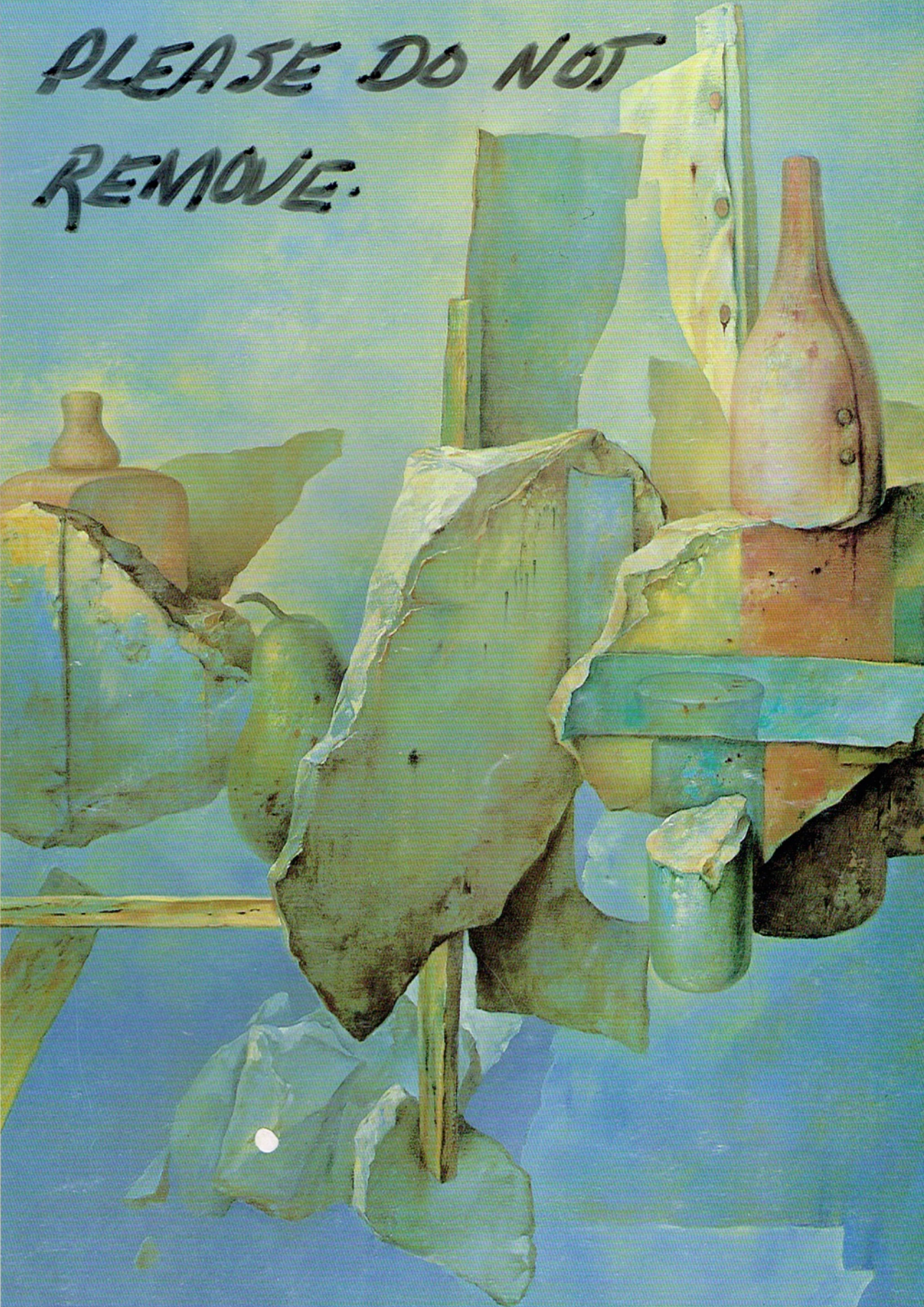


# SAMUEL BAK

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# Samuel Bak

## Still Life and Beyond

### Introduction

We are pleased to exhibit Samuel Bak's new paintings. "Still Life and Beyond" shows a range of provocative images. These works echo, honor, and transform the past, and, most importantly, suggest renewal. Their inventiveness tests the boundaries of our understanding and imagination.

Bak's art arises from his profound experiences as a survivor, wanderer, preserver. Of 80,000 Jews killed in Vilna, Poland during the Holocaust, Bak survived with a few hundred others. In 1940, his family was forced into the Vilna ghetto. There, between crowded walls, Bak took refuge in books and art. His first exhibit of drawings was held in the ghetto when he was nine years old.

Since then,<sup>1</sup> Bak has lived in many countries, including France, Italy, the United States, Israel, and Switzerland. He has created imaginary evocations of his ruptured childhood world, landscapes of Jewish history, metaphysical paintings, and innovative still lives. His works, shown internationally, inspire us to the art of acceptance and rebirth.

### The Art of Still Life

Most great artists have experimented with still lives. The investigation of form, space, color, and illusion is challenging and rewarding. Contrary

to first impressions, still lives do not exist. They are created. The artist must choose, arrange, and manipulate his objects. As he observes and invents, a unique personal vision may emerge.

One of the earliest traditions of still life is *nature morte* (literally, dead nature.) Objects are painted as still, as incapable of moving. The Dutch translation *still leven* implies silent, tranquil life, a more flattering description that captures the genre's early spirit. Fruit, flowers, and bottles filled the canvas evoking domestic peace, creature comforts, and a vision of an ordered time and place. Sometimes the artist included symbols of the spirit (a pure lily) or a cautionary reminder of time passing (a skull).

Forms in traditional still lives are typically seen close-up on a table. They are rendered as full, three-dimensional volumes. Light is often captured on canvas, as the art historian Charles Sterling writes, to "reveal the visible world in its pristine integrity." We need only look at Dutch still lives of the seventeenth century. The design is precise; surfaces are rich; light captures the energy and dignity of each object.

With characteristic inventiveness, Bak takes the early tradition of *nature morte* and redefines it. In *To the Left* and *From A to B through C*, we see domestic objects on a table. The warm golds and oranges in *To the Left* evoke the intimate world of home and hearth. Our gaze moves naturally to the right with the flow of light and curving forms until we meet the red arrow pointing left. Here is the wit of the title. We also see rocks floating by and suddenly step back. Something is moving. Life is not *still* as the genre promises.

### Tea Time/Aspects of Bak's Still Lives

A glance at Bak's paintings of tea time reveals the impressive range of his approach to still life. We see the fine draftsmanship of the Old Masters, rich glowing objects of Dutch interiors, fractured Cubist forms, and strange juxtapositions of Surrealist images. Bak draws from these influences to reinvent the traditions of still life and to express a world of pain and healing.

Tea time is one of Bak's symbols for loss and transformation. The drinking and brewing of tea suggest domestic comfort and civilized society. This ritual evokes Bak's happy childhood in Vilna.

Vilna was an important center of Jewish thought and culture. Its medieval quarter recalled Jerusalem. When the Nazis seized it in 1939, Bak said in *The Past Continues* "everything was destroyed — though the day was calm with smooth blue skies." (We see that lovely sky in the painting *That is the Question*.) From then on, Bak saw the world as "a broken thing that could never become whole again. In nearly all my pictures," he stated in *Paintings of the Last Decade*, "there is at least one ruined element to serve as a symbol of the destruction of 'My Jerusalem.'"

As we look at Bak's images of tea time, not one has whole forms. Teapots and cups are chipped, cracked, or fused with other implements. They suggest a broken world that at best has been *reformed* with flaws.

The spoons in Bak's paintings have another symbolic meaning. For Jews in work camps during the Holocaust, spoons were not middle class refinements but utensils, implements for survival. The broken, propped up spoon in *Silver Spoon* and the solid, floating one in *The Persisting Teaspoon* suggest dimensions of the displaced Jew's character. He is both fragile and strong, needy and independent, in his struggle for survival and healing.

Front cover:  
The Positive And Negative  
Aspects Of A Still Life,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 25 5/8"

Back cover:  
Under The Celestial Dome,  
oil on linen, 45 3/8 × 55 1/8"



To capture his broken worlds, Bak paints *still lives in nature*. Enlarged objects are often set in a landscape. In *That is the Question* and *Silver Spoon*, huge teapots and cups are rendered so vividly that we accept them as real. From Bak's point of view, why shouldn't we? If the Holocaust, an event of such incomprehensible evil, can occur then monumental domestic objects can dominate the landscape.

By taking his teapots and cups and setting them free in the cosmos, Bak creates the *floating still life*. This mode is a radical departure from the tradition of *nature morte*. In *Dark Galaxy*, a teapot, cup, and spoon drift whimsically in a mysterious, blue atmosphere. The whole painting is like a floating sculpture.

If the floating still lives represent a new spirit of healing, we can say Bak's *inventions* do too. These still lives, inspired by the Cubists, depict fragmented and reassembled objects. Forms play in a shallow space rather than in a three-dimensional world. The difference between the teapot in *That is the Question* and *Moving Art* points up the contrast. The former is a rich purple, well-rounded volume. We feel we can walk into the setting and touch it. The teapot in *Moving Art* has been taken apart and reconstructed by the imagination. We want to put our hand through it and turn the playful contraption of which it is a part. The whole construction seems to float in blue, ambiguous space.

## Still lives in Nature

Bak creates an exciting interplay between fact and illusion in many still lives. He sets up riddles of perspective which tease our senses and force us to question what we see.

In *From B to A to K*, named after the artist, Bak establishes a striking dynamic between the world "within" and "without." Pears are set in a complex temporary structure of sticks, stretched painter's canvases, and a broken ladder. This construct is set in turn against a traditional landscape of mountains, clouds, and gnarled trees.

The pears change continuously before our eyes. They are Bak's personal symbol, perhaps representing the human figure. Their shape is like a womb, their skin as vulnerable as human flesh. Bak renders pears throughout his works in several guises — harnessed, waxed, wrapped. Note the two green pears in *On the Move*. One is slightly restrained, swaddled like an infant, whereas the other seems blissfully cuddled. In *From B to A to K*, pears emerge where we least expect them. Two are painted on a canvas within a canvas, seeming imagined, perhaps dreamed. (It is no accident that Bak's name appears here). Another, just to the left, is illusory. This pear, a shadowy presence in the landscape, completes its form on the canvas.

Bak likes to suspend our sense of reality. He paints two separate scenes in *Reflexion* rather than create a mirror image. One is in the studio, the other in nature. Each has distinct colors and textures. By reversing the last "R" in "MIRROR," Bak wittily informs us that all is not as it appears.

## Inventions

Bak's images, as we have seen, let us play games of perception. He often calls attention to art as artifice, as something made by the artist. The canvases within canvases set off this dynamic. So do his images of flattened forms in shallow spaces, his inventions.

Bak's interest in contraptions is inspired in part by his grandfather, an inventor. The artist seems fascinated by moveable parts and makes us wish we could manipulate his visual concoctions. The scythe in *Moving Art* and small tin birds in *Under the Celestial Dome* (back cover) invite our curiosity. The assemblage in *Celestial Dome* suggests a window of the mind more than a dome. Nailed pieces of tin create a fabricated haven rather than a blissful heaven. The whole rests upon a broken table with small wheels as if it is part of a larger, unseen machine.

The colors of Bak's inventions are rich and strong; their density keeps our attention locked within the enigma of the shallow space.

## Floating Still Lives

Bak's floating still lives express his healing and liberation. We see works that become studies of light, color, form, and motion. Colors are bright and airy; compositions tease us but do not seem laden with symbolism and story. Man may be adrift but his journey through time and space is not tinged with darkness.

If we look at three paintings, *Painted Wall*, *The Positive and Negative Aspects of a Still Life* (cover), and *Light Interlude*, the table that has held so many of Bak's still lives gradually disappears. It changes from a positive form to a flat shape in negative space to a mere floating plank. Now objects rise above it. The rocks and wood, usually associated with weight and earthiness, share this airborne spirit.

There is a wonderful spirit of play in these works. A blue bottle appears in the negative space of *The Positive and Negative Aspects of a Still Life*. In *Light Interlude*, the pear at the top, missing one bite, seems buoyed by being tasted. It sails off, knowing it has given pleasure, into the vaporous background. The mere title suggests a playful moment and a charming piece of music.

Bak creates a teasing ambiguity in these works. Are forms coming together or apart? Just what is being created in *Genesis*? If there is a dark moment in these floating still lives, it may be here. We pray that the new forms will be better (not worse) than what we have known before.

*The Last Rose is a Rose is a Rose* is a visual poem. The elegant symbol of love floats in a ruby red vase in space. There is a perfect balance among the rocks that surround it. Contrary to Gertrude Stein who demystified the rose ("a rose is a rose is a rose"), Bak makes us cherish it all the more.

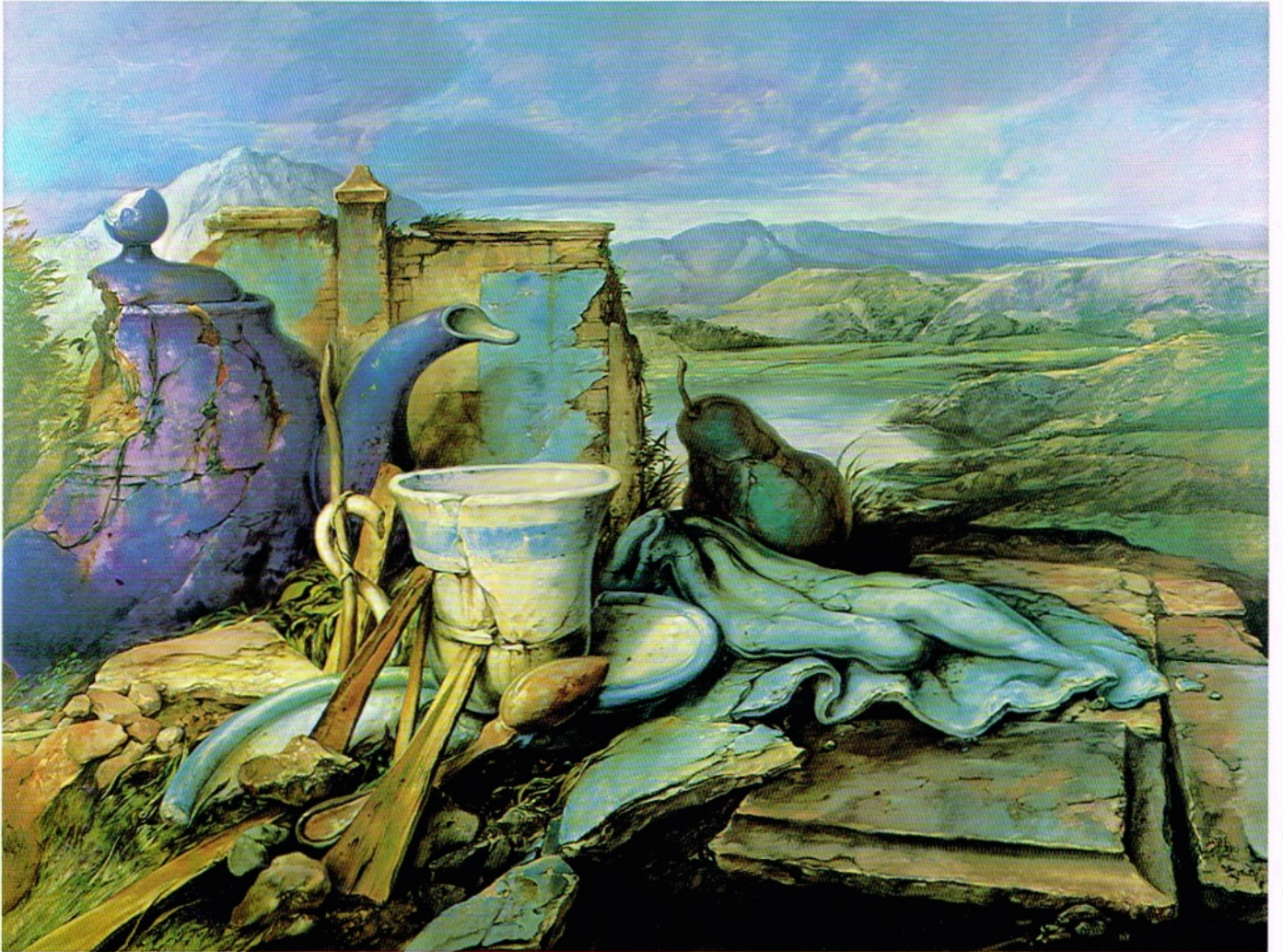




1. From A To B Through C,  
oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 31 7/8"

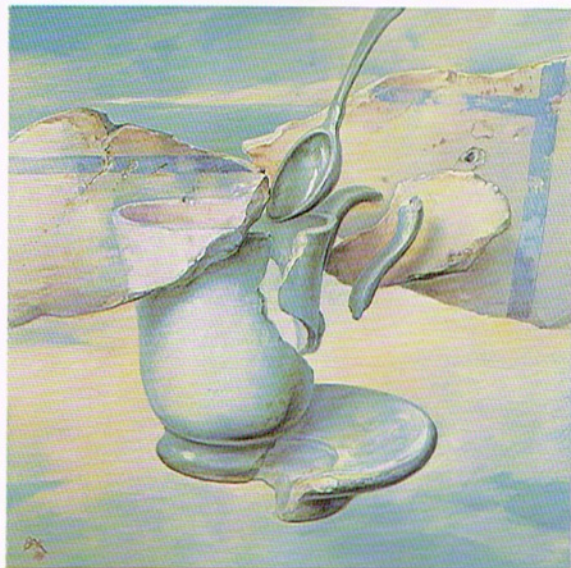
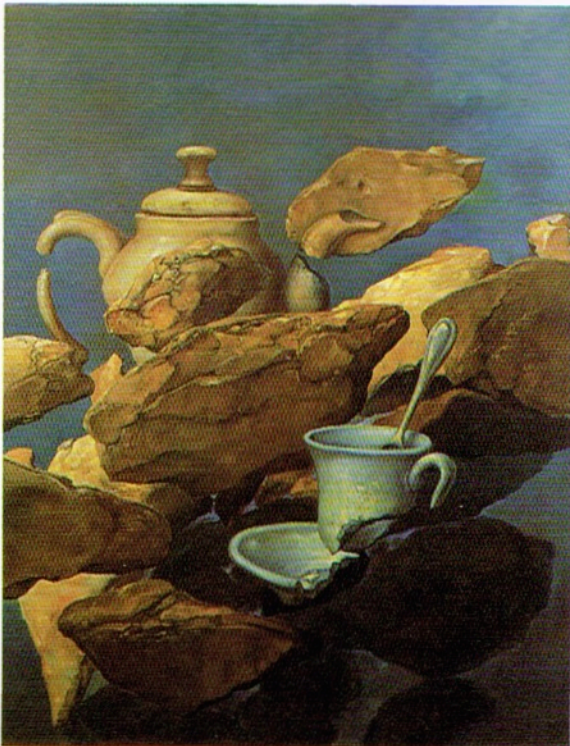
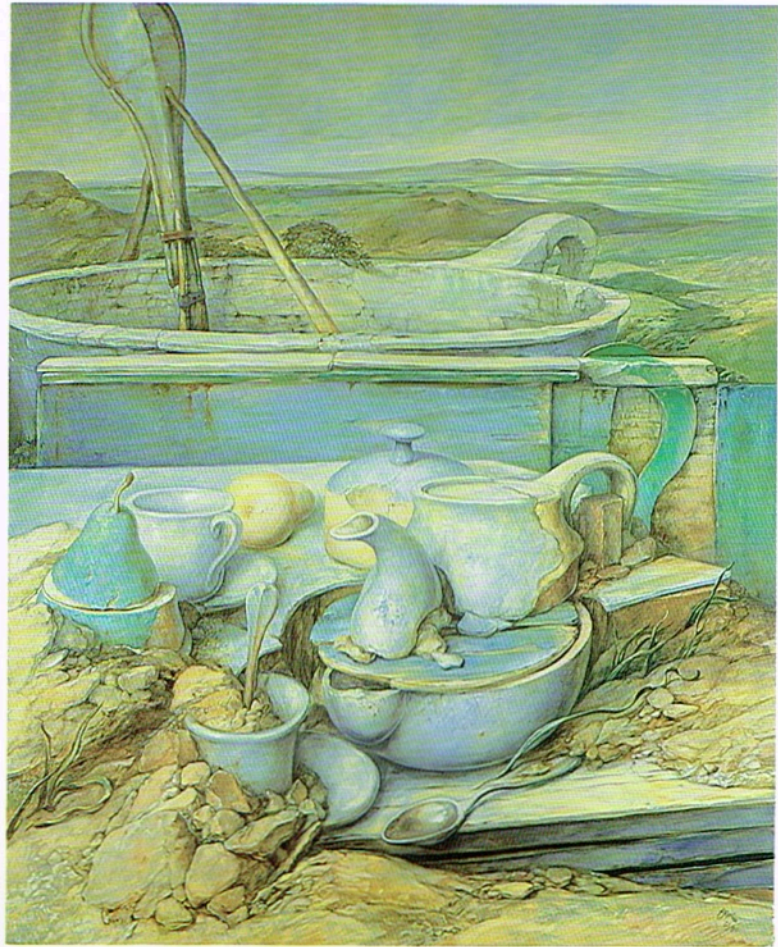
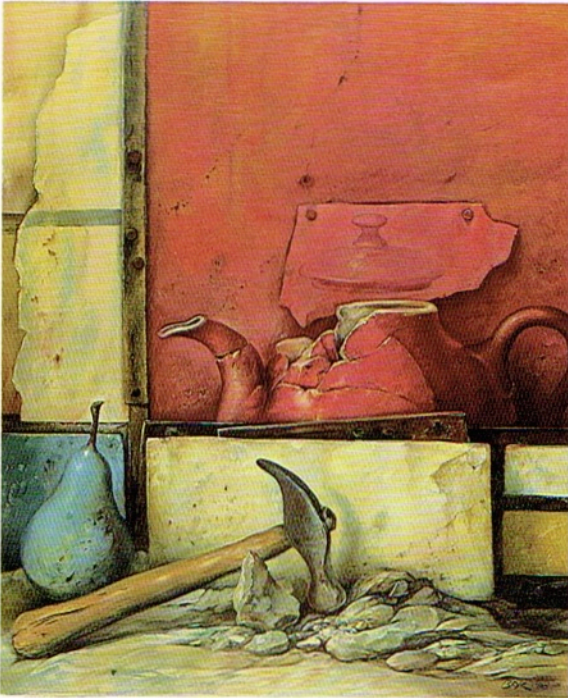
2. To The Left,  
oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 31 7/8"





3. That Is The Question,  
oil on linen, 41 3/8 x 55 1/8"





4. Piets Teapot,  
oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 21 1/4"

6. Silver Spoon,  
oil on linen, 39 5/16 × 31 7/8"

5. Dark Galaxy,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 25 5/8"

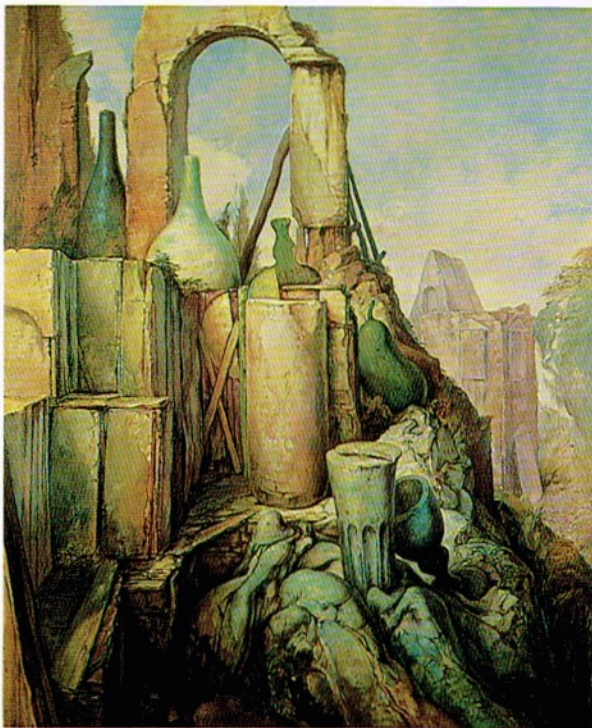
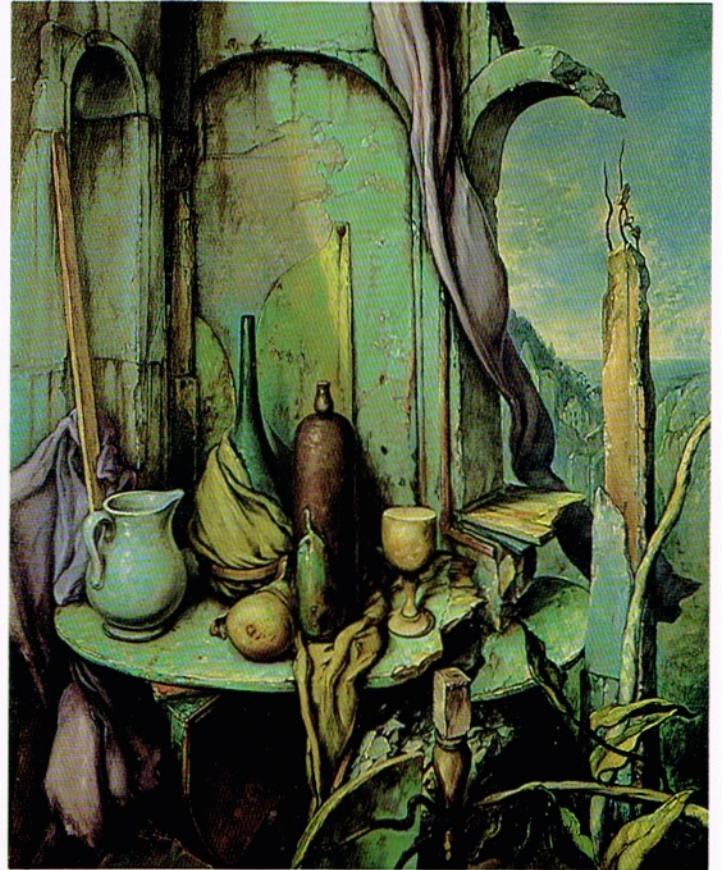
7. The Persisting Teaspoon,  
oil on linen, 13 3/4 × 13 3/4"





8. From B To A To K,  
oil on linen, 39 5/16 × 31 7/8"



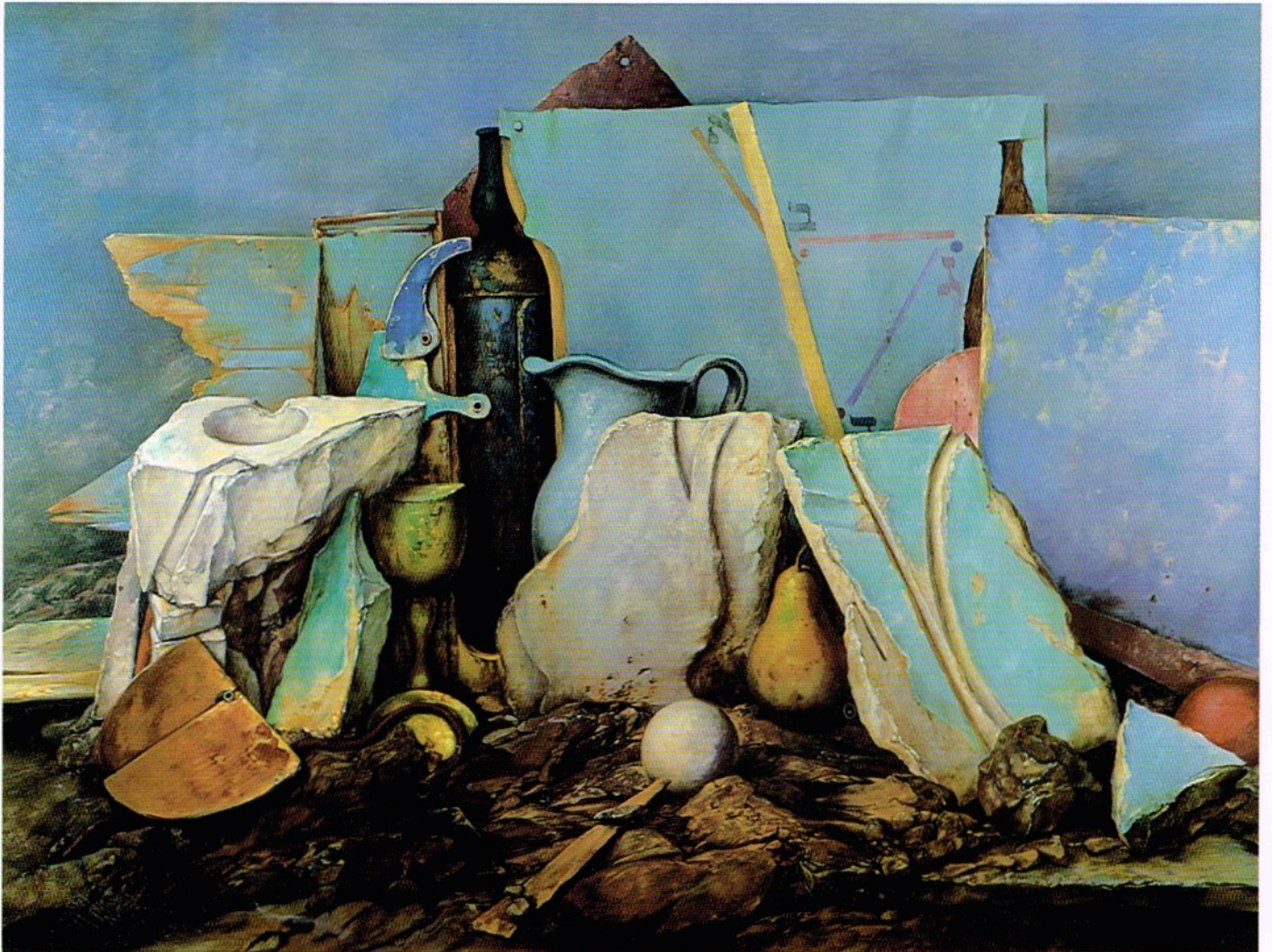


9. Housing Project,  
oil on linen, 39 5/16 × 31 7/8"

10. Still Archeology,  
oil on linen, 39 5/16 × 31 7/8"

11. Open Interior,  
oil on linen, 39 5/16 × 31 7/8"





12. From Aleph On,  
oil on linen, 41 3/8 × 55 1/8"





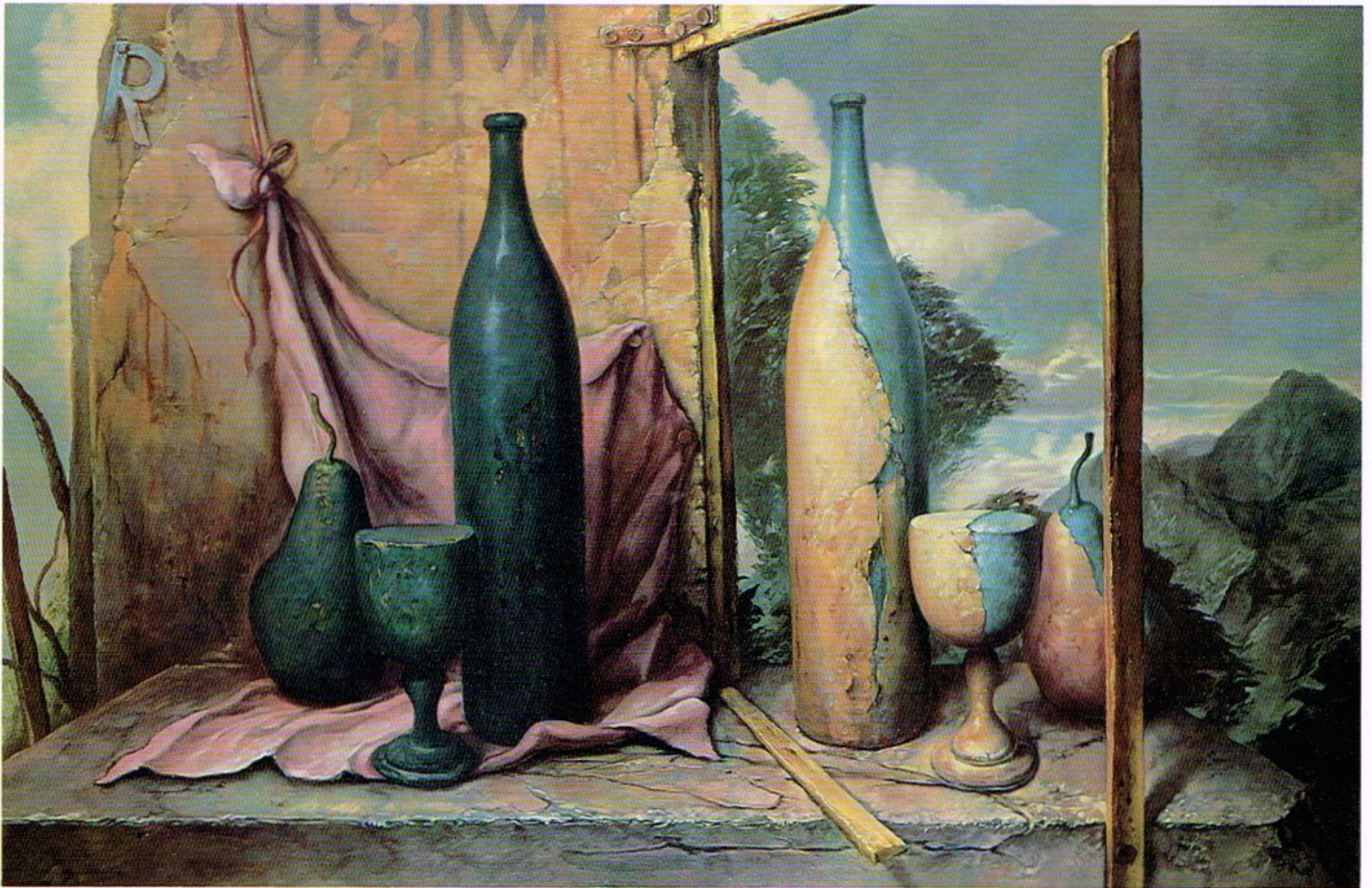
13. On The Move,  
oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 39 5/16"

14. Roman Still Life,  
mixed media on paper, 16 × 12 1/8"

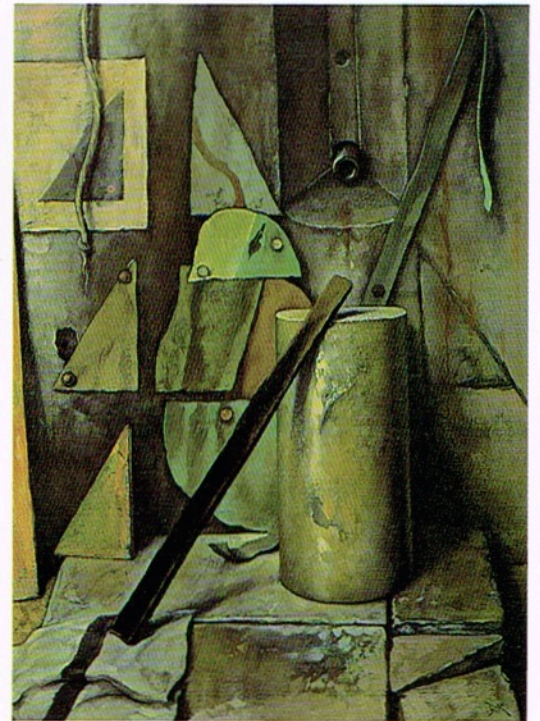


15. The Time For Departure,  
oil on linen, 14 15/16 × 18 1/8"



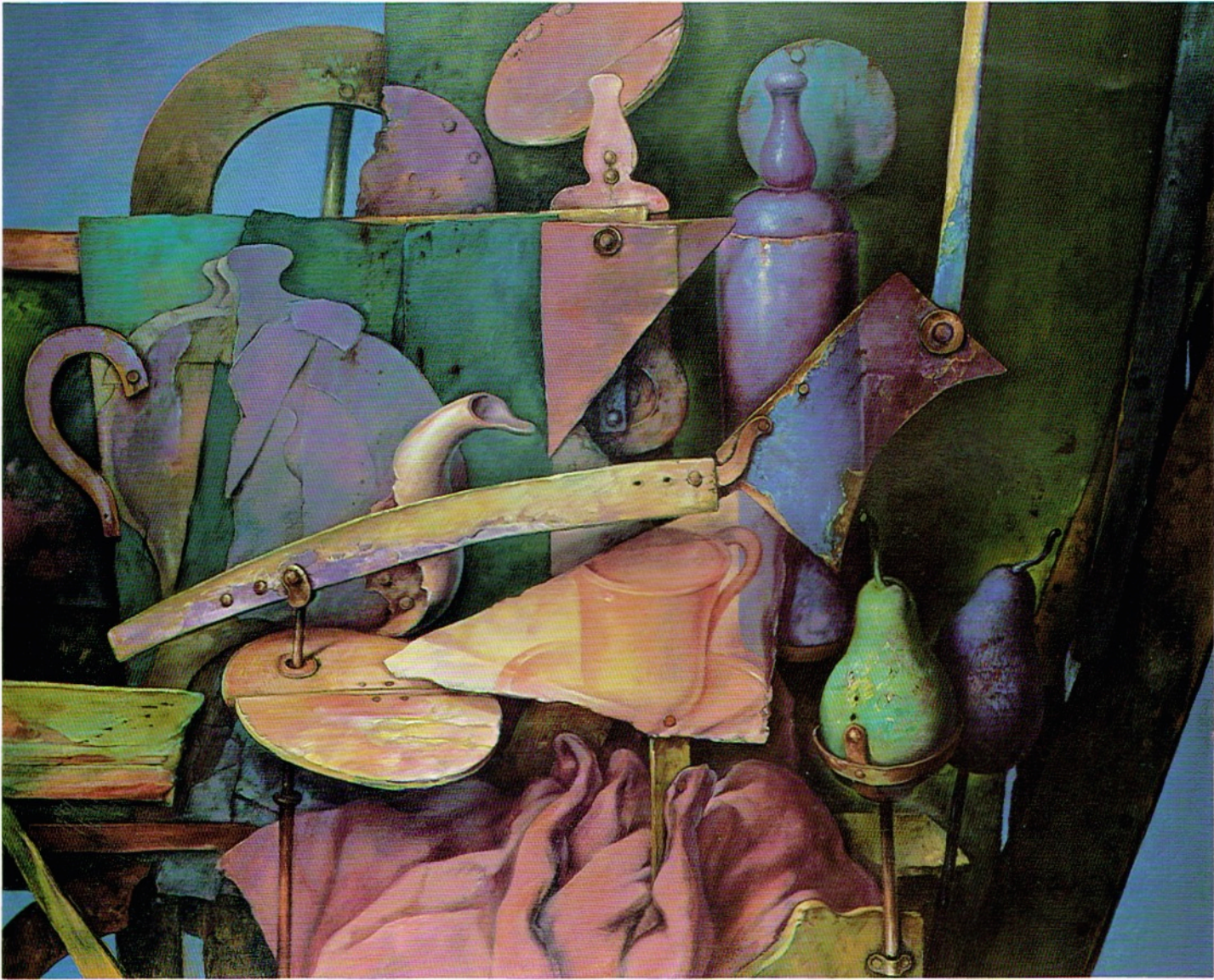


16. Reflexion,  
oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 39 5/16"



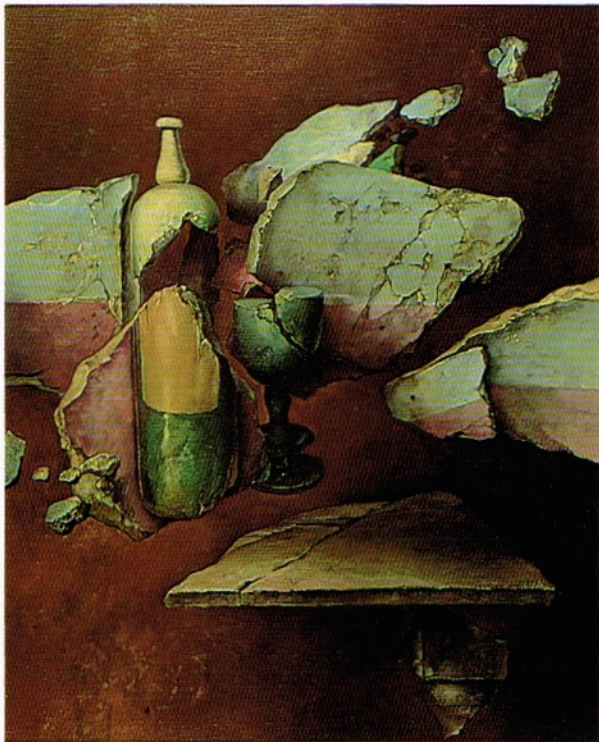
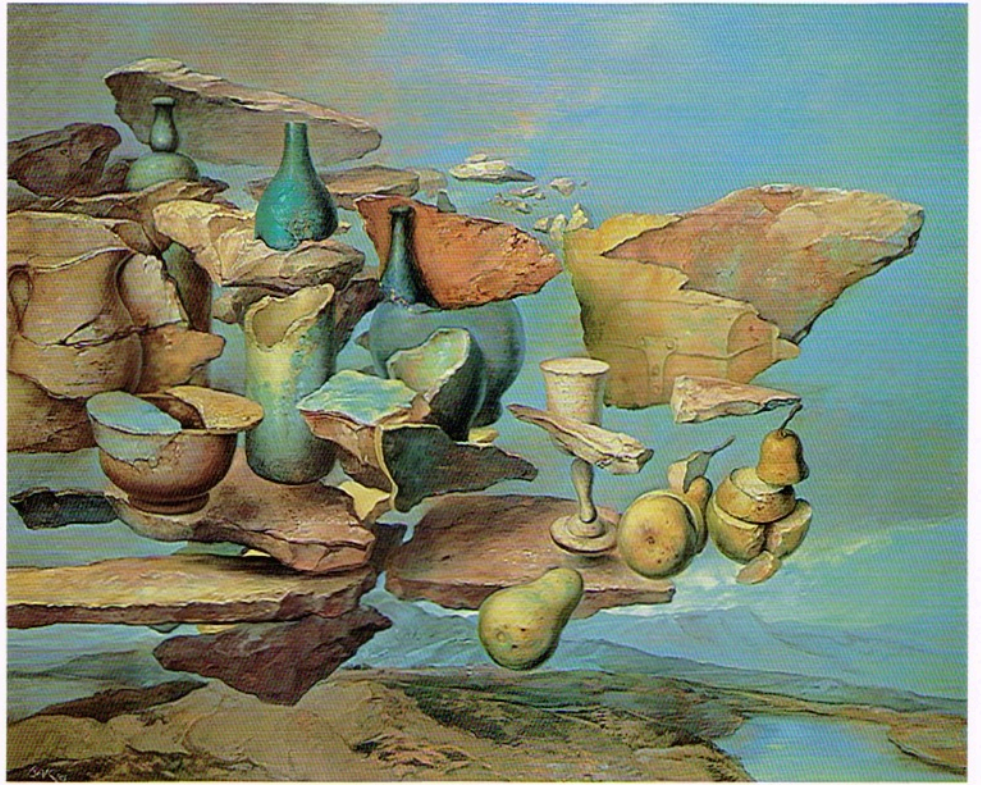
17. Cut-Outs,  
mixed media on paper, 14 3/4 × 10 13/16"



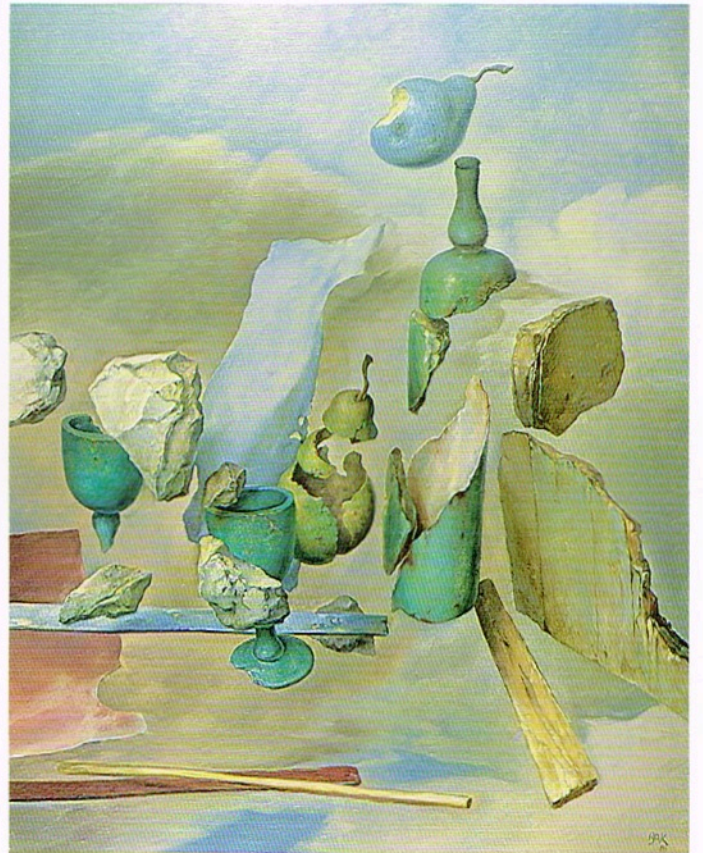


18. Moving Art,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 39 5/16"





19. Painted Wall,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 25 5/8"



20. Genesis,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 39 5/16"

21. Light Interlude,  
oil on linen, 31 7/8 × 25 5/8"





22. *The Last Rose Is A Rose Is A Rose*,  
oil on linen, 41 3/8 × 55 1/8"



# 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 of Vilna.

1945-48 Displaced Persons camps in Germany; studied painting in Munich.

1948 Emmigrated to Israel.

1952 Studied at the Bezalel Art School, Jerusalem.

1953-56 Army service.

1959-66 Lived in Rome.

1959 Solo: Galleria Schneider - 1959, 1961, 1965, 1966.

1961 Invited to exhibit at the Carnegie International, Pittsburgh.

1963 Traveled to Israel. Solo: Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem; Galleria Liguria — 1963. Tel Aviv Museum.

1965 Solo: L'Angle Aigu, Brussels. Alwin Gallery, London.

1966 Re-Settled in Israel. Solo: Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv.

1967 Solo: Roma Gallery, Chicago. Group: "Image and Imagination," Tel Aviv Museum.

1968 Solo: Modern Art Gallery, Jaffa.

1969 Solo: Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston. Brockton Art Center, Fuller Memorial.

1970 Solo: Bronfman Center, Montreal.

1971 Solo: Hadassah "K" Gallery, Tel Aviv, 1971, 1978.

1974-76 Lived in New York City.

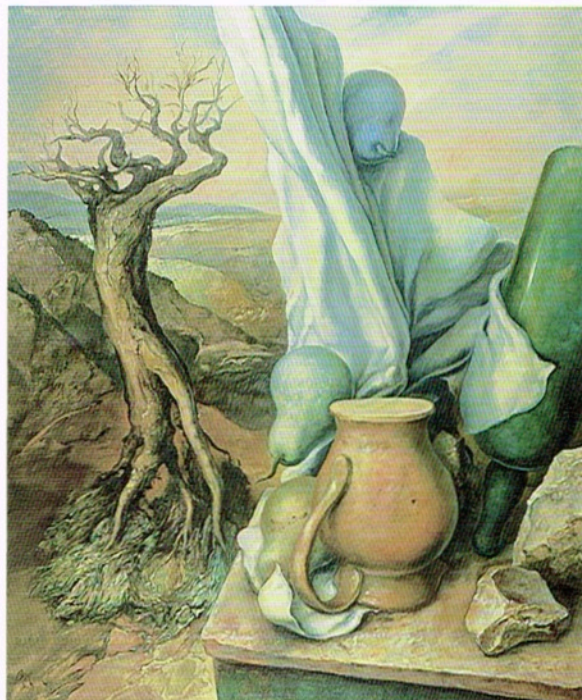
1974 Solo: Aberbach Fine Art, New York, 1974, 1975, 1978.

1975 Group: "Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th Century," Jewish Museum, New York. Solo: Pucker Safrai, Boston.

1976 Solo: Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh.

1977 Solo: Heidelberg Museum: Kunstverein, Esslingen; Ketterer Gallery, Munich.

## 23. Wrong Side Up, oil on linen, 25 5/8 × 21 1/4"



1978 Solo: Amstutz Gallery, Zurich; Vonderbank Gallery, Frankfurt; Goldman Gallery, Haifa.

1979 Solo: Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston. International Art Fair, Basel, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1986. Group: "Nachàbilder," Kunstahalle, Hannover.

1980 Solo: Galerie Levy, Hamburg; DeBel Gallery, Jerusalem. Traveling solo: 30 cultural centers in Israel, organized by "Omanut La'am," Ministry of Culture and Education. 1980-84.

1981 Solo: Thorens Fine Art Basel; Kallenbach Fine Art, Munich 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987.

1982 Solo: Galerie W. Wuppertal. Stadtische Kunstahalle, Dusseldorf; Thorens Fine Art, Basel.

1984 Group: "Still Life," Tel Aviv Museum.

1985 Solo: "A Moment Out of Time," Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston.

1986 Solo: "Life Without Still," Soufer Gallery, New York. International Art Fair, Ghent.

1987 Solo: "The Past Continues," Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston.

## Retrospectives

Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1976  
 Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg, 1977  
 Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf, 1978  
 University of Haifa, Israel, 1978, first retrospective in Israel  
 Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, 1978  
 Museum Der Stadt, Landau, 1979  
 Kunstmuseum, Wiesbaden, 1979  
 Kunstverein Braunschweig, 1980  
 Galerie Gotz, Stuttgart and Art Management Rolf, 1987  
 Stadtgalerie Bamberg, Villa Dessauer, 1988

## Collections

Durer House, Nuremberg  
 German Parliament, Bonn  
 Jewish Museum, New York  
 Municipality of Nuremberg  
 University of Haifa, Israel  
 Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem  
 Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg  
 Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
 Kunstmuseum, Bamberg  
 Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts  
 Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel

## Publications

**Samuel Bak, The Past Continues,** Samuel Bak and Paul T. Nagano, 1988.  
**Bak, Rolf Kallenbach,** 1977.  
**Bak, Paintings of the Last Decade,** A. Kaufman and Paul T. Nagano, 1974.





## SAMUEL BAK

### STILL LIFE AND BEYOND

#### Opening

**Saturday 14 October 1989**

**3:00 – 6:00 pm.**

The public is invited to attend  
Samuel Bak will be present.

#### **Pucker Safrai Gallery**

171 Newbury Street Boston, MA 02116 (617) 267-9473

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