



SANCTIFIED SYMBOL  
Pears in the Art of Samuel Bak

PUCKER GALLERY  
BOSTON

# SANCTIFIED SYMBOL

## Pears in the Art of Samuel Bak



### *A Commentary on Bak's Use of Pears in His Paintings*

Years ago, during a particularly trying and challenging time in my life, an astute colleague gifted me a perfectly ripened Bartlett pear. That evening, I hesitated before tugging at the stem, which with little reluctance, popped free. With rivulets of juice dripping from my chin I felt a renewal of spirit. An assurance that all will be right. A promise that my troubles will resolve. It was a moment of transformation. I cherished that pear. For me, the pear became a sanctified symbol of hope. Today, 60 plus years later, it remains so.

For artist Samuel Bak, the stately pear takes on an entirely different transformation:

*"This humble image (a pear) of man's vulnerability became a metaphor for all the inefaceable tragedy and sadness of the human condition. There was something stoic about pears' acceptance of their destiny, the way they obediently accepted the roles I gave them in my invented dramas. They were the receptacles of fate, perhaps the victims of life's random brutality—but never the perpetrators."*

What is afoot in these "invented dramas"? Wherein lies their conception? Bak was 34 years old when pears first appeared in his paintings. The genesis of these images, though, may well have been ripening in Bak's fertile mind since his challenging childhood at the brutal hands of the Nazis.

*"Like most artists, I am no stranger to the inner conflicts that are part of most creative processes. Yet, contrarily to the notion of such struggles, and irrespective of the complexities that my pears convey, they came to me with relative ease. At times they even seemed to be painting themselves." (New Perceptions of Old ApPEARances in the Art of Samuel Bak, 107)*

When I was first confronted by Bak's pears, I felt dumbfounded. When asked to describe a particular pear painting to a friend, I could only apologize with a stammered response. In time, I purposely avoided trying to use language to describe my response to these dramatic paintings. Instead, I employed my senses to do their work. It became a matter of allowing myself to experience the paintings. They are not puzzles, they are statements. I have become a participant in the paintings, not a spectator. I feel the pathos. I hear the clamor of destruction, the cracking of wood, the smashing of pottery, the unheard pleas, the spatter of spilled milk. I recoil from the heat of fire, I smell acrid smoke. Do I feel the rush of wind or is nature itself at a standstill? I stopped looking for answers and learned to live with the questions. Can crude repairs salvage what was? Where am I? Was I fated to be born into this world of grief? Checkmate! Ravens? Where are the doves? Do the "baby" pears have a chance?





*Touching* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2882

To me, Bak's use of pears represents an assault on tranquility. Eradicate tranquility and you destroy culture. You are tossed into a maelstrom of randomness. Freedom is obliterated. Free to think. Free to seek truth. Free to love and be loved. Free to embrace peace. Free to enjoy the shade of a tree. Free to celebrate. Free to adore. Free to fear. Free to embrace simplicity. Free to err. All gone, replaced by palms-up survival. Shards of the past are pasted together in an attempt to regenerate, to show resilience. But the past can never be resurrected. Loneliness prevails. Love is but a memory. No trees. Your wounded sole lies broken in a puddle of putrid water. Adoration does not help a wit. A mistake kills you. You lose your shadow. It is not your fault.

It is the roll of the dice. Time stops.

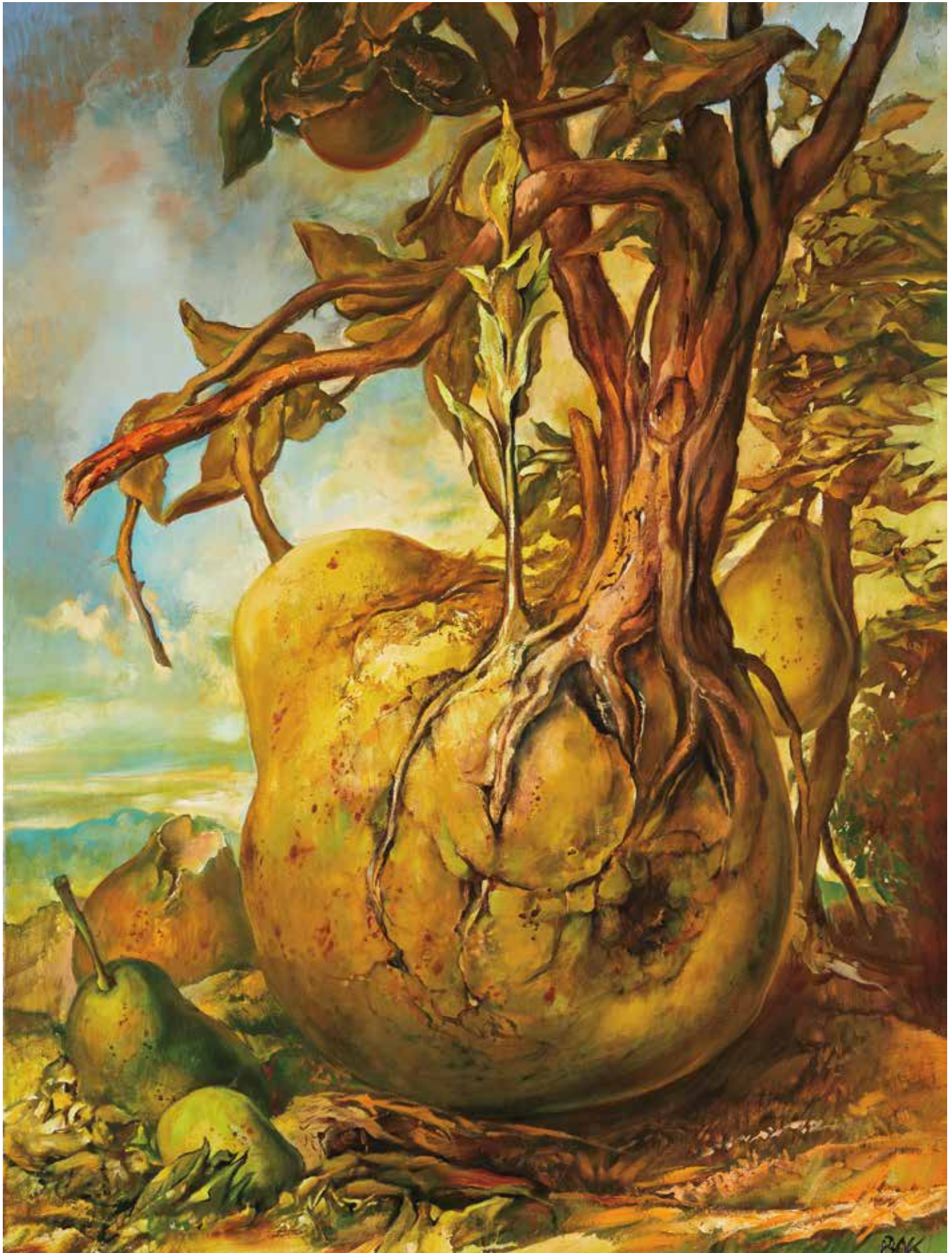
Bak's pears challenge us to confront evil, to ask "why?" Are we doomed to witlessly dismiss the tragedy of the human condition? Bak's use of pears speaks to the horrors of the Nazis; it alerts us all to the bubbling pot of man's inhumanity to man that continues unabatedly today, most clearly illustrated by Putin's vain assault on the people of Ukraine.

I still enjoy the taste of a ripe Bartlett. But just before popping the stem, I offer a prayer that one day our world will find tranquility.

Ah, for the power of a pear.

—Richard Probert





*Pear-petual* || Oil on canvas || 40 x 30" || BK2820





*Somewhat Above*, 1979–1989 || Oil paint on paper || 17.25 x 12.75" || BK2841



*All Together, Now...* || Oil on canvas || 15 x 30" || BK2804



Study, 1996 || Watercolor on paper  
6.25 x 4.75" || BK2835



Secret Code || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2827





Ready || Oil on canvas || 40 x 30" || BK2822



*Ritual* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2826



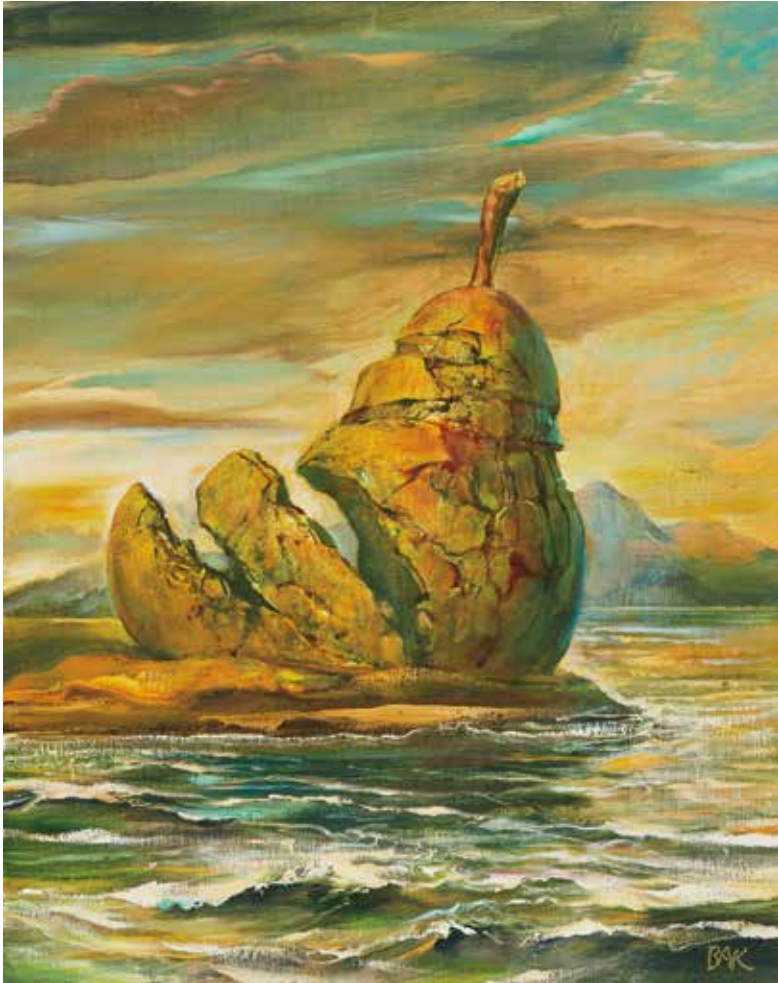
*Monochrome Study* || Procreate, pencil, and crayon on paper  
20 x 13" || BK2865





*The Way We Are* || Oil on canvas || 40 x 30" || BK2831





*Behind the Waves* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2807

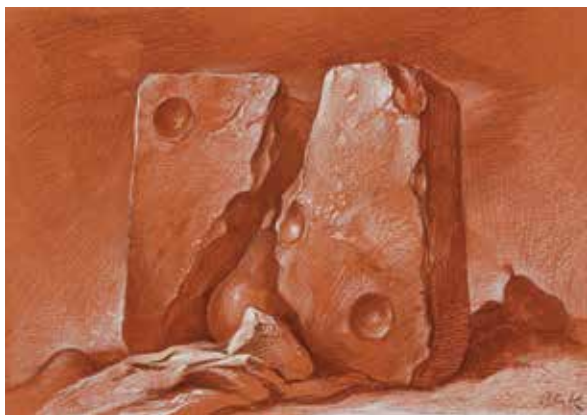


*Trough & Trough* || Procreate, pencil, and crayon on paper || 17.5 x 13" || BK2883





*Inflammables* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2817



*Lucky One*, 1993 || Mixed media on orange paper || 7 x 9.75" || BK2838



*Pear-Chance*, 2002 || Ink and watercolor on paper || 6.5 x 10" || BK2834



*The Power of Many* || Oil on canvas || 40 x 30" || BK2830





*Revolt* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 24" || BK2825



*Jacob's... B* || Procreate, pencil, and crayon on paper || 20 x 13" || BK2864



*Jacob's... A* || Procreate, pencil, and crayon on paper || 13 x 20" || BK2863





*Pyramid*, 1994 || Pencil, pastel, and charcoal on gray paper || 12.25 x 9.5" || BK2843



*Ongoing Game* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 24" || BK2819



*Etude*, 1990 || Black pencil on paper  
13 x 10" || BK2839



*Archival* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2805





*Oblique Blue*, 1990 || Paint on paper || 6.5 x 9.5" || BK2840



*Exposed* || Oil on canvas || 15 x 30" || BK2812



*Nocturnal* || Procreate, pencil, and crayon on paper || 20 x 13" || BK2866



*Well-Prepared* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 14" || BK2832





Only Three, 1994 || Watercolor and paint on paper || 6.5 x 10" || BK2836



Watertight || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2884



*Spacecraft* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2875





Story-Telling || Oil on canvas || 28 x 22" || BK2829



*Fire Works* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2813



*Regained Stability* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2824





*Borrowed Identities* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2808



*Expected and Confirmed* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2811



Readapted || Oil on canvas || 18 x 24" || BK2821





*As Still as Possible* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2854



*Still Life with Anticipation* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2828



*Still Life with Landscape B* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2878





*For Keeps* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2858



*Sustained Hope* || Procreate, pencil, paint, and crayon on paper || 12 x 16.5" || BK2881



*As Inevitable as Possible* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2853





Basic || Oil on canvas || 30 x 24" || BK2806



*Recycled* || Oil on canvas || 16 x 20" || BK2823



*Disguised* || Oil on canvas || 16 x 20" || BK2809





*In Control* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2860



*Per Chance*, 1994 || Paint on paper || 6.5 x 10" || BK2837



*Home Making* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2859

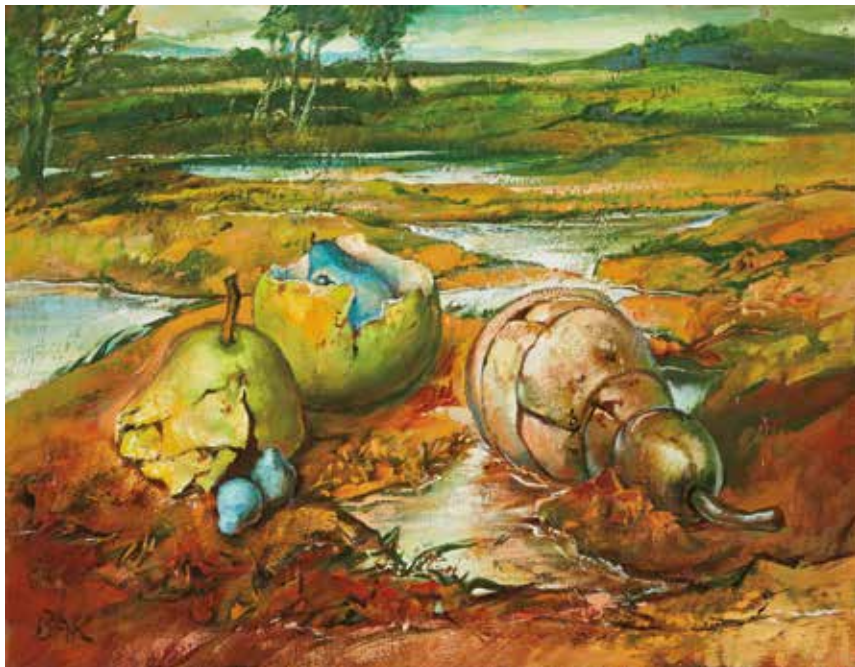




*Dispersed* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2810



*Still Life with Landscape A* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2877



*After* || Oil on canvas || 14 x 18" || BK2803





*With Unexpected Hope* || Oil on canvas || 16 x 20" || BK2833



*Hope for More Time* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 14" || BK2814



*Pear-Petual Time* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 30" || BK2871





*Interconnected* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 24" || BK2862



*After So Many Years* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2851

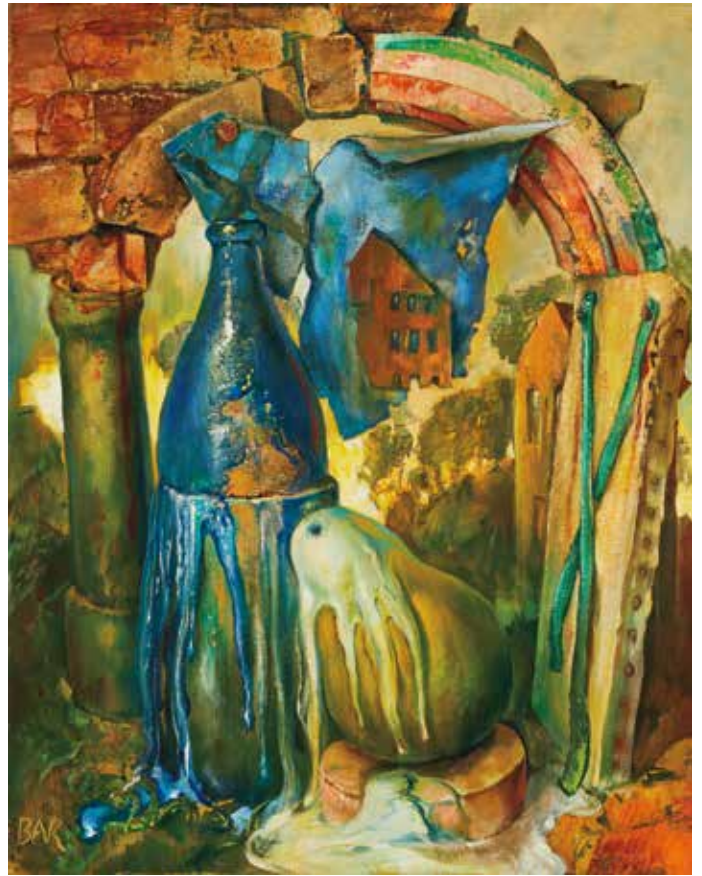


*Partially Restored* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 24" || BK2870

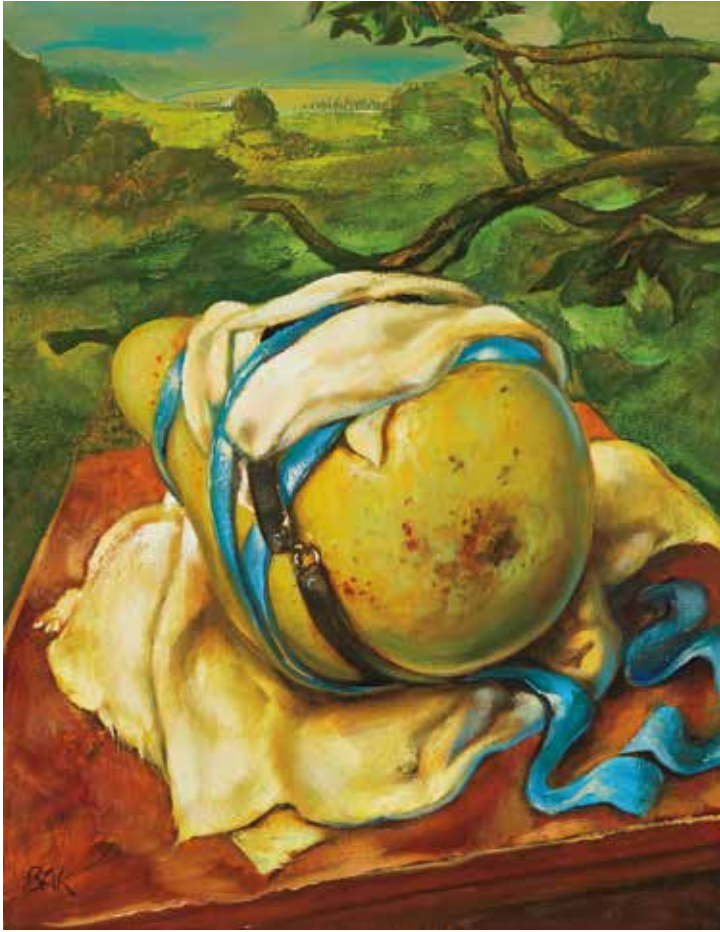




*Once There Was A Pear* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2867



*One Painting Two Unknowns* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2868



*A Hero's Rest* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2852



*Self-Defense* || Oil on canvas || 18 x 14" || BK2874





*Camouflage* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 30" || BK2856



*In Memory of Passing Clouds* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2861



*Study in Search of a Title* || Oil on canvas || 14 x 18" || BK2880





Permanent || Oil on canvas || 24 x 36" || BK2872



*Forever and Ever* || Oil on canvas || 32 x 25.75" || BK2857





*Identified* || Oi on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2815



*Study for the Research of Infinity* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2879



*Ongoing Restoration* || Oil on canvas || 20 x 16" || BK2869





*Before the After* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2855



Secret Unloading || Oil on canvas || 24 x 18" || BK2873



## SAMUEL BAK

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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 eight 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 over twenty 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; the University of Nebraska Omaha; and Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA.

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

ESTABLISHED 1967 BOSTON

GALLERY

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**GALLERY HOURS:**

Monday through Saturday

10:00 AM to 5:30 PM

Sunday

1:00 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.

**CREDITS:**

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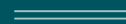
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the Week* email list.

## SANCTIFIED SYMBOL

### Pears in the Art of Samuel Bak



**DATES:**

*15 April through 4 June 2023*

**PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION:**

*Saturday 29 April 2023, 3 to 6 PM*

*The artist will be present*

**ONLINE EVENTS:**

*Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) for a list of virtual gatherings and events accompanying Sanctified Symbol.*



*In Quest of Eternity* || Oil on canvas || 24 x 36" || BK2816

*COVER: Keeper of Passing Memories* || Oil on canvas || 40 x 30" || BK2818