

Weber Fine Arts Building

UNO Art Gallery
University of Nebraska at Omaha
6505 University Drive South
Omaha, NE 68182

Opening Reception

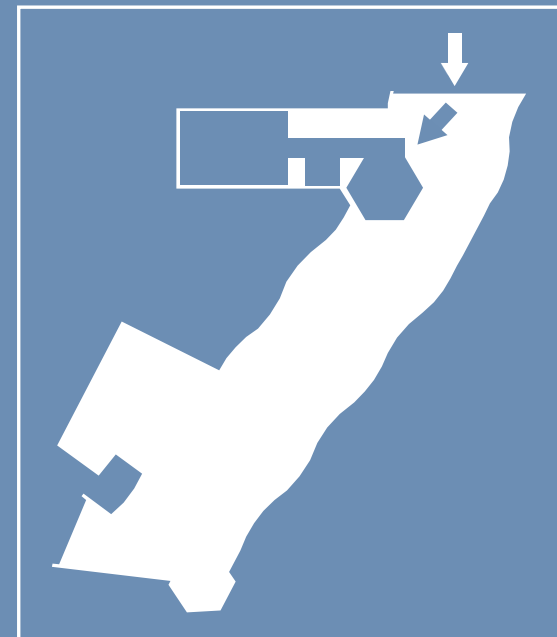
4 September 2019
From 4:00PM to 6:00PM

Exhibition Dates

3 September-14 November 2019

Gallery Hours

Monday10AM-4PM
Tuesday10AM-4PM
Wednesday10AM-4PM, 7-9PM
Thursday10AM-4PM
FridayClosed
SaturdayClosed
Sunday11AM-2PM



WITNESS

THE ART OF
SAMUEL BAK

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FOREWORD

In the art of Samuel Bak, worlds contrast, coincide, collide: the profane shadows the sacred, the strange echoes the familiar, life exists alongside death, while presence is ever haunted by absence. The artist's vivid imagination, the breadth of his knowledge and skill as a painter offers us profound questions about human nature. Bak's work is influenced by his painful experiences during the Holocaust as a child in Vilna, Poland. His art revolves around themes such as identity, responsibility, and justice, as well as on the challenge of rebuilding what was destroyed.

Yizkor 1991
Oil on canvas, 63" x 48" (BK420)

WITNESS: The Art of Samuel Bak took more than two years to conceive, develop and implement. The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) is grateful to gallery owners Sue and Bernie Pucker for their kindness and generosity. Pucker Gallery, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has represented Samuel Bak since 1969, and has been a true friend and partner in the creation of this exhibition. The gallery's Jonathan Pucker, Elizabeth Burgess, Emily Fitzsimmons, Jeanne Koles, and Ian Boissonnault dedicated a great deal of time and effort to ensure a smooth delivery of this program.

UNO's Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy and the Natan and Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies are proud sponsors of **WITNESS: The Art of Samuel Bak**. The UNO Art Gallery has graciously agreed to allow the exhibition to extend for eleven weeks. The program's Steering Committee consists of Amy Morris, Curtis Hutt and Jeremy Menard. Dean David Boocker of the College of Arts and Sciences and Dean Michael Hilt of the College of Communication, Fine Arts and Media have been a tremendous source of support. We thank Chancellor Jeffrey Gold and his cabinet for approving a program of this size and scope.

The art selected reflects the interests of the respective academic centers sponsoring this exhibition. The Sam and Frances Fried

Holocaust and Genocide Academy supports the scholarly study of genocide. A significant number of pieces in Bak's oeuvre contemplate the Holocaust and other acts of barbarism. In particular, his art often considers violence directed against our most vulnerable. In a variety of paintings, Bak depicts the unimaginable situations children found themselves in during the Holocaust and the difficult decisions they were forced to make in an attempt to survive another day.

As a teenager, Sam Fried, the late donor of the Fried Academy, was frequently placed in agonizing situations. In 1944, as a fourteen year old boy, he returned to his hometown of Rakosin, Czechoslovakia to find that the Germans and local police had arrived. From a distance, he watched helplessly as his family was rounded up and marched to the town square. Overcome, he quickly realized that he was unable to escape. He threw away his papers and joined his family. They were all taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau where his parents were later killed in the gas chamber. After the war Sam Fried moved to Omaha where he devoted his life to Holocaust education and repairing the world.

The mandate of the Natan and Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies is to expand knowledge about Israel, Judaism, and the Middle East. Both Natan and Hannah Schwalb are Israeli-born. The Schwalb Center recognizes that for thousands of years Judaism has had a major impact on humankind and that it is both the foundation and source for much of the world's religious and moral values. The art

of Samuel Bak often reflects on religious matters. Jewish themes frequently appear in his work. The Torah, Midrash, covenant, exodus, exile, diaspora and many other subjects are considered in his art. Bak has reflected on Judaism, Jewish history and culture throughout his career. These paintings offer students and scholars of Judaism and Christianity a great deal to contemplate.

The University of Nebraska and the entire Omaha community thank the artist Samuel Bak for his willingness to take part in this program. He has permitted his art to be displayed at our institution. He has made himself available to the organizers and provided insight throughout the planning process. **WITNESS: The Art of Samuel Bak** presents the deeply symbolic and evocative worlds he creates and invites us all to confront, interrogate, and repair.

*Dr. Mark Celinscak, Program Chair
Executive Director, Sam and Frances Fried
Holocaust and Genocide Academy
University of Nebraska at Omaha*



High Up 2015
Oil on canvas, 30" x 15" (BK1963)

Being a survivor, whatever I painted
arose from the sediment of the tragic
years of the Shoah.

Samuel Bak

RETRIEVE AND WITNESS THE ART OF SAMUEL BAK

By Amy Morris

Encountering Samuel Bak's art for the first time is a compelling experience. Reminiscent of the great Renaissance and Baroque artists, from Albrecht Dürer to Michelangelo to Bernini and Rembrandt, the artist renders every detail and texture of his landscapes, figures, and still-life elements with near photographic precision. Only for a moment do his astounding feats of illusionism distract the viewer from what is the unreality of Bak's painted world: places where keys spill down streets, giant heads emerge from walls, and molten chess boards cover the landscape. Painting the unreal or impossible in a real way was a strategy employed by Surrealist masters such as Dali and Magritte. Distancing himself from the Surrealist movement, Bak's subjects come from his own experiences and not the world of dreams or unconscious thoughts.

Many questions arise after careful scrutiny of Bak's imagery, but above all, what do these symbols and fractured realms mean? The general response to this query is that Bak's experience as a Holocaust survivor and his persistent examination of the human condition, permeate his art. While the settings and objects in Bak's works shift and mutate, one constant is that everything is broken, fragmentary, or reassembled. How could it not be so when as a child

nearly everything that he knew and loved was brutally taken from him? In Bak's art, scorched landscapes, partial figures, broken dishes, impaled objects, dilapidated buildings, and uprooted trees, communicate the sense of a post-Holocaust world. Creating a personal visual language enabled the artist to tell stories symbolically or metaphorically, rather than through the recreation of specific memories or events.

WITNESS: The Art of Samuel Bak, which brings together select paintings from numerous series, provides the opportunity to explore various motifs and ideas that have occupied the artist over the past several decades. The paintings also work collectively to address issues of broad significance, including the Holocaust and responsibility, Jewish culture and faith, and human rights. The following discussion outlines some of the concepts explored in various series and delves into interpretation of some of the individual works. Bak's paintings ask the audience to find their own meanings and raise questions for them to ponder on their own.

Return to Vilna

Biographical details of child Holocaust survivor surface in many paintings in this exhibition, particularly in those from the *Return to Vilna* series. In 2000, after more than 50 years, Samuel Bak made the incredible decision to return to his birthplace and childhood home, Vilna (Vilnius), Lithuania. Both the place of an idyllic childhood and of unspeakable loss, Bak said that returning to Vilna meant "confronting the ghetto, the convent, the labor camp, my home and the homes of my grandparents; and above all it meant a trip to the mass graves of Ponary, the burial place of my father and his parents..." The series that Bak created around his return to Vilna evoke this confrontation. The Vilna that Bak knew as a child, a city with a thriving Jewish population and a home and family he loved and admired, was no longer present.

The only child of two adoring parents, Bak experienced material comfort and every opportunity to pursue his education and talents in Vilna. Frequent contact with both sets of grandparents and extended family further enriched his childhood. At the age of six, however, the Nazi invasion of Vilna stripped him of his contentment and family. Forced from his vibrant middle-class home, the artist and family members hid in a convent and later lived in the Vilna Ghetto and a German labor camp (HKP 562). A mirac-



Figure 1: To the Ghetto 2001
Mixed media, 25½" x 19½" (BK1113)

ulous escape from the labor camp with his mother did not improve their quality of life as they faced unbearable living conditions. As the young Bak discovered, his grandparents were among the Jews of Vilna, who were shot in the nearby woods of Ponary and placed in mass graves. His father survived in the work camp until only a few days before the Soviet occupation when he met the same fate as Bak's grandparents. When the Soviets took Vilna from the Nazis on July 13, 1944, the artist and his mother were among the few hundred survivors of Vilna's 80,000 Jews.

Suggested in the title, *To the Ghetto* (Figure 1) refers to the thousands of Jews who were forced to leave their homes and enter the cramped conditions of the Vilna Ghetto. Instead of illustrating the crowded streets and mass confusion accompanying this event, a shrouded bundle lying abandoned on a cobblestone street becomes its embodiment. The somber blue tonality and pools of water at the edge of the street reinforce the collective sorrow of this injustice and recall the rainy conditions of the day Bak and his family were led toward the Ghetto. It is significant that the wrapped object lies in the street and not on the sidewalk, since Jews were no longer permitted on the sidewalks. The similarity of the discarded heap to a crumpled pillow also evokes the young Bak's decision to abandon his rain-soaked pillow on the doomed journey when it became too heavy to carry.



Figure 2: Remnants 2001
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK850)

Certain motifs reappear in paintings from the *Return to Vilna* series, including buildings, city streets, and architectural fragments. Collectively these allude to the Nazi destruction of Jewish Vilna. In *Remnants* (Figure 2), tilted buildings line a city street submerged in a cascade of keys. The artist once described keys as embodying unending quests for answers that never come. According to Lawrence Langer, they represent the "keys to Vilna's prior kingdom of intellect and faith." In *The Color of Night* (Figure 3), paper cutouts of building façades and architectural fragments dangle helplessly from ropes alongside other still life objects. The flimsy facades, one clearly marked with the Star of David, and disjointed table legs, serve as visual metaphors for the fragility of the post-Holocaust world. Specifically referencing the Jewish faith and the Jews as a "People of the Book,"



Figure 3: The Color of Night 2001
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK853)

the solitary synagogue in *Evidence* (Figure 4) is not made from wood or stone, but rather from piles upon piles of books that spill forward from the Tablets of the Law located near the top of the mound. The books may also recall the stacks of books that concealed Bak and his family while they hid in a Benedictine convent prior to entering the Vilna Ghetto. Rising out of the synagogue's gabled roof, two crematoria chimneys remind the viewer of the source for the downfall of Vilna's Jews.

The tree-filled landscapes that appear in the *Return to Vilna* series are powerful reminders of Ponary, a suburb of Vilna and the site where the Germans executed thousands of Jews. In *Under the Trees* (Figure 5), a grove of trees hovers in mid-

air over a desolate landscape punctuated by tombstones. Abandoning their earthen home, the buoyant trees expose what the Germans tried to hide: the mass shooting of Vilna's Jews. Initially covering the dead, the Germans attempted to hide their crime by exhuming and burning the bodies. Bak's grandparents and father were among those murdered at this site. Even though the Germans failed at their attempts to cover up their horrific deeds, as the years pass, the task of passing down the knowledge of these events to future generations is still at hand. Bak also incorporated trees into



Figure 4: Evidence 2007
Oil on canvas, 24" x 20" (BK833)



Figure 5: Under the Trees 2001
Oil on canvas, 30" x 24" (BK830)

a series of works that paid homage to his paternal and maternal grandparents. As in *For Khone* (Figure 6), a prominent element of this series is a single tree floating above its rooted trunk, a visual device that Lawrence Langer has described as a "suggestion of reunion." Looming in the background, the name of Bak's maternal grandfather, Khone, appears in Hebrew letters as the ruins of an ancient monument.

The paintings in *Return to Vilna* not only commemorate Bak's personal losses, but perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Holocaust: the deaths of millions of children. Consistent with the artist's visual practices,



Figure 6: For Khone 2001
Oil on canvas, 24" x 20" (BK834)



Figure 7: Skies Were the Limit 2002
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK854)

he never represents the massacre of children or physical violence directly. Instead, teddy bears become the metaphor for Vilna's lost children. In *Skies Were the Limit* (Figure 7), a representation of a cloud-streaked sky placed before a brick wall serves as the backdrop for a massacre. Piled up or scattered on the ground, most of the wounded and fragmented teddy bears remain frozen in the pose where they met their fate. A few of the survivors tragically seek the others. As the title denotes, for the Jewish children of Vilna, skies were the limit before the Nazi invasion. Only a sliver of the real sky remains visible behind the brick wall.

Bak referenced Vilna's vibrant Jewish culture before the war in some of his paintings in *Return to Vilna*. The stacks of books composing the façade of Evidence alluded to the Jews as the People of the Book and to Vilna as a prominent seat of Jewish faith. Additional series, including *Landscapes of Jewish Experience*, *From Generation to Generation*, and works dealing with themes from Genesis, also explored elements of Jewish culture and identity. Some of the artworks in these series address how the Holocaust forever altered Jewish culture and how the knowledge of it should be handed down to future generations.

Creation of Wartime III (Figure 8) originated in a series by Bak which reimagined episodes from Genesis, including the Creation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve and the story of Noah and other patriarchs. The



Figure 8: Creation of Wartime III 1999-2008
Oil on canvas, 50" x 75" (BK1243)

Creation of Adam 1512
Oil on plaster, 110" x 224" (Michelangelo)

artist attributes his interest in this subject matter to his mother and her lively storytelling. As a child, the dramatic events in the lives of his Biblical forefathers enthralled and entertained him and encouraged him to eat foods that he did not like.

Evident in works such as *Creation of Wartime III*, Michelangelo's scenes from the story of Adam and Eve on the Sistine Ceiling are a great source of inspiration for Bak. He first encountered this Renaissance giant, when, lying on a floor in the Ghetto, he spied a postcard from Rome

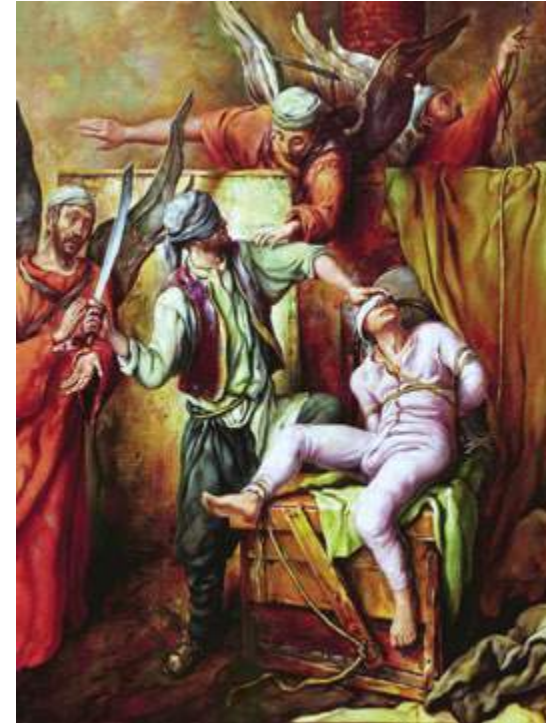


Figure 9: Dress Rehearsal 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK734)

with an image of Michelangelo's Moses. He continued to carry the postcard of Moses around with him in his pocket and to make sketches of it. As an adult, living in Rome, Bak made frequent trips to study the scenes from the Sistine Chapel in depth, which eventually served as inspiration for his own vision of Genesis episodes. In Bak's *Creation*, Adam and God have the same form as Michelangelo's figures, but the context is greatly altered. Instead of focusing on Adam's heroic nude body, Bak's Adam is in a tattered uniform and sits amidst a pile of debris. The rubble, smokestacks, and missile head all allude to the war. Instead of portraying God as a Zeus-like figure, Bak's only

intimates his presence as a shape in a wall. The infamous gesture of nearly-touching fingers no longer represents the transmission of the spark of life, but rather becomes accusatory. As Bak stated, "Surely Man has failed his Creator with his endless history of injustice, cruelty, and war; and God, by allowing it, has invited the accusing finger that mirrors his own."

Bak was also interested in the story of Abraham and Isaac, particularly Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son at God's request. In his images of this subject, the artist pondered the detrimental nature of such a decision. Even though Isaac was spared, he must have been crushed by his father's decision to take his life. Bak also raised the question of what imposed sacrifice could mean in modern times. In contrast to the many Renaissance depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac, in Bak's version, *Dress Rehearsal* (Figure 9), the angels do not seem powerful enough to intervene and the blindfolds worn by Abraham and Isaac may suggest their separation from the divine. As in many of Bak's paintings, the partially hidden crematorium chimney behind the figures serves as a reminder of the Holocaust. A common practice for Bak, the title plays off the imagery or vice versa. In considering for what event this was a dress rehearsal, Langer suggested that it prefigured the sacrifice of the Jewish people in the Holocaust.

The question of how God allowed the Holocaust to happen to his chosen people, especially in light of promises to protect them, is central to his Genesis-inspired

works and to *Noah's Dream* (Figure 10). As in *Dress Rehearsal*, two crematorium chimneys emerge from the Ark. Several objects in the upper part of the painting, including the rainbow, the dove with the olive branch in its beak, and the ark, evoke Noah's story and God's promise to him. After the flood had covered the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, God promised Noah that he would never again reap destruction on his people. Diminishing the signs of hope, the chimneys negate the fulfillment of God's promise. Although not an episode from the Bible, Noah lies asleep in the bottom right section of the canvas. At his feet, a blank picture plane awaits modernity's version of the historical facts.



Figure 10: Noah's Dream 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK736)

A set of the paintings in the *Landscapes of Jewish Experience* series feature settings inhabited by symbols of Jewish identity, including the Tablets of the Law (*The City*, **Figure 11**), the Star of David (*Harvest of the Night*, **Figure 12**) and Shabbat candles (*One of the Memorials*, **Figure 13**). Langer provided important insight into Bak's intention for this series in his essay on the *Landscapes*. Once symbols of the strength of the Jewish community, their tattered condition in the paintings speaks to the destructive powers of the Holocaust. At the same time, their very presence serves as a reminder of the resilience of the Jewish people and the failure of Nazi Germany to eliminate them. Layers of meaning are enshrined in the representations of the Tablets of the Law, variously adorned with words or silently left blank. Given to the Jews as a sign of God's covenant with them during their flight into Egypt, what they mean in the Post-Holo-

caust world is up for debate. The Star of David, originally intended to be a symbol of Judaism, became a mark of Nazi oppression. During World War II, Jews were required to wear the star on the front and back of their clothing. In several paintings, candles accompany the stars or exist as the focus of the composition. They simultaneously stand for the Shabbat candle, which is lit each week to remember the Covenant and for the candle (*Yizkor*), ignited once a year for lost loved ones.

Another motif Bak visualizes from the *Landscapes of Jewish Experience* series is *pardes*, a form of Biblical interpretation, which consists of four paths of understanding. The



Figure 11: *The City* 1986
Oil on canvas, 39¼" x 35" (058)



Figure 12: *Harvest of the Night* 1997
Oil and crayon on paper, 15" x 12½" (BK493)



Figure 13: *One of the Memorials* 1992
Oil on linen, 16" x 13" (BK186)



Figure 14: *Penetrability of Spheres* 1995
Oil on linen, 32" x 39" (BK405)

concept of *pardes* is elicited in *Penetrability of Spheres* (**Figure 14**) in which great stone walls take the form of the Tablets of the Law. The dividing walls create four spaces that allude to the different paths of understanding. *Penetrability of Spheres* calls into question the acquisition of knowledge as the walls and separations break down. The space within the walls resembles the devastation of World War II. From the same series, *Voyage* (**Figure 15**) addresses the fate of the Jews during the Holocaust. Converted into stone, the ship is no longer seaworthy. The faded Star of David on the ship's prow identifies it as Jewish and testifies to the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust. Instead of passengers, the ship is filled with flattened, miniaturized houses—a motif that recalls the destruction of the Jewish community. From the two crematorium chimneys billow clouds of smoke, a grim reminder of



Figure 15: *Voyage* 1992
Oil on linen, 39¼" x 32" (BK221)



Figure 16: *The Wall Continues* 1992
Oil on canvas, 20" x 20" (BK1847)



Figure 17: Melencolia I, 1514
Engraving, 12" x 10" (Dürer)

the doom that befell millions of Jews. The blank Tablets of the Law pinned against the smokestacks suggests that God's covenant was suspended during the Holocaust.

In Bak's *From Generation to Generation* series the artist revisited the Jewish practice of passing down stories and religious tradition from one generation to the next. Although customary to pass down stories, such as the Exodus, it questions what will be said about the Holocaust. The images also ask how Jewish culture could be transmitted and kept alive after such an incomprehen-



Figure 18: Guardian of Sleep 2006
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1123)

ble loss of life. In several works in this series, Bak depicts one or more students encountering an elderly Chassid or sage. In *The Wall Continues* (Figure 16) the monumental head of the sage emerges from a great stone wall. The title conjures the many associations between Judaism and walls, including the wall of Jericho and Jerusalem and that surrounding Vilna's Ghetto. Although the wall continues beyond the great head, it is no longer composed of permanent



Figure 19: Eye Witness 2015
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1943)



Figure 20: Eye for Eye 2008
Oil on canvas, 36" x 48" (BK1932)

stone blocks, but of narrow and mismatched planks of wood. It continues, but is not the same. The juxtaposition of materials begs the question if the wall will last.

Melencolia and Just Is

Although the *Landscape of Jewish Experience* series focused on landscapes laden with symbols of Jewish identity, human figures are the main characters in many of Bak's series. They are the focus of his paintings based on Genesis and appear in the *From Generation to Generation* series. Other largely figure-based series include the paintings after *Melencolia I* (Figure 17) and *Just Is*. Michelangelo was not the only Old Master who inspired Bak's creations. One of Albrecht Dürer's master engravings of 1514, *Melencolia I* provided a template for several works, including *Guardian of Sleep* (Figure 18). Bak transposed the winged figure and many objects from the engraving nearly verbatim in this painting. A highly debated image, Dürer's *Melencolia I* is generally interpreted as the image of a creative genius, unable to realize his ideas. The discarded instruments of science, art, and architecture lay idle on the ground. Bak stated that his interest in paraphrasing Dürer were twofold: he admired the expressive power of the figure and enjoyed "looting" something that was quintessentially German.

The series, *Just Is*, examined the notion of justice in a post-Holocaust world through the figure of Lady Justice and the concept of *lex talionis* or an "eye for an eye." Lady Justice variously appears in long robes



Figure 21: Sanctuary Z 2003
Oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (BK970)

and various styles of dress. In *Eye Witness* (Figure 19), the attributes of justice in the West accompany her, including the blindfold, balance scales, and sword. Frequently the balance scales are broken or weighted unevenly, referencing the challenges of restoring balance. A symbol of impartiality, the blindfold has slipped. Stone eyes often inhabit the baskets of Justice's scales or appear on their own as in *Eye for Eye* (Figure 20). The concept of *lex talionis* suggests that something of equal value will be given



Figure 22: Dismissed History 2011
Oil on canvas, 24" x 36" (BK1503)

or enacted in exchange for a wrongdoing or a loss. Bak seems to ask the question, or encourages the viewer to do so: what could possibly right the wrong of the Holocaust?

Pears, Chess, Dice, Cups and Letters

Of all Bak's recurring symbols, the pear deserves special consideration. For over forty years, Bak has returned to the pear, continually transforming it. According to the artist, he initially became fascinated with the shape because of its similarity to the human form. One of the defining moments in the use of the pear was his 1967 series *Eight Allegories on a Contemporary Theme*, which he painted in Israel. In each, the pear appears to be made from a different material and is somehow compromised. In Bak's eyes, the pear became a metaphor for

the vulnerability of humans. By manipulating the context or what they were subjected to, Bak endowed them with meaning. Pears loom large or appear unassumingly in several paintings in this exhibition. In *Sanctuary Z* (**Figure 21**), the pear resembles a towering altar or furnace where the object sacrificed is one of its own kind, an undeniable reference to the Holocaust.

Similar to pears, chess pieces and boards frequently appear in Bak's art. He began an in-depth exploration of the subject in the 1970s in memory of his step-father, Markusha (Nathan Markowsky), who had recently passed. Bak recalled his personal struggle watching the incredibly rational and



Figure 23: Looking Back 2017
Crayon and pastel on paper, 19½" x 16" (BK2076)

mathematical mind of Markusha, a master chess player, deteriorate rapidly in the grip of Alzheimer's. Twenty years later, the subject reappeared in a series, *The Game Continues*. Bak's chess images overturn our expectations, evoking a world where rules no longer apply. Instead of precise, glossy squares and smoothly wrought knights, pawns, and bishops, the pieces and board are battered and mutilated. *Dismissed History* (**Figure 22**) recalls the destruction of a city and blown up buildings. The chess pieces heaped in blown out squares, resemble the victims of war.

At first appearing sporadically in paintings and eventually developing into a whole series, entitled the *Chance in the Art of Samuel Bak*, dice became another frequently employed motif for Bak (*Looking Back* [**Figure 23**] and *Give and Take A* [page 55]). Die have associations with the idea of chance and Bak seems to be asking if there is more to the laws of the universe than the laws of chance? Along with deconstructing the figures, die cubes, and pips, the presence of chimneys and death camp uniforms suggest that there is no refuge.

Still life plays an important role in Bak's oeuvre and he incorporates cups, vases, utensils, and other such elements into nearly every work of art. Dishes and cups have multiple levels of meaning. Some resemble



Figure 24: Recall 2013
Oil on canvas, 12" x 12" (BK1574)

the types of dishes that his grandparents used when he was a child. In *Recall* (**Figure 24**) the lower half of a damaged pitcher sits on a shallow ledge. Its upper half, while visually completing it, does not make it functional. It is not ceramic, but rather an image of the upper portion painted on a canvas scrap. The title suggests a post-Holocaust meaning, where the pieces of life do not fit neatly back together. Perhaps, however, the leafy sprig emerging from the top of the pitcher, offers a sign of renewal.

Signs of hope and renewal, such as the leafy sprig in *Recall*, are manifest in other of Bak's paintings. *Green Piece* (**Figure 25**) originated in Bak's *H.O.P.E.* series, which came about after the artist had been invited to meet Ernst Bloch, at which time he obtained a copy of the writer's seminal work, *The Principle of Hope*. Bak had

earlier raised the question to himself, that if pictures are worth a thousand words, then words must be worth a thousand pictures. *H.O.P.E.* resonated with him considering that every human being has the capacity to feel hope. What binds the works from this series together is the presence of the four letters that make up the word hope. The letters, which are sometimes prominent and other times hidden, vary in their placement and style.



Figure 25: Green Piece 1990-2014
Oil on canvas, 35" x 46" (BK1776)

Through his extraordinary artistic talent, Samuel Bak invites the viewer to witness the devastating effects of the Holocaust on an individual and his family, the Jews as a people, and the Jewish culture and faith. Having witnessed such catastrophic loss in Bak's metaphoric and symbolic presentation of his experiences and memories, the audience must ask themselves what they must do to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive for future generations. The world needs

to remember the unspeakable horror and continue to question how such events can occur, in order to help prevent them from happening again.

¹*Return to Vilna in the Art of Samuel Bak*, Lawrence L. Langer and Samuel Bak (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, with Syracuse University Press, 2007), 86.

²*Between Worlds: The Paintings and Drawings of Samuel Bak from 1946 to 2001*, edited by Irene Tayler (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2002), 173.

³*Return to Vilna*, 3.

⁴*Return to Vilna*, 23.

⁵*In a Different Light: The Book of Genesis in the Art of Samuel Bak*, Samuel Bak (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, with the University of Washington Press, 2001), 9.

⁶*Between Worlds*, 272.

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SURVIVING CHILDREN FOUND IN THE RUBBLE

By Mark Celinscak



Figure 1: Jews captured by SS and SD troops during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising are forced to leave their shelter and march to holding areas for deportation. Photograph number 26543. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

*And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel your brother?
And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4:9)*

In 1948 Samuel Bak and his mother left Europe and immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. Upon settling in Jerusalem a historian explained one of the possible origins of his surname. The young artist was told that the family name could be traced to the period of the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648- 1657) in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the rebellion, Ukrainian Cossacks committed mass atrocities against civilians. Roman Catholic clergy and Jews in particular, were targets of brutal violence. Entire Jewish villages were destroyed. "Some of the children," Bak writes in his memoir *Painted in Words*, "remained miraculously alive in the rubble of their burned families and houses."¹ The historian told the burgeoning artist that these young survivors were known as Beney-Kedoshim, meaning Children of Martyrs. In the aftermath of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, the children who survived the violence, along with their descendants, adopted the abbreviated form of Beney-Kedoshim: Bak.

Inscribed on each painting he produces, the artist signs his surname, BAK—he, one of the surviving children found in the rubble. It stands as a marker for those destroyed. It is a memorial to the dead. It also recognizes those who endured the devastation. It

is an expression of the ongoing trauma survivors face in the aftermath. In much of his work Bak asks: how does one repair a world destroyed?

Child survivors of the Holocaust comprise the last living witnesses to the genocide of European Jews. As some of the most vulnerable victims, Jewish children experienced discrimination, expulsion, ghettoization, internment, and death. When the Second World War began, approximately 1.6 million Jewish children lived in areas Nazi Germany would ultimately conquer. At war's end, between 1 and 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered. The mortality rate for these children was ninety percent.

For many, the well-known image of the little boy in the Warsaw ghetto has become the all-encompassing symbol for the genocide of European Jews (**Figure 1**). As one of the most iconic photographs of the Holocaust, it has been reproduced countless times in exhibitions, books, films, posters and paintings. Indeed, Samuel Bak has incorporated the image of the "Little Boy" in more than one hundred paintings. He calls the photograph a "masterpiece of composition and of storytelling."²

Prior to the Second World War, Warsaw was the center of Jewish life and culture in Poland. In 1939, more than 350,000 Jews lived in the city, comprising nearly thirty percent of the total population. In October 1940, a year after German victory in Poland, the Warsaw Ghetto was established. The Jews of Warsaw were forced to move into the ghetto, which was then sealed off from the rest of the city the following month. At its peak, the ghetto's population was more than 400,000 people and all of whom were contained in an area of only 3.5 square miles. There was little food, heating materials, medical facilities and supplies. In 1942 the majority of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp and gassed to death.

In April 1943, under the command of SS Major General Jürgen Stroop, German forces liquidated the remaining 60,000 Jews of the ghetto. When the assault began, many Jews went underground. During the operation, cameramen from Stroop's headquarters took photographs which were later included as part of his official account. Known as the "Stroop Report," and prepared for Reich Leader-SS Heinrich Himmler, it details the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto.

The original German caption of the famous photograph states: "Pulled from the bunkers by force." Contained within the frame of the photograph are twenty people, mostly women and children. Five German troops from the Protection Squadron (SS) and Security Service (SD) are also present. Clearly visible in the frame is at least one German, identified as Section Leader Josef Blösche, holding a submachine gun. Blösche glares in the direction of the camera, appearing to smirk.

In the middle of the frame is the "Little Boy." He stands apart, unobstructed by anyone else. He wears a cap that is positioned slightly askew, a tattered coat with what appears to be a rucksack over his shoulders, short pants, bare knees, and socks pulled high in his dusty shoes. The look on his face is one of abject fear. He stares at something out of camera range. In this staggering image, the Little Boy arrests the viewers' gaze.

There are a number of elements that make this a jarring image. First, the scene is utterly incongruous. A young boy, perhaps seven or eight years old, dressed as if he was on his way to school, is surrounded by a group of menacing adults. Context tells us that these are German troops—armed, dominant and in complete control—who

have Jewish civilians—unarmed, vulnerable and helpless—ensnared. The Little Boy stands marginally away from the group, his hands upstretched. On the level of historical reality, it is clearly an act of surrender. He has been "pulled from the bunkers by force." Men with weapons surround him. On the level of allegory, with arms raised in disbelief, palms outward, he is pleading for his life or calling out for the intervention of a higher power. How is it possible that a defenseless child, hemmed in by adults with weapons drawn, has found himself in this position?

Bak has explained that he sees himself in the image of the Little Boy. He was of similar age when he was imprisoned in the Vilna Ghetto. He wore the same short pants, cap and coat. He also sees his childhood best friend, Samek Epstein, in this image. During the war, Epstein was discovered by Lithuanian police hiding in the cupboard in the home of a Gentile woman. He was shot, killed and left where he lay as a warning to anyone who would attempt to hide or to help Jews. Undeniably, the photograph of the Little Boy has come to represent the vulnerable child victims of the Holocaust.

Bak has incorporated the image of the Little Boy repeatedly in his work.³ In *Depo-*



Figure 2: Deposition 2008
Oil on canvas, 40"x30" (BK1210)

sition (BK1210), the artist presents a metal fabrication of the boy and places him on a wooden cross overlooking a valley (Figure 2). The colours are drained from the Little Boy's body and stand in contrast to the brightly coloured items in the foreground. The colour of the body evokes blood and rust. Nails appear through his hands, which, torn from his arms, are still affixed to the cross. In the foreground we see the boy's rucksack and shoes. A collection of stones surround the body perhaps in reference to the Jewish tradition of leaving pebbles on



Figure 3: Targeted 2008
Oil on canvas, 40"x30" (BK1192)

a grave marker. This is also a rare instance when Bak renders the Little Boy smiling. The distinction between his pained smile and the absolute terror on the face of the photographed boy is stark and unsettling.

The painting is titled *Deposition*, which is when testimony is delivered outside of a court of law. Indeed, Bak's paintings are his own personal testimonies to his experiences and what he has witnessed. Moreover, the *Deposition of Christ* or *Descent from the Cross*, the scene evoked in this particular work, involves Jesus being removed from the cross after his crucifixion. It is one of the more commonly depicted episodes in Renaissance art. Michelangelo, Rubens, Raphael, and many others have portrayed this moment in their respective work. Jewish artists have also painted the crucifixion of Christ, including Marc Chagall. In *White Crucifixion*, Chagall depicts a crucified Jesus wearing a prayer shawl as a symbol that he is a Jew. It confronts the narrative of Jewish people as oppressors. In *White Crucifixion* the scene is used to represent Jewish anguish and suffering. Similarly, Bak has described the iconic photograph of the Little Boy as the "most poignant image of Jewish crucifixion."⁴

In most paintings illustrating the descent from the cross, Jesus is taken down by a group of people and his body is carefully prepared for burial. However, in Bak's *Deposition*, there is no one. The Little Boy

“descends” from the cross through his own body weight, his arms torn from his hands. He is alone in abysmal solitude. In traditional scenes depicting the descent, Christ is shown fully intact with his body placed in a white shroud for burial. In Bak’s *Deposition*, these elements are absent. The boy’s descent does not result in burial. He is suspended in death, presented before us. Likewise, virtually none of the more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust received a burial. Their bodies were often burned and turned into ash. Contrary to Christian theological belief, the boy’s death does not lead to resurrection or salvation; rather it degrades what it means to be human.

Bak’s *Deposition* is a memorial to profound, immeasurable loss. The Little Boy represents the more than one million Jewish children killed during the Holocaust. The artist offers a memorial to the iconic photo. In Bak’s rendering, the memorial appears uncared for and abandoned. *Deposition* reminds us that both the icon and the memory of the Little Boy can be distorted, discarded, and abandoned.

In *Targeted*, Bak addresses similar themes (Figure 3). He presents both the Little Boy and his fabrication. Both figures are situated under a stone arch that is shaped like a drab, washed-out rainbow. Behind a wall made out of rubble stands the Little

Figure 4: Signal of Identity 2008
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1190)



Boy with his arms raised. Meanwhile, the fabrication of a faceless boy, also with his hands up, is fashioned from parts of rock; nails appear through his palms. White shoes lie in front of the bombed out rubble. Blood stains the jagged stone. Bullet holes pierce a red target. Small pebbles again have been placed on top of the wall as on a grave marker.

In *Targeted*, the faceless boy could be any child. The wounds in his hands evoke the stigmata as it parallels those Christ received during the crucifixion. The wall acts

like an altar. In the Hebrew Bible altars were often made of unwrought stone. The Hebrew word for altar is *mizbeah* (מזבח) meaning “to slaughter.” The scene reminds us that in wars and genocides, women and children are frequently marked for death. In this painting, the red target is pierced and scarred by bullet holes.

Both the Little Boy and the memory of the little boy have come under siege. Nazi Germany and its collaborators targeted the boy as they did all Jews. While he hides behind the wall, the Little Boy remains partially exposed—still in view and marked for destruction. As vulnerable and helpless beings, it is our responsibility to protect all children, everywhere. Moreover, the memory of the boy has also been besieged. Today the iconic photograph has taken on a life of its own and is often removed from its proper historical context. It has been reproduced countless times, becoming for many the exclusive, sweep-

ing emblem of the Holocaust. Consequently, the photograph has been used, abused, and misused over time. The painting is a warning that we must be on guard in order that remembrance of atrocity does not become banal.

In *Signal of Identity*, the Little Boy has reached a dead end (Figure 4). In front of him appears a passageway that has been sealed by bricks. His back is to the viewer and we cannot see his face. Once again, he could be any child during the Holocaust. A Star of David, a six-pointed figure and symbol of Jewish identity, appears on the wall in front of him. It blends into the Little Boy’s cap and coat with one of the points of the star wrapped around his arm. A rucksack hangs over his shoulders. It perhaps contains all of his worldly possessions; items he hopes might help him survive yet another day. Shades of yellow—stained, faded, drained—is the predominant colour of the painting.

As the title makes clear, identity is the central subject of this work. The Star of David—representing the collective—merges with the Little Boy—the individual. The Nazis decreed that Jews, as a collective, as a race of people, were to be destroyed. The Star of David envelops the boy’s arm: the two are intertwined and their fates are sealed. As depicted in the painting, there was no escape for the individual; the collective was under attack, swallowing everyone. Where can the boy go? What should he do? These

are impossible questions with no obvious right answer. It is a horrifying situation in which a child must make what scholar Lawrence Langer has called a “choiceless choice.”⁵ For victims trapped in the Nazi universe, decisions often become problematic and carry dire risk.

The art of Samuel Bak offers more questions than answers. His work deals with difficult ethical and moral dilemmas involving issues of responsibility, justice, identity and remembrance. Through incorporating the Little Boy in his work, the artist encourages us to confront the targeting of our most innocent, including the more than one million Jewish children destroyed in the Holocaust. *Tikkun olam*, repair of the world, is a central concept in Judaism and is a recurring theme in Bak’s work. Again, how can one repair a broken world?

In the book of Genesis, Cain, the firstborn son of Eve, kills his brother Abel. This act of violence is the world’s first murder

with Abel becoming the first victim. When confronted by the LORD about the whereabouts of his slain sibling, Cain responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The LORD’s reply takes us to one of the philosophical essences of the art of Samuel Bak: “What have you done?” It is through his work that the artist asks each of us: what have you done for your brother?

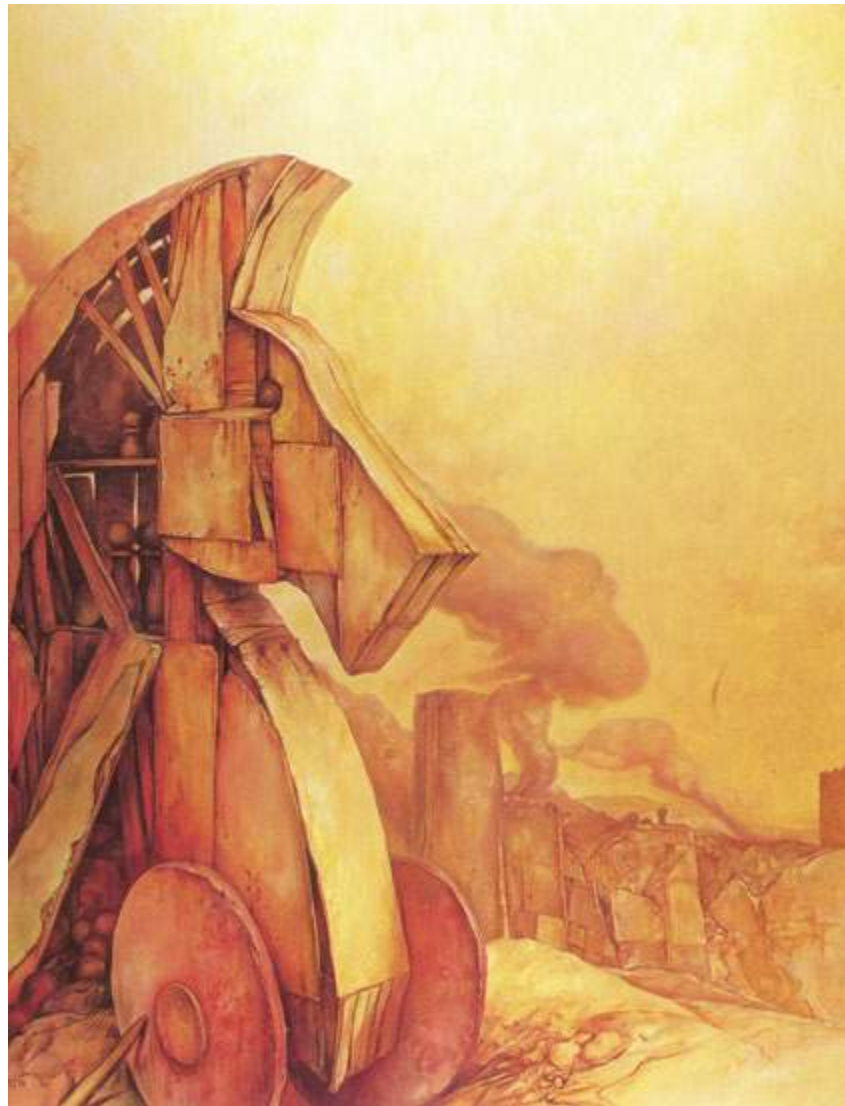
¹ Samuel Bak, *Painted in Words: A Memoir* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 128.

² Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 148.

³ My thanks to Gary Phillips for sharing with me his insight on the incorporation of the Warsaw Ghetto boy in Bak’s art.

⁴ *Between Worlds: The Paintings and Drawings of Samuel Bak from 1946 to 2001*. Edited by Irene Taylor (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2002), 297.

⁵ Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.



Mythology 1991
Oil on linen, 46" x 35" (BK160)

Triumvirate 2003
Oil on canvas, 36" x 24" (BK927)



The Designated 2007
Oil on canvas, 24" x 18" (BK911)



For One King 2007
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1616)

Departures 1971-1992
Oil on canvas, 38½" x 51¼" (BK224)



Landscape Kit 1969-1992
Oil on linen, 30" x 40" (BK262)



Dismissed History 2011
Oil on canvas, 24" x 36" (BK1503)

Collective Memory 1986
Oil on linen, 32" x 39¼" (O55)



The City 1986
Oil on canvas, 39¼" x 35" (O58)



Yizkor 1991
Oil on linen, 63" x 48" (BK420)



Voyage 1992
Oil on linen, 39¼" x 32" (BK221)

One of the Memorials 1992
Oil on linen, 16" x 13" (BK186)



Penetrability of Spheres 1995
Oil on linen, 32" x 39" (BK405)



Harvest of the Night 1997
Oil and crayon on paper, 15" x 12½" (BK493)



Protected Area 1996
Oil on linen, 22" x 26" (BK389)

Accidental Music 2007
Oil on canvas, 24" x 48" (BK1162)



On Call 2000
Oil on canvas, 20" x 20" (BK766)

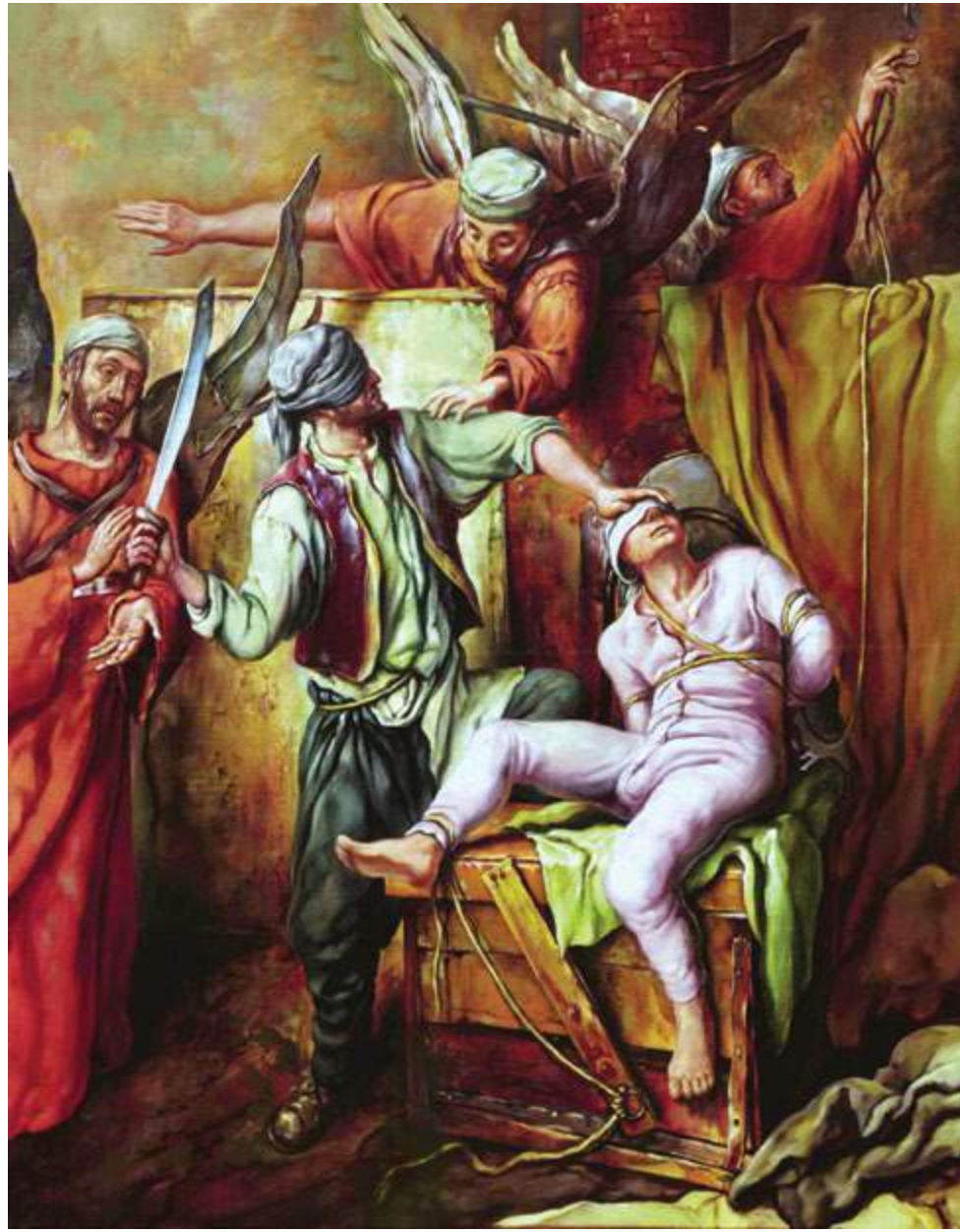


Creation 1992
Oil on linen, 21¼" x 25½" (BK206)

Banishment III 1999-2008
Oil on canvas, 50" x 75" (BK1244)



Creation of Wartime III 1999-2008
Oil on canvas, 50" x 75" (BK1243)



Dress Rehearsal 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK734)

The Nature of Roots 1999
Oil on canvas, 32" x 18" (BK723)



Searching 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK733)

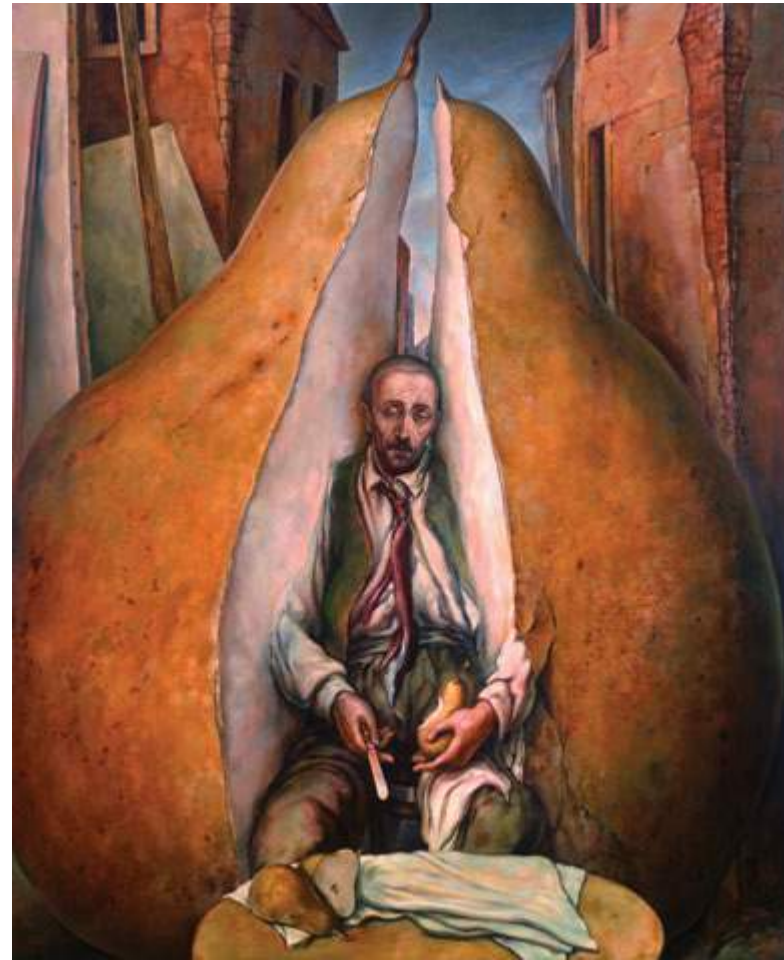


Noah's Dream 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK736)

Top Secret 2001
Oil on canvas, 30" x 24" (BK784)



Close Up 2003
Oil on canvas, 63¼" x 51½" (BK1026)



Sanctuary Z 2003
Oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (BK970)



The Returns of the Legend 2003
Oil on canvas, 65¼" x 50¼" (BK1027)

Give and Take 2005
Oil on canvas, 22" x 28" (BK1049)



To the Ghetto 2001
Mixed media, 25½" x 19½" (BK1113)



In the Old Streets 2002
Pencil, 13½" x 14½" (BK865)

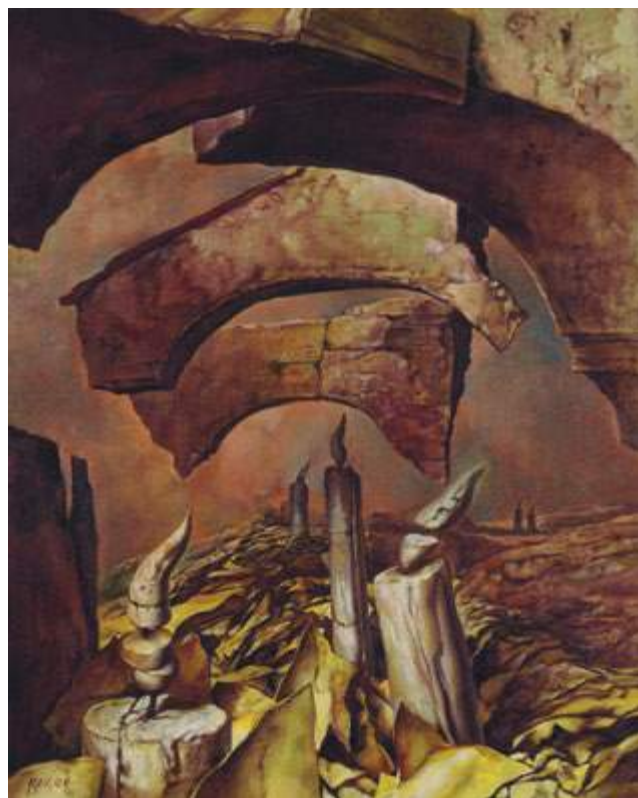


For Shifrah 1975
Mixed media on paper, 12¼" x 9½" (BK549)

Shull Hoif 1992
Mixed media on paper, 19¾" x 12¼" (BK238)



Giving Shelter 2001
Oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (BK804)



The Color of Night 2001
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK853)



Evidence 2007
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20" (BK833)

For Khone 2001
Oil on canvas, 24" x 20" (BK834)



Under the Trees 2001
Oil on canvas, 30" x 24" (BK830)



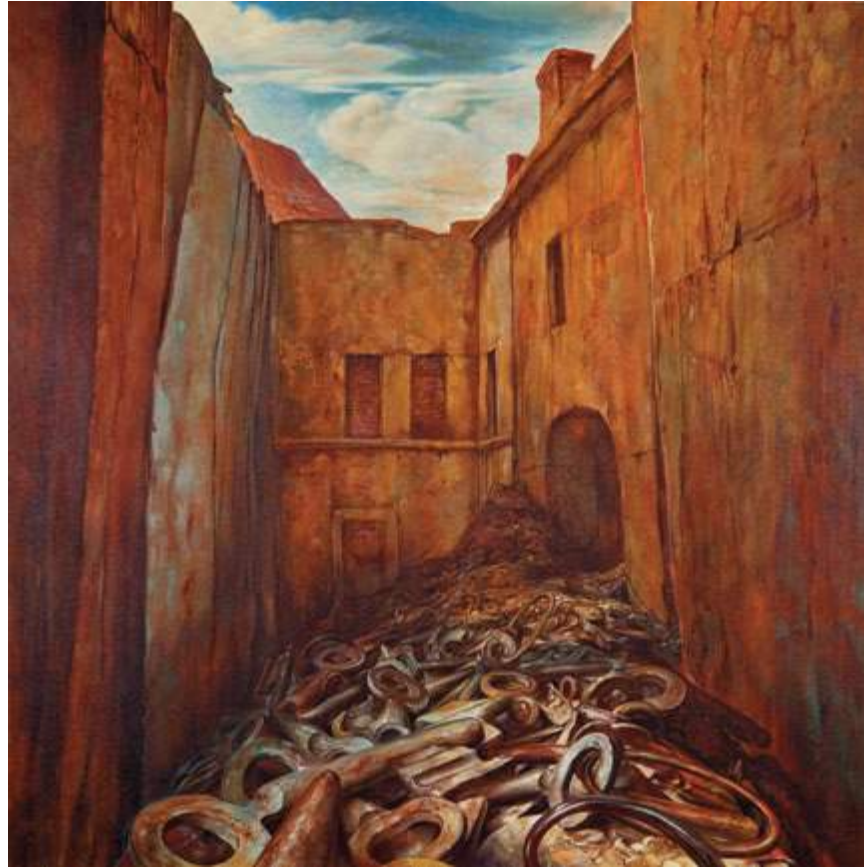
Witness the Art of Samuel Bak



Skies Were the Limit 2002
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK854)

Witness the Art of Samuel Bak

Remnants 2001
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK850)



Jewish Quarter 2017
Mixed media, 11" x 8½" (BK2161)



Guardian of Sleep 2006
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1123)



On the Other Hand 2007
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1136)



Deposition 2008
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1210)



Targeted 2008
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1192)



Signal of Identity 2008
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1190)



Icon of Loss, Ancient Memory 2008
Oil on canvas, 60" x 48" (BK1242-A)

Latest News 2009
Oil on canvas, 24" x 36" (BK1291)



Adam and Eve
and the Letter Reyish of Bereyishith 2009
Oil on canvas, 30" x 24" (BK1437)



Adam and Eve and the Still Life of Their Rainbow 2010
Oil on canvas, 24" x 30" (BK1438)



Recall 2013
Oil on canvas, 12" x 12" (BK1574)

The Wall Continues 2015
Oil on canvas, 20" x 20" (BK1847)



From Above 2015
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK1862)



Green Piece 1990-2014
Oil on canvas, 35" x 46" (BK1776)



Study for Six Winged One 2015
Oil on canvas, 12" x 12" (BK1837)



Long Lasting 2015
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1941)



Portrait with Eyes 2015
Oil on canvas, 28" x 22" (BK1948)

To My Eye 2014
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1799)



Witness the Art of Samuel Bak

Study for Keeping an Eye 2015
Oil on canvas, 16" x 12" (BK1976)



Witness the Art of Samuel Bak



Even-Handed 2015
Oil on canvas, 63¾" x 38¼" (BK1928)

Eye Witness 2015
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1943)



High Up 2015
Oil on canvas, 30" x 15" (BK1963)



Eye for Eye 2015
Oil on canvas, 36" x 48" (BK1932)



Looking Back 2017
Crayon and pastel on paper, 19½" x 16" (BK2076)



Give and Take A 2017
Oil on canvas, 28" x 22" (BK2047)



On Time and Its Numbers 2017
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK2060)



Before and After 2017
Oil on canvas, 54" x 54" (BK2064)

Burden 2017
Mixed media, 11" x 8½" (BK2156)



Memoir 2017
Oil on canvas, 32" x 26" (BK2147)



Chapters 2018
Oil on canvas, 24" x 48" (BK2219)

PLATE DETAILS

Accidental Music

2007
Oil on canvas
24" x 48"
BK1162

Adam and Eve and the Letter Reyish of Bereyishith

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Oil on canvas
30" x 24"
BK1437

Adam and Eve and the Still Life of Their Rainbow

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BK1438

Banishment III

1999-2008
Oil on canvas
50" x 75"
BK1244

Before and After

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Chapters

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Close Up

2003
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Collective Memory

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055

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Crayon and pastel on paper
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Oil on linen
46" x 35"
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Oil on linen
39¼" x 32"
BK221

Yizkor

1991
Oil on linen
63" x 48"
BK420



SAMUEL BAK BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Bak was born in 1933 in Vilna, Poland, 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 vocabulary that ultimately privileges questions. His art depicts a world destroyed, and yet provisionally pieced back together, and preserves 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 hon-

orary doctorate degrees from the University of New Hampshire in Durham, Seton Hill University in Greenburg, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.

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 fifty works already donated by the artist, the Museum will continue to accept 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 Holocaust Museum Houston opened the Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center in Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan to house an extraordinary gift by the artist of more than 125 works of art.

"Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak" exhibition at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is made possible due to the financial support of the Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy and the Natan and Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies.

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