimney becomes part of the debris, the normal chimneys scattered among the rooftops losing their significance in the presence of this monstrous death-machine. After such a malign assault, what comfort could one find from terms like “relief” and “celebration” as responses to the “good news” that “The War is Over”?

Yet the journey Bak invites his audience to undertake as they enter his landscapes of art does not lead them on a pathway toward total despair. It is a voyage that links familiarity with



Still There

estrangement, leaving the viewer to make sense of the tension between the two. For example, a work like *Still There* (BK2621; p17), with its looming horizontals and verticals, insists that both eye and mind move in several directions at the same time. The adjacent clock hand pointing down and the arrow pointing up add to our intellectual confusion, but our unease is modified as we slowly recognize old friends from Bak’s earlier visual world, domestic objects like a bottle, a pitcher, and a pear. They are “still there,” but they no longer belong to the artistic tradition of “still life,” or even to the cracked and splintered versions that Bak once designed for them. They may be a link to a time when they retained a formal beauty, but now they seem to have strayed from their original artistic destiny. Like the brick wall, the curved rainbow fragment and even the wooden planks in the shape of the Hebrew letters “vov” and “gimel” (recalling the Vilna Ghetto), they offer some small reassurance that art persists even though its once familiar images seem consigned to an assemblage in disarray. And finally, in a frail sign of new growth, a single leaf reminds us that like art, nature continues to flourish.

But as anyone who re-examines the paintings in *Figuring Out* will discover, these works address not only us, but also each other. The human figure in *Conveyance* (BK2582; p30) holds in his



Conveyance

hand the very leafy twig that we saw in *Still There*, as if to warn us and himself that metaphors from nature can be a burden as well as a source of future promise. What else can the arrows pointing in opposite directions signify? The Jews of Europe were “uprooted” from their native habitats and sent on a journey to extermination. If this bent figure hopes to find a new space to replant the tangled roots of his broken tree in order to restore it to its pristine health, he is on a futile quest. Some new branches and leafy twigs may sprout from its surface—and this is not entirely without value—but the original tree, and the grove of which it was once a part, like the Jewish towns and villages with their millions of inhabitants, are gone forever.

This is a melancholy truth, and Bak refuses to sentimentalize it with forays into a landscape of nostalgia. Instead, with an endless skill for developing visual variations on a theme, he invents scenarios to help us apprehend two of the major challenges that the modern imagination must confront: the struggle



Study for a Portrait of an Old Shoe

for survival, and the devotion to remembrance. The struggle surfaces in a majority of these paintings, but a unique cluster of six focus on a single image, empty shoes, and their presence—or more precisely, the presence of absence that they suggest—introduces us to a new genre of artistic representation. Consider, for example, the drawing *Study for a Portrait of an Old Shoe* (BK2607; p15) which offers us a new subject for portrait painting: and introduces a new version of “still life” which we might call “still death,” since the first question we are tempted to ask is “What happened to the person who used to wear that shoe?” This in turn leads us into a train of thought that is dazzling in its referential richness, though part of it may be unconscious and only part deliberate.

A signature feature of many of Bak’s artistic representations has long been the fact that most of what they bring to us depends on what we bring to them. They make intense demands on the “beholder.” So why shoes? For the informed viewer, the shoe image sends out tentacles of association. To begin with, when God summoned Moses to the Burning Bush to assign him the task of leading the Jewish people out of captivity in Egypt, the first thing he said to him (in the King James version, the one familiar to most readers), was “put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” (Exodus 3.5). The well-known narrative continues with the promise to relieve “the affliction of my people” by leading them through the desert to “a land flowing with milk and honey.” (3.7-8). The ironic contrast between this moment and a later journey of the people of Israel from freedom back to a fate far worse than “captivity” on an unholy landscape branded by fire and ashes instead of flowing with milk and honey needs no further commentary. And there was no divine presence to hinder the proceedings.

History has intervened to reverse the prophecies of Exodus, and Bak chooses to make empty shoes witnesses to that failure. But he is not the first to do so. The great Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever—like Bak a survivor of the Vilna Ghetto, and later a friend in Israel—finds these humble objects to be proper subjects for the art of poetry. In “A Wagon of Shoes,” written on January 1, 1943, in the Vilna Ghetto, Sutzkever provides us with a more explicit account of their Holocaust origin. His lines add a verbal vitality to the immobile images of Bak’s versions, and supply a context for grasping their impact:

*The wheels they drag and drag on
What do they bring, and whose?
They bring along a wagon
Filled with throbbing shoes.*

Other stanzas, like Bak’s visual equivalents, raise questions that only a knowledgeable reader (or viewer) could answer. For one example:

*All children's shoes—but where
Are all the children's feet?
Why does the bride not wear
Her shoes so bright and neat?*

By now it should be clear that this is a journey about mass-murder, and lest readers have any doubt about the identity of the victims and the killers, Sutzkever ends his poem with a specific reference to their geographical origins:

*The heels tap with no malice:
Where do they pull it in?
From ancient Vilna alleys,
They drive us to Berlin.*

If we now move to another Bak shoe drawing, *Now What?* (BK2610; p15) we gain a more vivid sense of the dilemma facing not only Bak's audience, but also the artisan who once shaped those shoes as his trade.

The nails he once pounded into their soles (and with his fondness for punning, could Bak possibly have been thinking of "souls" too?) have grown to monstrous proportions, turned tools into a threat, and have left the shoes so damaged that they are now beyond repair. The history of the Holocaust has also left us with a reality beyond repair: though the shoemaker's hammer has swelled into a weapon, he must now realize that it is too late to "defend" his shoes, or the human beings who were once their occupants.



Now What?

We are left to "figure out" the possible meanings of this insight—or to admit with a shrug of futility that there may be none at all.

LAWRENCE L. LANGER



COMING ALONG | Oil on canvas | 14 X 18" | BK2580



DEFINITIVE | Oil on canvas | 22 X 28" | BK2584



STOP OVER | Oil on linen | 40 X 30" | BK2622



SILHOUETTE | Pencil and gouache on paper | 11 X 8.5" | BK2603



RUN AGAIN | Pencil and gouache on paper | 11 X 8.5" | BK2602



UNKNOWN AND LOST | Charcoal and pastel on paper | 19 X 13.5" | BK2620



SIGNALIZATION | Oil on canvas | 20 X 16" | BK2600



BEHOLDER | Oil on linen | 32 X 25.5" | BK2577



HEAVY LIFTING | Oil on paper | 25.5 X 19.5" | BK2587



EXPECTED DELAY | Charcoal and alkyd on orange paper | 8.5 X 10" | BK2608



STUDY FOR THE FOUR READERS OF THE APOCALYPSE | Oil on canvas | 15 X 30" | BK2624



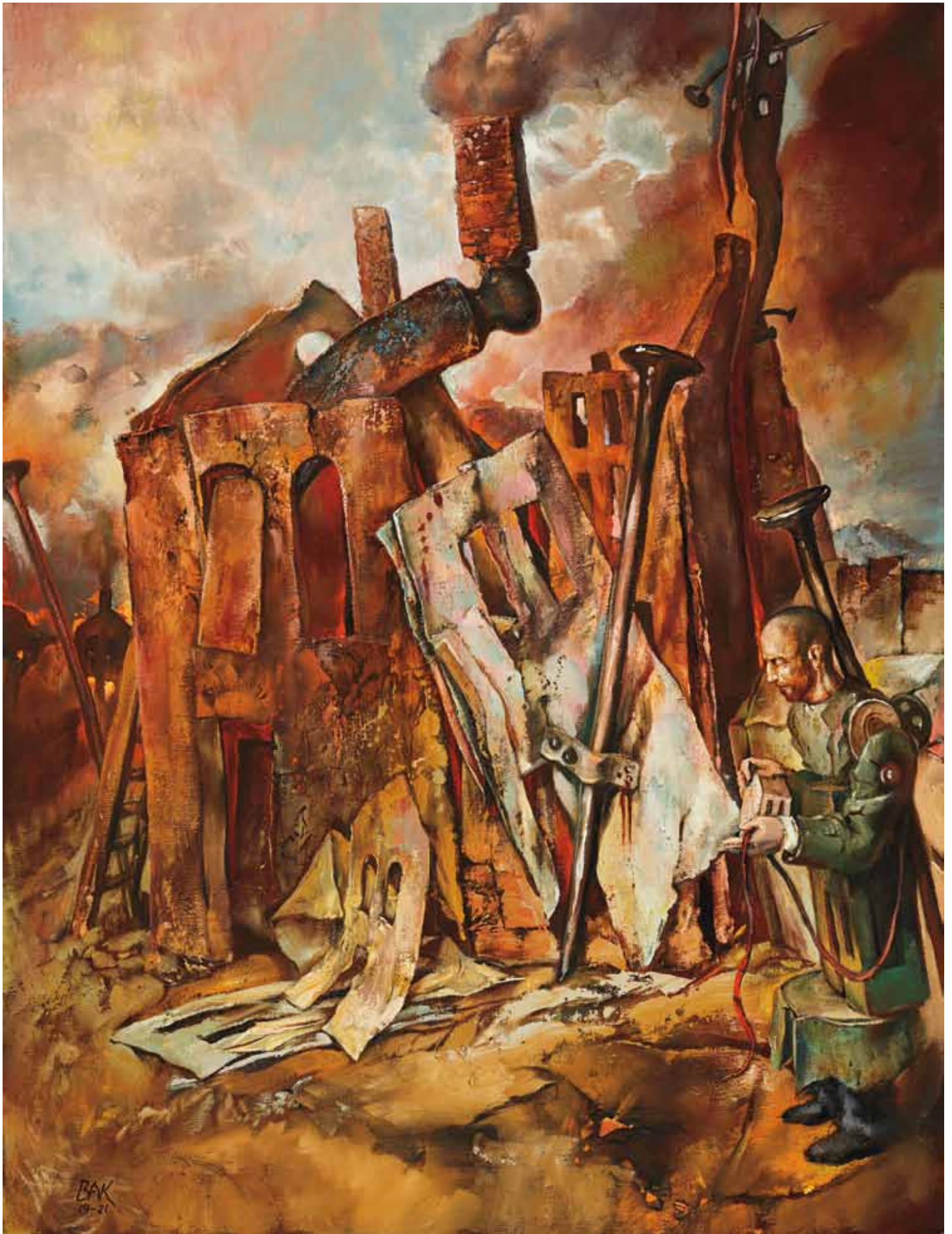
OLD FACADES | Charcoal and alkyd on blue paper | 11 X 8.5" | BK2615



CROSSING | Oil on canvas | 16 X 20" | BK2583



PHILOSOPHER'S MEETING POINT | Oil on canvas | 15 X 30" | BK2598



FOR A NEW HOME | Oil on linen | 40 X 30" | BK2586



STUDY FOR OLD PAIR | Gouache on yellow paper
5.75 X 9" | BK2604



NOW WHAT? | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper
11 X 8.5" | BK2610



STUDY FOR A PORTRAIT OF AN OLD SHOE
Charcoal and alkyd on brown cardboard | 11 X 8.5" | BK2607



FOR GOOD | Charcoal and alkyd on brown cardboard | 8.5 X 11" | BK2605



MOST IMPORTANTLY | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper | 10 X 13" | BK2606



MOST IMPORTANTLY | Oil on canvas | 14 X 18" | BK2594



STILL THERE | Oil on canvas | 24 X 30" | BK2621



THE MISSING (TRIPTYCH) | Oil on canvas | Each panel 16 x 20" | BK2625A-C





SHARED PURPOSE | Oil on canvas | 22 X 28" | BK2599



BURIED MEMORIES | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper | 10 X 13" | BK2613



TO THE UNKNOWN | Oil on canvas | 20 x 16" | BK2629



NEW LANDSCAPE FOR ADAM AND EVE | Oil on canvas | 24 X 24" | BK2596



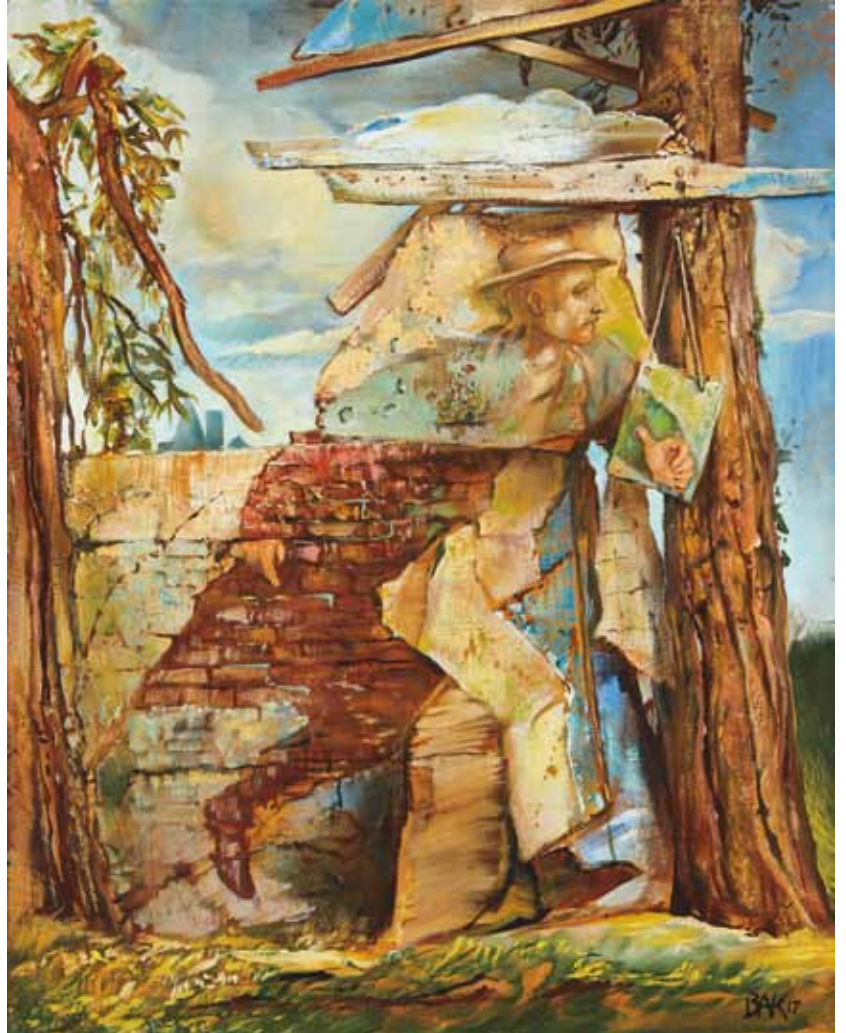
AS FAST AS POSSIBLE | Charcoal and alkyd on brown/grey paper | 19.5 X 16" | BK2619



JACOB'S SLUMBER | Oil on canvas | 14 X 18" | BK2592



SUSPENDED RUN | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper
16.75 X 9.5" | BK2612



STUDY FOR ONGOING ESCAPE | Oil on canvas | 20 X 16" | BK2623



ISLANDER | Oil on canvas | 28 X 22" | BK2591



IN THE SAME DIRECTION | Oil on canvas | 22 X 28" | BK2590



THREE RUNNERS | Watercolor and gouache on yellow paper | 6.25 X 8.75" | BK2609



INEVITABLE | Oil on canvas | 20 X 16" | BK2588



IN SEARCH OF AN OPEN HOUSE | Oil on canvas | 24 X 20" | BK2589



DISPLACED | Oil on canvas | 14 X 18" | BK2585



ON THE INADMISSIBLE | Oil on canvas | 16 X 20" | BK2597



CONVEYANCE | Oil on canvas | 22 X 28" | BK2582



TO WAIT OR NOT | Charcoal and alkyd on orange paper | 16 X 20" | BK2616



FIGURINGS | Mixed media on paper | 19 X 13.5" | BK2601



MUTUAL HELP | Oil on linen | 30 X 40" | BK2595



ON THE ROAD | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper | 12.75 X 9.75" | BK2611



FROM LONG AGO | Charcoal and alkyd on brown/grey paper | 15.5 X 19.5" | BK2618



REVOLVING DEPARTURES | Charcoal and alkyd on brown paper | 12 X 19" | BK2617



THE WAR IS OVER | Oil on canvas | 20 X 16" | BK2628



CONTINUOUS JOURNEY | Oil on canvas | 20 X 20" | BK2581

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 Pittsburgh, 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 a 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 nineteen 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 four 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 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. 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. Also in 2019, the Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy and 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.

PUCKER

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GALLERY

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GALLERY HOURS:

Monday through Saturday
10:00 AM to 5:30 PM
Sunday
10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

We are open to all and taking the necessary precautions for visitor and staff safety. We welcome appointments to maximize visitor experience.

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

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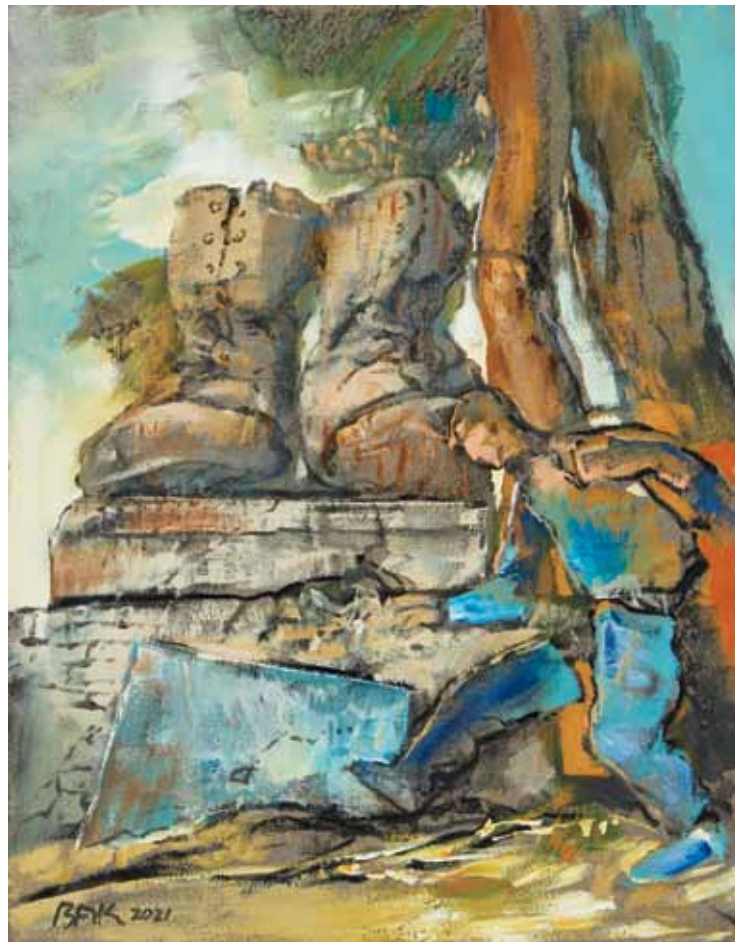
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DATES | 5 March through 24 April 2022

PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION | 5 March 2022 | 3 to 6 PM

The public is invited to attend. The artist will be present.

ONLINE EVENTS | Please visit www.puckergallery.com for a list of virtual gatherings and events accompanying *Figuring Out*.



MOTIONLESS | Charcoal and alkyd on brown/grey paper | 11 X 8.5" | BK2614
COVER | LANDSCAPERS A | Oil on canvas | 22 X 28" | BK2593