

ILLUMINATIONS



The Art of Samuel Bak

Collection at Facing History and Ourselves

In 1977, the parents of a student in my first Facing History and Ourselves class took me to an exhibition of Samuel Bak's work. I couldn't wait to share the catalogue with my class. As I turned the pages, students literally moved their chairs closer to the images. They were disturbed, curious, questioning. "Is this work art?" They saw pears in harnesses of metal in "foreign" landscapes; pears against buildings with smoke stacks, tables and chess figures, keyholes and keys; villages set in between halved pears that looked like mountains, candles, trees, and birds.

The images drew students from the comfort of their concrete thinking to a new fascination, a dis-ease for some, inspired by Bak's work. They had moved from concrete to abstract thinking right before my eyes. "How can this be art?", they asked as if they had discovered Salvador Dalí and surrealism next to the still-lives they were instructed to draw in their art class. "You can't get an A in art class for pears like that!" Immediately, we invited their art teacher to join our class that day and from then on included her in our journey. Nothing was the same after that! To this day, Samuel Bak's paintings remain an integral part of similar journeys taken by Facing History and Ourselves teachers and students.

We thank Bernie and Sue Pucker and Samuel and Josée Bak for the collection of 20 paintings that we are so proud to exhibit at our Brookline headquarters. Also, a special thanks to Lawrence Langer, Marc Skvirsky, Mary Johnson, Adam Strom, Judi Bohn, and Ilana Klarman for all their hard work. Thanks to you, Bak's creations will now be shared in classrooms across North America, serving to both strengthen and enrich the mission of Facing History.

—Margot Stern Strom
President of the Board and Executive Director
Facing History and Ourselves

Samuel Bak's work has been a part of Facing History and Ourselves' classes since the very beginning. Bak's masterful skills as a draftsman—as well as his incredible imagination—open up profound questions for students. Much of Samuel Bak's art is influenced by his experiences of surviving the Holocaust as a child in Vilna, Poland. Bak explains: "I certainly do not make illustrations of things that happened. I do it in a symbolic way, in a way which only gives a sense of a world that was shattered..." The themes of Bak's work are also the themes of Facing History and Ourselves: questions of identity, responsibility, the challenges of justice, and the difficulties of rebuilding what was destroyed. As in Facing History classrooms, there are no easy answers to the difficult questions that his work asks us to consider.

Facing History and Ourselves firmly believes that adolescents are moral philosophers whose ideas of good and evil, fairness and justice, are waiting to be uncovered. Samuel Bak's work taps into students' natural curiosity and burgeoning ability to think abstractly, thereby building a bridge between Bak's history and students' lives today. Working from the particular details of Bak's finely rendered images, students easily recognize the choices Bak has made as an artist to distort texture and to transform or deconstruct familiar objects, thus giving them new meaning.

At Facing History and Ourselves, we take great pride in our relationship with both Samuel and Josée Bak and Bernie and Sue Pucker. They have been incredibly generous to us over the years, allowing us to use Bak's images both on the covers and in the content of our resource books, which are used in classrooms around the world. We are extremely thankful to them for their generous donation of this collection. We have created a website to feature these works and the educational outreach we intend to do around them; we also plan to use the collection in our workshops and with students, and we expect the show will travel starting in the fall of 2010.

—Adam Strom
Director of Research and Development
Facing History and Ourselves

Facing my own history and my story with Facing History and Ourselves

by Samuel Bak

“Do you still paint?” a journalist asked me. “Do you still breathe?” I angrily retorted. What a silly question! I felt assailed, perhaps humiliated. I have been painting paintings all my life, and now, after more than seven decades, I still assiduously do so. And as the saying goes: for reasons of the heart that the heart does not know. For me, being a painter means being possessed by a world of ghosts; and making the best of it. I believe that throughout my relatively long life I have created an oeuvre that at first sight might seem hardly decipherable, but in the long run reveals most of its hidden content.

In the fifties and early sixties, at the period of my artistic formation, contemporary criteria of art did not allow storytelling. However, I felt compelled to shatter this taboo and “paint” my stories. Why? No doubt the traumatic events of my childhood and their miraculous shifts and turns were at the core of my compulsion. Another word for compulsion would be inspiration. My use of symbols, icons and metaphors managed to keep the underlying horror of my world at bay; it protected me, and protected the future audience of my paintings. Since I was determined to connect with people, I knew that I had to create a space that evoked the ancient beauty of the old Masters. It would attract most viewers and make them respond to my uncomfortable visions. I was lucky; my plan worked. And I connected with many, and on many levels. My work has reached people of many different backgrounds, in various countries, of various ages.

The concerns and the needs of the young public are close to my soul; and so are those of the teachers of Facing History and Ourselves, whose educational activity could not be more humane and more edifying. This organization has my unlimited admiration. Its leaders and I share similar visions of the world; a world plagued by racism, intolerance and discrimination—yet a world packed with millions of young minds that can be nurtured and shaped. In short, we live in a world that cries out for repair. Since 1976, the year of my show at the Rose Museum in Waltham, my art has been added to the curriculum of the founders of Facing History. Indeed, the journey we share is quite a long one!

How did this journey begin? Let me go back to the year when the Nazis seized power—1933. I was born in Vilna, lovingly embraced by a large and happy family. We lived, so it later became apparent, in the wrong place and at the wrong time, because the community to which we belonged was destined for annihilation. I experienced the Ghetto, the labor camp and a hiding place in a Catholic convent. Mother and I survived, and so did my passion for creating images, and not mere images of colors and shapes, but images of the dangerous and troubling realities in which we lived. Realities that my imagination could transform, in accordance with the surging needs of my soul, and thus nourish my art. When I was 12, in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, Mother made me read *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, a terrifying book on the massacre of the Armenians in Turkey. According to my mother, every Jewish child had to understand the meaning of the innumerable bloodstains of genocides that blemished the pages of our History books. Unknowingly she prepared me to empathize with the present concerns of Facing History. Little by little, the lost world of European Jewry, the world of murdered children, worlds that we humans perpetually struggled to repair with whatever we could save from the rubble, in short: the world of the “inhuman” human condition, turned out to be the ongoing subject of my paintings.

Since 1959, the year of my first show in Rome, I have exhibited in many countries and worked with a good number of art dealers. But the major catalyst and sustainer of my art became Bernie Pucker of Boston. Bernie is a dear friend. For over four decades he exhibited my canvases in his gallery, devotedly labored to bring them to audiences of museums and public galleries, and in particular to the audiences of American students. He also facilitated access to my art through a variety of excellent art publications.

In order to help him with these challenges it was necessary that I leave Europe and settle in Boston. Eighteen years ago, my wife Josée convinced me that she was ready to abandon her work in Switzerland, leave her language, culture, friends and close family, and like Ruth the Moabite, follow me to this chosen land. Her support was and still is critical to what I have been able to accomplish. We became American citizens.

Larry Langer, the outstanding Holocaust scholar and critic, penetrating my images to their deepest layers of meaning, enthusiastically responded to my art and brought to it his unique talent of interpreter. I love the style of his lucid and powerful writing. Whenever I feel the approaching shadow of self-doubt, I think of Larry’s inspiring texts and find in them instant solace.

And then there are my friends at Facing History—Margot Strom, Marc Skvirsky, and all the dedicated and wonderful people who surround them, and who with time have created this indelible link between my art and their organization. This bond is one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

“Tfu, tfu, tfu,” Mother would say—whenever good things happened to her—“we must hide all this from the Evil-Eye.” She was a perfectly rational

person, pretended to reject all superstitions, and all notions of “it was meant-to-be.” However “in case, in case, since one never knows” she believed that in order to remain on the safe side one had to renounce some sacrosanct principles—surrendering was worthwhile.

It is to celebrate the memory of her existence, the memory of my step-father Nathan, and the truncated lives of my father and my dear grandparents, victims of the Holocaust, that my artworks are being donated to Facing History.

Today these paintings need no “tfu, tfu, tfu.” I am sure that where they are they feel safe. And meanwhile I shall go on painting more and more. As long as I keep on breathing

Weston, Massachusetts
January 2010

Illuminations

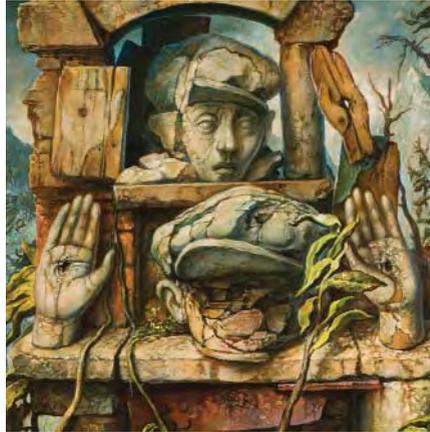
Introduction by Lawrence L. Langer

Years from now, when researchers write the cultural history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the art of Samuel Bak may very well be one major source for their investigations. In many of the paintings and drawings that have emerged from his fertile visual imagination over the past few decades he has captured the struggle of western civilization in a post-Holocaust era to regain its spiritual footing. But he has also been concerned with the need to repair the intellectual and emotional damage caused by the ceaseless turmoil of wars and other forms of violence. He challenges modern consciousness to confront and try to comprehend the failure of the covenantal promises of the Jewish narrative and the salvational hopes of the Christian tradition to launch a global community based on virtue and love. Through the indirect stimulus of art he forces us to ask why nations and their inhabitants have so much difficulty achieving the ideals set forth in the scriptures, declarations of rights and various international treaties and charters that are supposed to improve human conduct and discourage conflict. The crumbling structures and broken monuments that often rule over his arid and rock-strewn terrains, defacing the beauty of the natural landscape, are stark visual reminders of an imperfect world that may finally have to surrender its expectations of the best in order to settle for the compromise of a society that can only grow a little better.

The paintings and drawings assembled in this collection comprise a fair representation of Bak's vision of the human dilemma as it has evolved over the years. The contrast between the beauty of artistic composition and the decay inherent in his imagery expresses a paradox that parallels the contradictions in the history of our time. We fight wars to establish peace, we purge peoples to create ethnic "purity," we strive for reconciliation after the most unimaginable massacres, and we seek justice after deeds so unjustifiable that surviving victims are left bereft at the slow progress toward that impossible goal. By assaulting our perception with elegantly composed images haunted by an aura of decomposition, of pictorial scenes whose edges seek to burst through the frames containing them, of creatures in diverse stages of disintegration and buildings clinging to formal outlines while simultaneously threatening to collapse into a pile of rubble, Bak recapitulates the tensions that



Under a Blue Sky, 2001, detail
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



Sanctuary, 1997, detail
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

constitute the disturbing diet we are obliged to consume virtually every day of contemporary life. His work urges—or more precisely, compels—us to cast off the consoling bonds of myth and legend and to look at the scarred features of modern history—and not only the history of the Holocaust—until we begin to recognize that the apparently surreal content of his canvases represents not a flight from current reality but a venture into the caverns of its deepest disquietudes.

Any educational enterprise worthy of its name aims to develop minds that will remain in a perpetual state of awareness, and the same may be said of the artistic works in the series called *Illuminations*. Looking at a painting like *Under a Blue Sky*, we are struck by the desolate spectacle of dismembered teddy bears turned to stone. The tranquility of the title greets us with an ironic force as we gaze at the sphinx-like impassivity of an adult teddy bear presiding over the collapse of what once may have been a monumental tribute to the memory of childhood joy. Among the many victims of a century of violence were the more than one million Jewish children murdered during the Holocaust, but this is only a single extreme instance of the worldwide abuse and misuse of children that has been one of the least admirable hallmarks of our time. To hold in consciousness the visual evidence before us of this dismal statistic while concurrently valuing the serene blue sky above it is to define the paradoxical state of awareness that Bak invites his viewers to strive for.

This kind of dual vision is one of the principal legacies of his art. Its philosophical implications have scarcely been recognized. Bak achieves this effect in several ways. One is to introduce into his canvases animate and inanimate features at the same time, like the living sky and the dead landscape of the painting we have just examined. Another is to allow two works to address each other, as it were, like separate sections of an orchestra sequentially playing variations on a similar theme. For example, *Sanctuary* and *The Cup was Full*

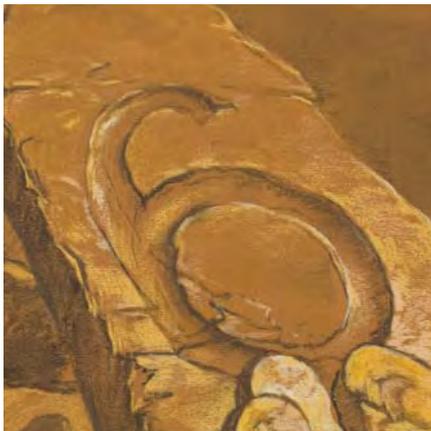


The Cup was Full, 2007, detail
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20"

contain related and in some cases almost identical images, though they seem to address different phases of consciousness. The first was created a decade before the second, and might serve as a preface to our encounter with the latter. Nothing human exists in *Sanctuary*. Only nature is alive, making slow inroads on the twin effigies of what was once the face of a boy; its vines will soon entangle them in a jungle of undergrowth. If this bizarre monument is a sanctuary for anything, it is for the fading memory of the fate of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto with his hands raised, perhaps the most famous photo to have survived the Holocaust. All that remains of the figure below are two hands amputated at the wrist; its visage has already been defaced by the ravages of time. The pierced palms and faint rivulets of blood evoke reminiscences of a more promising era, when sacrifice was intended to bring salvation and redemption. That spiritual refuge now seems as obsolete and inaccessible as this abandoned shrine where no worshipper appears to perform a ritual of remembrance.

Except perhaps for the members of Bak's audience. As custodians of memory, we seek to rescue from these gloomy remains some vestige of identity for the victim who inspired this creation. *The Cup was Full* provides an entry to this task by stripping from the boy his most familiar garments—his cap and shoes now lie on a platform in the foreground—and leaving only a silhouette of his head. From the open space a human countenance peers out, perhaps a portrait of the artist as a young boy. Is he imagining the “sanctuary” that one day will be the only trace of his former existence, pondering the irony that sanctuaries are usually designed to precede rather than to follow death? Here the face ceases to be a symbol and becomes instead an example of the human loss suffered by childhood during the Holocaust.

A faded Jewish star in the center of the painting nailed to a stone tablet like the ones that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai proclaims the Jewish



The Number, 1991, detail
Mixed media on paper, 13 x 10"



Reconstruction, 2001, detail
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"

origin of both the absent victim and the still living one who has taken his place. In this context, the pierced palms suggest that crucifixion has been replaced by execution, deprived of the transcendent dimension that was earlier associated with such wounds. The empty cup, once metaphorically full of hope and promise, provides no nourishment now. Its former handle lies by its side in the shape of an inverted question mark, confirming that once we have removed the commemorative stone mask of *Sanctuary*, we are left with a defenseless boy staring at an ominous future filled only with uncertainty. Together, *Sanctuary* and *The Cup was Full* announce the necessity and the vanity of monuments. Once more *Illuminations* has enlightened our divided consciousness with a paradoxical and unresolvable truth.

Two other thematically related works, *The Number* and *Reconstruction*, further clarify our journey into the cemetery of remembrance. The first, a monochromatic tribute to the fate of the twin tablets that once were inscribed with the ten commandments, furnishes a stark contrast to the richly diverse coloration of the second, which pays homage to the subsequent law—and lore—of the Jewish tradition. They may be seen as companion pieces, chronicling the oral and written sources of faith for the Children of Israel. According to the Book of Genesis, God first spoke the Ten Commandments to his chosen people, then presented them to Moses on Mount Sinai inscribed on twin stone tablets. In *The Number*, those tablets are on the verge of tumbling in fragments onto a pile of gravestones, uprooted from their stable base by the contradiction

between the admonition of the sixth commandment (“You shall not murder”) and the murder of six million Jews during the Holocaust. History has challenged the authority of the Lord, a version of whose name is imprinted on one of the tablets. How shall modern consciousness respond to this trial of the belief that lies at the heart of Judaism?

Such an inquiry is not blasphemous. The many volumes and manuscripts occupying the foreground of *Reconstruction* represent the intellectual origins of this damaged faith, which has a venerable tradition of commentary on its meanings for a current generation. The Hebrew letters in *The Number* identifying God have their echo in the Hebrew letters of *Reconstruction*, spelling Midrash, signifying that habit of responding to sacred texts by learned scholars through the ages. The large blank canvases in the background of this painting await new inscriptions about the substance of Judaism to account for the violation and destruction of spiritual, physical and intellectual existence

during the Holocaust. They hint at the major role that art will have to play in this arduous labor of renewal.

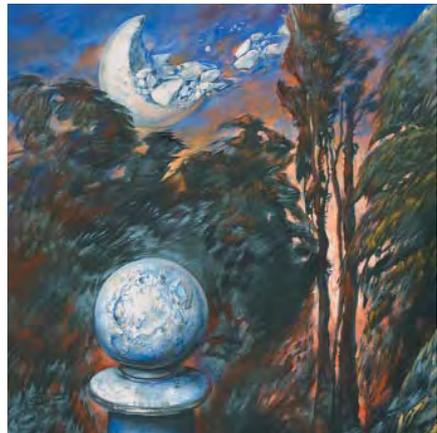
The works of *Illuminations* thus spread their challenge to enlightenment in many directions, soliciting viewers to identify with the title by clarifying the complexities of their appeal. They project muted tones that require us to activate what we might call a “listening eye” to hear the silenced voices buried within their visual surfaces. For example, *The Number* invites us to ask how the voice of God would explain the suspension of the covenant that promised to bless his people and nurture their seed till the end of time. Similarly, *Reconstruction* asks the sages of Israel whose ancient works crowd the canvas to develop a modern Midrash by seeking in their sacred texts a justification for mass murder, and to announce their findings to an anxious audience. The blank canvases behind their writings, which reinforce the notion of silenced voices, raise a related but different kind of question: how will those findings affect our mental and emotional as well as our religious vision of the future?

One main impetus of *Illuminations* is to train the “listening eye” to avoid searching for definitive answers and instead to ask provocative questions. A very recent (2009) mixed media work like *Broken Strings* virtually demands such an approach. Who are these musicians who literally can only produce sounds of silence on their wounded or absent instruments, playing with thin branches instead of genuine bows? Were they not so earnest in their endeavors we might consider their jarring presence some kind of visual joke. But as a revitalized Jewish culture rose from the ashes of the Holocaust, it must have begun with some sort of minimal resources such as these performers display. Music has its own voice, and this improvised recital seems to initiate the arduous journey needed to repair the damaged art of chamber performance.

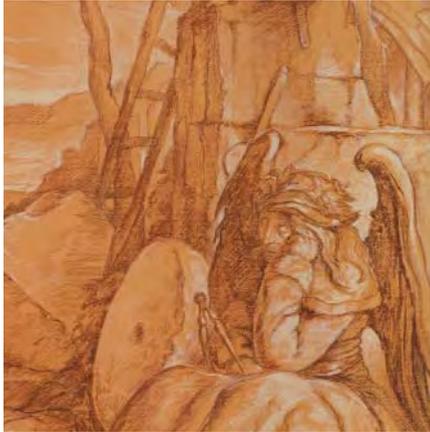
A world in disarray, like the one in *Broken Strings*, is not necessarily a world without hope, but only human intervention can restore it to the realm of possibility. If one thing is clear in Bak’s visual universe, it is that the illusion of automatic security based on political or religious promises is no longer worth pursuing. Quite literally, renewal begins with dis-illusionment. Sometimes Bak moves us in this direction through an adventure of viewing that is purely symbolic. This is the case with *Study After Nocturnal A*, where a chess pawn is witness to a cosmic catastrophe that registers far more than the mere loss of a romantically shining full moon. Through a kind of aesthetic ventriloquism, we are enjoined to ask what the transfixed pawn cannot: how has our thinking



Broken Strings, 2009, detail
Crayon, tempera and oil on tinted paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4"



Study After Nocturnal A, 1998, detail
Oil on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4"



After Dürer, 2007, detail
Pastel on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2"



Commemoration, 2001, detail
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"

about spiritual existence been changed now that we can no longer regard the cosmos only as a mysterious habitat for the human soul?

As if in response to our concern, *After Dürer* acknowledges the dilemma. Bak's brooding angel, once cast as a messenger between earth and heaven but now marooned on an island of doubt, wonders about finding a new role for itself in an unfamiliar setting. It sits surrounded by outmoded artifacts from the age of Albrecht Dürer, whose earlier engraving called *Melencolia I* from 1514 of a nearly identical image showed an angel troubled by the transition from medieval to Renaissance thought. When we face the modern age "after Dürer," how do we organize into a coherent program for human aspiration advances in technology, science, medicine, astronomy and the arts that would have astounded Dürer in his own time? If Bak's angel could speak, what words would it utter? And how would it balance such achievements against the violent ends so many of those discoveries were used for?

Creating a discourse to respond to such inquiries, or to record the difficulty of doing so, is one of the unspoken summons implicit in Bak's art. It reflects the distinctly modern tenor of his work. But there is another side to his achievement which is equally striking, and equally important. Commenting on the problems encountered while trying to produce an accurate text in his recent translation of the Five Books of Moses, Robert Alter deplores the "heresy of explanation" that taints so many earlier English versions. Literature in general, he says:

*and the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular, cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution.*¹

He might have been describing the imaginative thrust of Samuel Bak's visual universe. The influence of scriptural strategies may be only hinted at in Bak's work, but Alter has inadvertently formulated that connection in a precise and convincing manner.

Bak is unapologetically frank in his conviction that the burden of memory inhibits our devotion to a promising future, much as the cluster of objects in

1. *The Five Books of Moses*. Translation with Commentary by Robert Alter (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), xviii.



Camp, 1991, detail
Oil on canvas, 16 x 13"

Commemoration blocks our imagination from entering into a liberating distant vista. The candles weeping tears of wax are a tribute to the vanished Jewish community of Vilna, whose name is inscribed in Hebrew letters near the lower left hand corner of the painting. In a more specific historical allusion to such loss, the candles of *Camp*, an earlier work, are still burning, eternal flames that ironically immortalize death. The passage of time may have extinguished those flames in the later painting, but the obligation to remember remains. *Illuminations* emblazons on modern consciousness the melancholy truth that the ruins of memory are now a permanent part of our human heritage: any effort to build a future while ignoring those ruins would compromise our allegiance to both decency and hope.

Newton, Massachusetts,
January 2010

Collection at Facing History and Ourselves

Paintings by Samuel Bak
Commentaries by Lawrence L. Langer

Reconstruction

As in so many of Bak's works, *Reconstruction* offers us a vision of organized chaos. Fragments of a Jewish past abound, but the artist distributes only sparingly hints about its possible future. To the right we see half of the façade of an edifice, topped by half of a Jewish star, but the task of restoring unity to what has been damaged or destroyed remains incomplete. On one side of a pile of tumbling Torahs, or books of commentaries on their contents, we find a flat triangle, on the other a pyramid. If one were inverted on the other, they would form another Star of David.

Two towers preside over the scene like twin sentinels, though it is not clear whether there is anything left for them to guard. The one on the left resembles a synagogue against which leans a bundle of poles once used to support scrolls containing the sacred Torah. Its worshippers have vanished from the scene; new ones will have to be recruited from the audience of viewers.

The structure on the right is more difficult to identify. It looks like a stovepipe, with a hint of

flame emerging from its opening, but whether this is a token of death or of rebirth we have no way of knowing. The "x" on its surface compounds the mystery.

The best clue to meaning is the Hebrew word "midrash" imprinted on a piece of giant canvas pinned to an easel. Midrashim (plural of midrash) are parts of rabbinic literature that seek to interpret the meaning of biblical texts. They have two purposes: to inspire clarity of thought, and to apply such thinking to practical action in the world. Bak's images here, his multiple volumes once filled with Jewish lore, his blank manuscript pages once covered by narratives of faith from Hebrew scripture, invite us to devise new "midrashim" that will include the catastrophic injury to the ancient destiny of the Jewish people, and to Jewish traditions and culture, suffered during and after the Holocaust. The blank canvases that form the background of *Reconstruction* solicit the imagination of the viewer to contemplate the enormity of the challenge. They also remind us of the crucial role of art in carrying out this task.



Reconstruction, 2001
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"

On the Road

One of the recurrent themes in Samuel Bak's paintings is the journey motif. We cannot know whether the title of this work includes an ironic reference to Jack Kerouac's classic fiction about the so-called "Beat Generation," but it is unquestionable that the ordeal of European Jewry during the Holocaust tells the story of a "beat generation" of another kind. The contrast grows even sharper when we consider that Bak's cluttered landscape supports a voyage to nowhere, to a destination ending in annihilation.

As so often, the imagery creates the narrative before our eyes. It is not an orderly caravan, and it seems to be leaving behind, in the foreground, a ruined city of fallen archways and columns, abandoned wheels from absent vehicles, and the vestige of a deserted house, its empty window staring bleakly at a scene void of individual presence. Where have all the occupants gone? Where are the crowds of confused victims, lined up and wondering about their future fate? Where are the boxcars intended to transport them to their doom? Bak's canvases are very much con-

cerned with what is missing, challenging the power of the imagination to reconstruct the human import of what only appears to be the surreal drama unfolding before us.

Although Bak's images have a distinct metaphorical value, it does not take much effort to link them to a specific historical reality too. A single roofless ghetto dwelling on wheels is enough to conjure up the loss of an entire community. Fragments of gigantic keys entreat us to unlock the mystery of their departure, but they also remind us that after the end of this journey they will never be used again to open the doors of the homes where their former owners once lived. The keys to the kingdom where they are going will be of little use.

Ancient memory reminds us that the Children of Israel were once "on the road" for an entirely different purpose, a voyage to a Promised Land under divine guidance. That narrative endures as a source of consolation to the Jewish people, but the dilemma remains—we still are searching for a "key" to its solution—of how to reconcile it with the more somber voyage evoked by the artist in this painting.



On the Road, 1992
Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 1/2"

Camp

Set in a barren and rocky terrain, the ruined structure dominating the landscape of *Camp* has become a memorial site where we are forced to reconstruct in the imagination what its original purpose might have been. Empty windows peer out at us like blind eyes; the original inmates of this erstwhile concentration camp have long since left to meet their doom. But they are not forgotten. The abandoned site is now inhabited by memory, the twin candles marking a ritual of remembrance that will rescue the victims from oblivion. Many of Bak's paintings reflect this theme: the absence of human figures forces the viewer to consider the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish life and culture. Such reflection cannot restore the loss, but it revives a sense of living presence even as it mourns the absence of those who once embodied it.

Since visual art cannot speak, it depends on images to rouse a response to what it signifies. Careful inspection reveals that the outline shape of the stone enclosure is a crumbling Star of

David. Lest we miss its significance, the Star is duplicated in more recognizable form on stilts above a far wall of the Camp, a giant monument to the memory of those who once dwelt there. Like a watchtower of commemoration, it proclaims to future generations the identity of those who perished in this place.

But Bak's paintings do not simply announce meaning. They invite collaboration. They demand an informed audience, educated in the basic details of the Holocaust. *Camp* should not be mistaken for a surrealistic invasion of the past; its vacant buildings and disappeared population have nothing to do with dream imagery or fantasy forms, but are rooted in a real history that awaits excavation. The arid landscape with its monotone shading makes one wonder whether a desert sandstorm has washed over its surface, a sufficient hint that some form of catastrophe has occurred here. The unextinguished candles with their seemingly eternal flame suggest that nothing will—or should—ever erase the memory of this event.



Camp, 1992
Oil on canvas, 16 x 13"

Commemoration

A higher percentage of Lithuanian Jewry—between 93 and 94 percent—were murdered during the Holocaust than of any other country in Europe. A large proportion of them came from the capital city of Vilna, whose name is inscribed in Yiddish letters on the stone plaque in the lower right corner of the painting. The Yiddish culture of Vilna was known worldwide for its learned rabbis and scholars, its rich libraries and archives, its variety of religious academies, all of which were pillaged and destroyed by the German policy of confiscation and mass murder.

How does one memorialize a loss of such magnitude? *Commemoration* can be viewed as a group portrait without the people. Instead, the artist has introduced a cluster of images that he invites his viewers to read with the help of the visual imagination. This is especially important because nature, retaining its vitality, is already encroaching on the site, threatening to overwhelm it and erase it from memory. This makes us the guardians of its future, imposing on us the solemn responsibility of responding to the impact of its monumental implications.

The bright yellow fragment of a Star of David (which inhabitants of the Vilna ghetto were forced to wear), together with the Yiddish plaque, confirms the identity of the absent community. In their place we find a family of candles, some of them covered by drippings as if they were weeping tears of wax in sorrow for the loss they should illuminate. But as so often in Bak's work, their shape and substance violate our expectations of how they would normally appear. Here the candles resemble stone carvings or pillars: they are not capped by bright flickering flames, but only vestiges of their reflection. Like the Jews they are intended to commemorate, they have undergone a metamorphosis, as if to remind us of the painful difference between honoring the memory of a single family member and virtually the entire population of Vilna Jewry.

Yet despite the inanimate nature of these memorial candles, there is a kind of dignified beauty, an almost fortress solidity to this curious shrine in the woods, standing perhaps on the very space where the remains of Vilna Jewry lie buried. It is a tribute to the power of memory, and a warning that the only alternative to such memory is oblivion.



Commemoration, 2001
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"

The Sheen

Like *Camp*, *The Sheen* represents a crumbling monument reflecting the fate of the people of Israel, but its origins long predate the Holocaust while it addresses a different destiny that was once filled with immeasurable hope. The foreground is almost entirely occupied by two gigantic stone replicas of the Tablets that once contained the Ten Commandments. Like twin guardians of a sacred ancient memory, they prevent the eye of the viewer from escaping into a distant vista of landscape or sky. The spatial arrangement of the canvas forces us to focus on their significance, offering only ambiguous clues to the meaning of their disintegrating state.

The first clue comes from the title. A “sheen” refers to a gleaming surface, and one can imagine that the initial tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai glowed with a holy light, since they contained the imprint of the divine hand. But now the Hebrew letters that once spelled out the mandates sealing the covenant between God and His chosen people are peeling off the surface,

collapsing in a heap at the base of the fragmented stone template that once contained them. The title of the painting thus bears ironic implications. When one considers that the sixth commandment (in Hebrew scripture) reads “Do not murder” and then reflects on the doom facing European Jewry during the Holocaust, it is no wonder that the “sheen” has worn off and lost its luster.

The Sheen is a classic example of a Bak painting that challenges us with questions without providing us with answers. Have the people of Israel done something to earn God’s displeasure, or had God simply turned away from a commitment made at the beginning of monotheistic belief? Is it presumptuous to expect God to intervene in history when His creation has gone morally awry? Assuming one could redesign a system of belief to include the events of the Holocaust, what kind of covenant could we imagine that would account for the chaos of mass murder? The jumbled letters in *The Sheen* await our intervention, without assurance that a damaged faith can be permanently revived.



The Sheen, 1995
Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 1/2"

About Time

We see a rubble-strewn landscape occupied by replicas of human presence rather than actual human beings. Nothing seems vital, yet this gathering of sages is presumably engaged in a learned discussion of important issues. A gigantic tree lies uprooted before them, its lifeless branches bearing no greenery, its once upright stature apparently a victim of the decay of time. The clock face imprinted on a sliced segment of tree trunk confirms this association. Does the upright chimney in the background belching smoke assert some kind of vertical triumph over the fallen tree? Despite the remorseless progression of time, surely the “victory” of this icon of death was not inevitable. Are our sages discussing why it could not have been avoided? Or are they still tied to Talmudic disputations about fine points of ancient scriptural lore? Do their gestures signify mourning, or warning? Shouldn’t they be addressing the subject of a disastrous past, or debating what possible meaning it could have for the future of civilization, and of world Jewry in

particular? Isn’t it “about time” that they—and we—faced some of these questions, and acknowledged how the passage of time influences our response to where they may lead?

Developing a point of view toward the event we call the Holocaust is essential for anyone who hopes to achieve a meaningful encounter with the dark vision it embraces. There is a certain aridity to the figures in this painting, sculpted from or imprinted on stone. Time has turned them into monuments to memory, and we are challenged with the task of converting them back into living flesh and changing their dialogue into an argument about what lies beyond the massive tree that is blocking their view. If we could see that distant vista, would we be gazing at a fading sunset through which nature renews the beauty of an assaulted universe, or at the advancing threat of raging and destructive flames? An eerie light bathes the foreground of the canvas, an invitation to insight, though its source remains a mystery. That mystery—the journey from sight to insight—is the one that we are asked to unravel.



About Time, 1999
Oil on canvas, 20 x 30"

The Cup Was Full

Although this painting is another version of the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto with his hands raised, its title leads into complex associations that reach beyond the boy's literal experience. Why is a cup that was once full now empty, and what has happened to its contents? The cup is on a table (or altar?) in the foreground, its detached handle lying next to it in the shape of an inverted question mark. Those familiar with the verses from the well-known Psalm 23 in Hebrew Scripture—"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over"—may also recall that the psalms were once attributed to King David. The vague outline of a Star of David appears near the center of the painting, identifying the boy as Jewish. The lines from Psalm 23 express confidence in God's covenantal promise to protect his people and bestow on them the grace of divine providence.

Here the boy is not part of a monument but has a very human face, with a mixed expression of confusion and despair in his eyes. If we could stand behind him and look through those eyes,

what might we see? He has been deprived of his cap, which together with his worn shoes lies on the table-altar before him, perhaps as a preliminary sign of a "sacrifice" that is about to take place. But there is no evidence that his head has been anointed with oil, and with a wry irony Bak expands this allusion to include the beginnings of Christianity, since the raised palms with their nail holes are a clear reference to the fate of Jesus on the cross. In New Testament Greek "*Khristos*" (Christ) means anointed, as does "*Mashiach*" (Messiah) in ancient Hebrew Scripture. But the doom of the boy, as we foreknow, will be fulfilled through physical execution, not crucifixion or some other form of spiritual redemption. Even more ironic, then, in the context of this work, are the closing lines of Psalm 23, which immediately follow the ones quoted earlier: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." If the cup of faith was once full, it now lies empty before us, and how to renew its contents remains the intricate question that this ambiguous painting leaves unanswered.



The Cup Was Full, 2007
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20"

Sanctuary

Imagine the surprise of the explorers who first uncovered the ruins of Machu Picchu, the so-called “lost city of the Incas,” half-buried beneath tangled undergrowth in the mountainous terrain of Peru. A hundred years later, archaeologists are still arguing about the original usage of its buildings and terraced fields. Bak’s *Sanctuary* represents a similar dilemma, challenging its audience to interpret the purpose of this ancient stone monument, also partially covered by shrubbery, surrounded by mountains, awaiting some archaeologist of the Holocaust to confront its mysterious presence.

Bak’s title offers us some clues. A sanctuary is a sacred site: the destroyed Temple of the Hebrews in Jerusalem was such a holy location. But a sanctuary is also a place of refuge where one seeks protection from a threatening enemy. The painting displays two heads, the face of the lower one having lost its human features while the one above retains the recognizable visage of a boy, though the flesh of both have long since turned to stone. They now seem part of some ancient statuary, but the raised palms prompt us to identify them with the famous photograph of the boy in the Warsaw Ghetto with his palms

raised. He is standing with a group of other Jews who have just been driven by the Germans from the bunker where they have been hiding—in other words, from the underground sanctuary where they have been seeking refuge.

Whatever spiritual solace sanctuaries were once intended to provide, it does little to forestall the physical extinction that will be the fate of the boy and the other Jews rounded up in the Warsaw Ghetto. Bak thus introduces a veiled ironic undertone to the implications of his painting. This is reinforced by the image of the upraised palms, each pierced by what appears to be a bullet hole. But one palm is noticeable by its absence, replaced by a nailed piece of wood, and the association of “nail” with “palm” in Bak’s iconography summons up the memory of an earlier Jew, nailed to the Cross at the birth of Christianity. However, as the vines of time wind about this monument in the mountains, we are invited to ask what kind of spiritual salvation is offered to the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto. Bak’s art provides a different kind of immortality, a sanctuary in the mind of the viewer, though each of us is obliged to decide whether this is sufficient compensation for such an unredeemable loss.



Sanctuary, 1997
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

At Rest

Pursuing the journey of interpretation into paintings like *At Rest* is aided by some background information—how much of it we bring to the encounter helps to shape and ultimately to enrich what we take from it. Because his face is partially shadowed, it is hard to tell whether the expression of the seated figure reflects a weary or a wistful disposition. Since he is “at rest,” he has obviously been traveling; a bundle containing his meager possessions lies nearby. Is he looking at the uprooted broken tree in his lap that blocks his view, or at the intact tree beside him, which rises healthily through the seat of the unoccupied chair? Both will have an impact on his future.

The fragmented tree he carries resembles a crude crucifix, with half a Jewish star affixed to its crest. There is sufficient visual evidence to assume that the reference in this painting is to the Legend of the Wandering Jew. There are as many versions of this Legend, which originated in medieval Christian folklore, as there are speculations about the identity of its protagonist. One of the commonest stories is that a Jew in Jerusalem, possibly a shoemaker (note the prominent empty

boot), refused to allow Jesus to rest at his door as he bore his cross to crucifixion on Mount Calvary. In response, Jesus condemned him to wander across the face of the earth, an object of scorn, without possibility of dying until the Messiah returned—in this instance Jesus himself—on Judgment Day. Perhaps both Bak and his wanderer are wondering how a messianic message originally designed to bring blessing to mankind was later twisted to include a curse against the Jews.

Bak’s Wandering Jew bears his own cross, but the “immortality” to which he has been sentenced by Christian folklore carries no promise of salvation or redemption. The question raised by this painting may simply be how to destroy the legend by uprooting it so that eventually the Wanderer and his people can escape its harsh sentence and achieve a permanent rest from its malign influence. The normal tree that flourishes despite its unnatural mooring hints at the chance of restoring an unblemished community, though there is no certain evidence in the imagery of this painting that the injuries caused by the folklore of antisemitism will wither and die in the immediate future.



At Rest, 1996
Oil on canvas, 30 x 16"

Under a Blue Sky

Bak's title employs a device found frequently in his work—the use of irony. Irony appears when language or images encourage us to believe the opposite of what we literally see or hear. The clear and tranquil sky in this painting offers us a peaceful vista of nature, but it is rudely contradicted by the pathos and violence of the scene on the earth below. We gaze with horror at the spectacle of maimed and headless corpses, but they are the corpses of teddy bears rather than the children who once owned them. Their body parts are strewn across the landscape like fragments of stone, frozen tributes to the memory of the million and a half Jewish children murdered during the Holocaust.

Who can appreciate the beauty of nature in the presence of such ruin? One of Bak's constant themes is the impact of the Holocaust on values we once cherished without question. There was a time when the mention of teddy bears would evoke furry creatures that filled us with nostalgia for the innocent pleasures of childhood. But for

these “victims” the Holocaust has killed both children and childhood, and somehow we must find a way of reconciling this loss of innocence with any hopes for future growth. The irony of the painting is reinforced by the tension between what our mind recalls about the time when teddy bears flourished as comforting toys and what our eyes tell us about the inconsolable scene before us.

Bak faced a technical difficulty when conceiving this work, one that any author or artist concerned with representing the Holocaust must wrestle with. Of course, he could have painted the corpses of children, but the result would have been so aesthetically repellant that most members of his audience would have turned away in disgust, mingled with the panic that such a scene might instinctively induce. He found an ingenious compromise by substituting teddy bears for children, leaving us with a monument to an unnamed past—most of the creature parts have already turned to stone—that challenges the imagination to translate his images into a reflection of historical reality.



Under a Blue Sky, 2001
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"

Unexpected Visitors

Despite the dazzling rainbow of colors spread across the surface of this painting, we can hardly regard it as a celebration of natural beauty or harmonious forms. Instead of a landscape of birds chirping amidst leafy branches or swooping on graceful wings against a background of luminous sky, we are offered a gathering of monstrous birdlike shapes, wooden or metallic, each graced with a threatening eye, though nothing hints at a reason for their alarming presence. But clearly the time is out of joint: a broken clock face no longer registers the hours because its “hands” lie useless on a stone slab, pointing in opposite directions. There is a warrior quality to some of the bird creatures, as if they were helmeted for conflict, having already invaded the supposed serenity of artistic representation.

An unaccountable ominous atmosphere pervades the scene. Vacant eye sockets, some of them resembling bullet holes, stare at us with a silent message of dread. Such “visitors” are always unexpected in a universe that prefers to pay homage to natural harmony, but once they appear they exert a hypnotic power over their

audience. How do we solve the secret of their spell? Bak has an uncanny ability to harness the psychological intensity of visual images and to use it to engage the attention of his viewers. But he is shrewd enough to resist the temptation to add a didactic moral to his story. Whatever impact his bizarre scenario may have on our consciousness, he leaves for us to decide.

And how do we do that? By asking questions. What is the one natural bird doing there, pecking vainly at a branch, its gentle identity virtually canceled by the warlike creatures that ignore it? When “unexpected visitors” like these intrude on the plains of history, we are obliged to recognize the threat they bear with them and acknowledge the consequences of failing to do so. If we allow the monstrous to inhabit our reality, then the identity of the ultimate Unexpected Visitor becomes clear. We call him Death. When the flow of time reverses direction and reverts to barbarism, his reign may seem invincible. Is it easier to resist once we learn to expect the unexpected? As we know, Bak is expert at raising such questions. The answers lie beyond the province of his art.



Unexpected Visitors, 2000
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

Falling Memorial

The undamaged pear in the foreground, insulated from earth, presides over a landscape in flames. Pink-tinged clouds reflecting the blazing inferno below obscure the last vestiges of natural sky. Twin plumes of smoke rising in the distance evoke the sinister image of crematorium chimneys that appear in so many of Bak's paintings. Some disaster has occurred, but the artist refuses to specify, compelling his audience instead to examine this unpopulated terrain and search for a human connection.

Why pears? Bak himself provides some clues. Early on, he has written, he saw "something vulnerable, almost human about their form." Later, he said, "they became thoughts in search of thinkers, coded messages, questions without answers, parables of our human condition." As usual, Bak avoids didactic meaning, offering us a variety of possibilities, leaving interpretation open to the imagination of the viewer. In the beginning, we might say, there was a pure pear, its beauty and dignity highlighted by the white fabric on which it rests. Civilization has rewarded its promise by erecting a gigantic monument to celebrate its stature. But time has shown that such tributes may

be based on the illusion of invulnerability. Cultures rise and fall and disappear, and this seems to be the fate of the "falling memorial" before us. The solitary survivor at its base, once a worshipper and now a mourner, is forced to admit the fragility of what was once thought to be indestructible. Who would have believed that such colossal sculpted pears, solidly supported on an altar of stone, would one day crumble in ruin, losing the splendor of their original form? In the face of such violence, how do we mend our identity? Have we worshipped false gods of power, who in the end betray our esteem? Was this memorial ill-conceived from the start? As Bak says, his pears raise questions without answers—but they need not reduce us to silence. A response may not be a solution, and pears are not people. To the artist they are "merely" thoughts without thinkers, bidding their audience to undertake the mental journey they are incapable of. As in the Garden of Eden an apple led to the loss of innocence, so here a pear serves a similar function. The attitude of the solitary ripened fruit is both assertive and sad, bearing into the future its burden of catastrophe, a somber survivor left with the responsibility of renewal.



Falling Memorial, 2002
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"

Stronghold

Unlike in *The Cup was Full*, where the title leads us toward an understanding of the content, in this painting the images shed light on the significance of the title. Without a basic familiarity with the game of chess, the viewer will have difficulty assessing the implications of the work. But this is no more than to say that responding to almost any work of art requires collaboration between the colors and composition of forms on the canvas and the depth of consciousness that the viewer brings to the encounter. Chess is a contest, a struggle, demanding a carefully wrought plan of attack and retreat designed to defeat one's opponent by capturing his pieces and trapping his king, the presiding monarch of the chessboard. In *Stronghold* the only visible pieces are the pawns, the least mobile of all unless they can penetrate to the rear echelons of the enemy and transform themselves into more valuable instruments of assault. But at the outset they form the rank and file of the opposing forces, protecting the kings, queens and bishops behind them. Their role at the start of the battle is thus not trivial, as is confirmed by the appearance of shallow bullet

wounds in the "heads" of the pawns in the left and right foreground. We see how easily the language of chess can be converted into a military idiom.

This is a universe committed to total victory; it thrives on rivalry and shuns treaties, except for an occasional stalemate or draw. The squares of the original chessboard hang in fragments; this is no longer a game, but a war, fraught with danger. Contending troops, their battle-flags visible, face each other, one brigade marching forward while the other waits in disarray. Their royal defender is present, like the chessboard, only as an image of a crown imprinted on a square and nailed to a wall. Bak has commented that "painting is like a game of chess: you have to foresee things, but you can't foresee everything." He might have been speaking of the human condition: it sometimes seems as if civilization, like the game of chess, cannot exist without armed conflict, despite its commitment to peaceful community. In a game, this is permissible, but in life it becomes a paradox, forcing one to wonder why despite our foresight we fail to prevent the destructive consequences of "strongholds."



Stronghold, 1990
Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 21 3/4"

Study After Nocturnal A

The innocent title of this painting offers little guidance to its significance, except to identify the time of day. A brightly lighted but solitary chess pawn stands as mute nocturnal witness to a cosmic catastrophe. Its knob-like head resembles the globe of the earth, but it is misplaced amidst this windswept terrain, as if to suggest that a simple board game has suddenly escalated into a conflict of far more sinister implications. Instead of a romantic landscape celebrating the communion of natural and heavenly beauty, we are greeted by an exploding moon, its rocklike fragments drifting slowly toward outer space. We might like to believe that below it lingers the glow of a fading sunset, but this would be inconsistent with the nighttime scenario on display. More likely, the pawn in its solitude is the anxious spectator to an avalanche of advancing flames, a conflagration whose origin remains a mystery and whose potential destructive effect we are left to envision.

Bak's art often introduces us to the beginning of a narrative, its arrested motion awaiting

our intervention to advance if not to complete its tale. It does not take much imagination to transform the pawn into a human figure contemplating a universe gone awry—such a scenario has repeatedly assaulted modern consciousness during the past century—and to seek a way of absorbing it into the possibility of a meaningful future. If the “game” continues, what will be its result? Illumination rather than darkness controls the surface of the picture. The pawn is bathed in a luminous radiance, cloaking it in a mysterious dignity despite the chaos it beholds. A heavenly body may be in disarray, but so far the earth, the pawn's “head,” retains its integrity.

In the absence of moonlight, which seems to have suffered a crushing defeat, the creative impulse of the artist provides an alternative source from outside the frame of the picture. Within that frame, the light of the flames approaches, and the rivalry between the two leaves open the question of which will triumph. The “Study” itself is an initial step in the journey toward enlightenment.

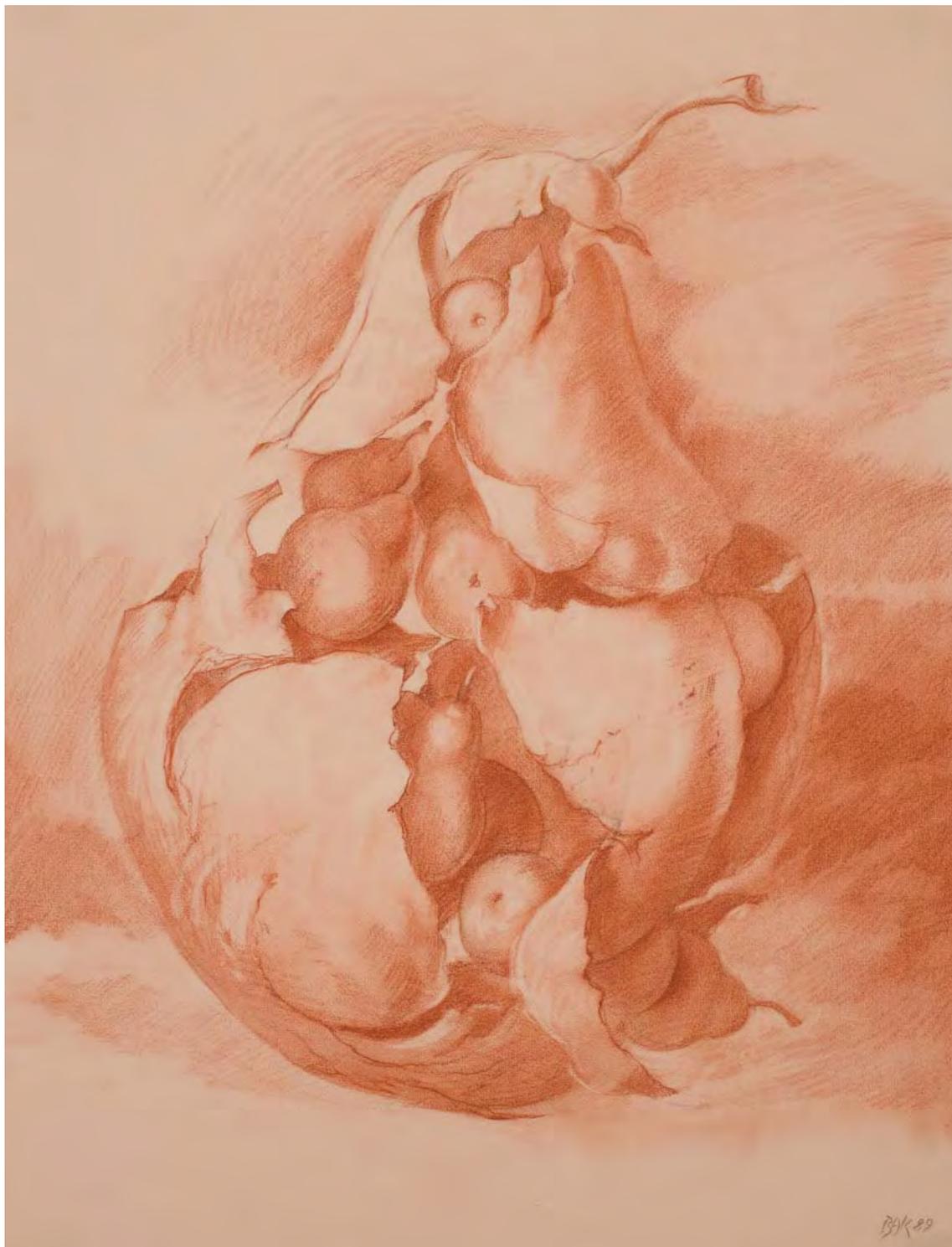


Study after Nocturnal A, 1998
Oil on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4"

Envelope

The title of this work does not disclose its meaning, but it leads us toward a means of approaching its implications. An envelope is a kind of container: it encloses, among many possibilities, a message, a surprise, an invitation. Bak's mixed media composition of a gigantic pear seems to be floating on a cloud, adrift in a space that shares its coloration and offers no contrasting shades to help define the import of its shape. It urges us to explore not its surroundings but its contents; bulging with numerous smaller but intact pears, it appears to be about to give birth to replicas of its collapsing self. As God is said to have created Adam and Eve in his own image, so here Bak's image is about to heed the advice of the divine voice to the first human pair to be fruitful and multiply. Although we are viewing the work of a more humble and fallible kind of creator, Bak duplicates the gesture of something being created in its own image.

We are the midwives to this process, peeling away the cover of conventional looking in an attempt to reveal what lies beneath—or within. Legend tells us that Adam and Eve lost the innocence of Eden by eating an apple, long known as the “forbidden fruit.” Unwilling to adopt a worn out image full of associations with sin, Bak adapts the old story to a new narrative—after all, Adam and Eve were not forbidden to eat an apple, but according to Genesis only the “fruit” of a certain tree—and in an act of secular creation with no constraints attached invites us to cherish a succulence and admire a purity of form embodied in a different kind of fruit—a pear. The annual ritual of nature that allows old leaves to fall and new ones to emerge, old petals to wither and fresh flowers to flourish is embodied in the teeming vigor inside the envelope of decaying skin, much as the modern mind seeks to shape a more vital future out of the remnants of a mournful past.



Envelope, 1989
Mixed media on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4"

Four Introductions

Does a work drained of color imply a world drained of meaning, or are we merely asked to confront a monument stripped of embellishments and reduced to a state of decay? We are looking at a gloomy composition in black and white that also includes many shades of gray. At first the structure seems to resemble several adjacent tombs in various stages of decomposition, and this is certainly a possibility. The absence of bright hues is more appropriate to the theme of loss and death, and the dismal landscape supports this view. But seen from above, the roofs of the adjoining buildings take the shape of a familiar Bak icon, the twin tablets that once contained the Ten Commandments, though the shape is now nothing more than a silhouette without surface or divine content. Much is missing that was once present, but enough is present to provide us with clues about how to continue the task of interpretation.

Indeed, “interpretation” is itself the central subject of *Four Introductions*, but without some background information it would be impossible to proceed. Because of the lack of tinted contrasts that a painting in color would contain, it is easy to overlook the Hebrew letters that preside over each of the doorframes. Reading from right to left as Hebrew texts require, we find in sequence PRDS, an acronym for the Hebrew word *Pardes*, which means “garden” or “orchard.”

Pardes is also a cognate for the English “paradise,” a reference to the Garden of Eden, though here the allusion is far from a happy one, since eating the forbidden fruit, as Milton affirms in *Paradise Lost*, brought “death into the world, and all our woe.” It is as if the temple has become a mausoleum, and viewers are invited not to worship but to mourn.

The four Hebrew letters also refer to four levels of Biblical exposition, ranging (again reading right to left) from the literal to the allegorical to the moral to the mystical. Each doorway invites our entry, though only the simple or direct meaning is fully open. Scripture may once have revealed its meaning to anyone introduced to it, but now such “introductions” are increasingly difficult to achieve: the second doorway is partially closed, the third entirely shut, and the fourth, the mystical, the most sacred, is inaccessible behind a pile of debris. Inside that fourth section, rising in silhouette like the tips of flames, is the top part of the Hebrew letter “Shin,” the first letter of Shekinah, one of the Scriptural names of God signifying the mystery of Divine Presence. Here it might just as easily signify the mystery of Divine Absence, and when combined with the missing Ten Commandments and the reference to the loss of Eden, we are left with introductions to the fate of certain Biblical traditions that are more unwelcome than we might at first have imagined.

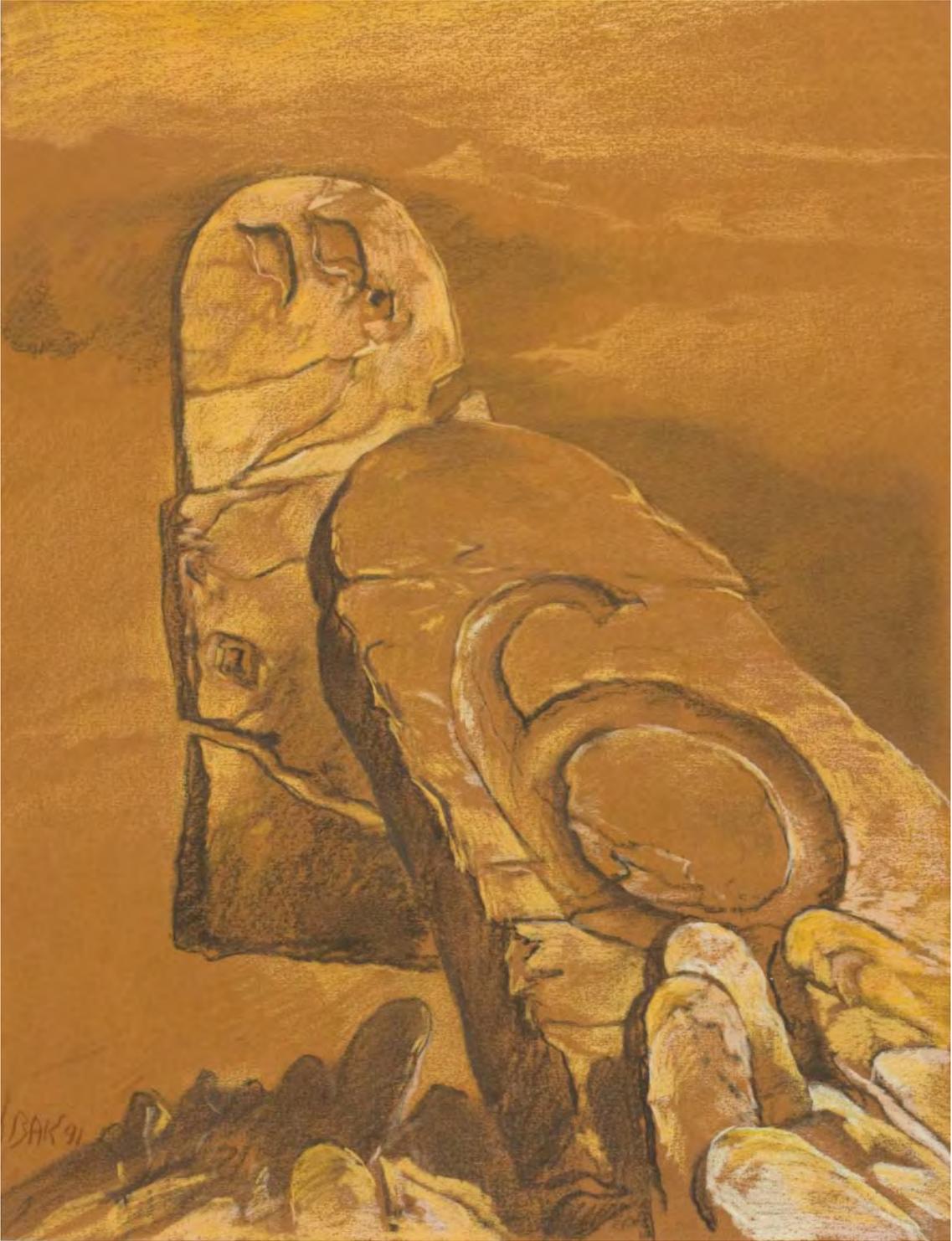


Four Introductions, 1994
Mixed media on paper, 19 1/2 x 25 1/2"

The Number

Three scenarios merge in Bak's *The Number*—a landscape of memory, a landscape of faith, and a landscape of death. The landscape of faith is propelled by the legacy from Mount Sinai, the twin tablets that once contained the basis for human morality, the Ten Commandments. Their surfaces are now blank, with two exceptions: on one, floating off into the void, is etched an unpronounceable name of God, commonly represented by the twin “yods” that are etched into the stone. This is all that remains of the covenant that once joined the people of Israel with their divine protector. The faith that was the basis for that union is now tested by the giant numeral six that is embossed on the other tablet, which is tilted precariously as if it were about to tumble into an abyss. That number evokes a divided memory which shuttles uneasily between faith and death: the sixth commandment in Hebrew scripture is “*lo tirtsach*,” “Do not murder,” but its violation looms with equal force as we recall the six million members of European Jewry killed during the Holocaust.

The images elicit questions to which we are still struggling to find answers. How do we retain our reverence for these cracked and crumbling remnants that once contained the principles of conduct designed to guide the moral behavior of much of western civilization? How do we account for the cosmic failure of the particular commandment intended to support life and preserve faith among the peoples of the world? If history can so easily disturb consciousness with the memory of such violent death, is it possible to inscribe new commandments on the blank faces of these stone monuments so as to include the possibility of events like the Holocaust? It is as if these tokens of faith are slowly being embedded in a landscape of death, floating above a painful cemetery of remembrance, doomed to undergo a metamorphosis that will convert the tablets of God's words into replicas of tombstones. How to rescue the divine message from the graveyard of memory is the challenge facing us in this vivid and powerful assemblage of suggestive images.



The Number, 1991
Mixed media on paper, 13 x 10"

Recovered

This cluster of apparently unrelated images resembles objects that some curious modern archaeologist had unearthed in a recent dig. He has gathered in an apparently casual manner the results of his discovery, and since we are privileged witnesses to this episode, we can join in the task of organizing the random assemblage into a meaningful artistic vision.

Fortunately, the work itself contains a significant clue to its design. The letters of “life” are clearly visible; they are preceded by the word “still,” which is partially obscured by a stone fragment, perhaps left over from the “excavation.” Once upon a time, the letters remind us, there was a popular tradition of painting called “still life” (Cézanne was one of its most expert practitioners) devoted to celebrating the joys of existence, the fertility of nature, the pleasures of domestic tranquility. They usually exhibited a table, often covered by a richly embroidered cloth, bearing a bottle of wine, a decanter, a glass, a bowl of fruit or a vase of brightly colored flowers—in short, a display of visual harmony that represented the very opposite of Bak’s discordant drawing.

That drawing may be an attempt to rescue from oblivion some items from a time of past beauty, but it is clear that its visual harmony has

been tainted by the incursions of history. One can decipher the outlines of a wine bottle, but it seems to have been absorbed by the surrounding stone, incapable of pouring anything into the tilted goblet that in any case has lost its own stability. Instead of an embroidered cloth the table (also askew) holds a ragged garment with the iconic stripes of the “uniform” of a concentration camp inmate. The sign “still life” is attached in poster-fashion to a huge stone structure, perhaps the base of a crematorium chimney, extending beyond the frame of the picture. It is another iconic image of past destruction, looming over the contents of the work. The only fully intact shape before us is the large pear, but its ripe promise is shrouded in shadow, making it a timid example of the bounty of nature that earlier artists in the “still life” tradition once applauded.

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that “in the midst of life we are in death.” Since Bak is less committed to beginnings and ends than to uncertainties, he might revise that line to read “in the midst of life we are in *if*,” coincidentally the central two letters of the word. We may cherish whatever has been recovered from our Holocaust legacy as a sign that life persists, but we do so while simultaneously remembering how much of that past remains unrecoverable.



Recovered, 2005
Pastel and gouache on paper, 13 x 13"

Broken Strings

Everything in this mixed media composition speaks of improvisation: two musicians marooned on a forlorn promontory are hardly in a position to practice their accustomed art in a normal fashion. They appear to be violinists, but the other members of their string quartet—if they exist—are nowhere to be seen. Very few duos for two violins appear in the library of chamber music, but these performers have no choice but to ad-lib their talent as best they can. The work thus mourns a loss—they are also deprived of their instruments and their bows—but simultaneously celebrates the ingenuity of the players who manage to mime a recital that cannot possibly be taking place.

There is thus a pathos in the effort to extract sound through gesture alone, using as bows branches that have been plucked from the decaying remnants of trees already stripped of their bark. Yet from that wood will be carved the instruments they lack; the shape of a cello begins

to emerge from the giant masses of wood that loom in the background. The sprig of leaves sprouting from the tip of one of the improvised “bows” offers some hope that all is not lost, that from this visual tribute to the sounds of silence there may yet blossom a genuine concert to restore our faith in the beauty these musicians were once capable of creating.

Yet the mystery and the meaning of the “broken strings” of the title remain. The dangling ropes, reaching beyond the upper frame of the picture, seem to be dropping from heaven, but two of the four strings have snapped, as if some divine instrumentalist were striving to harmonize the music of the spheres with the earthly representatives below, who seem metaphorically to have been cut off from a previous source of inspiration. How extensive a damage to the creative imagination has been suffered by this rupture and what needs to be done to restore a mutually advantageous connection remains an unresolved issue for Bak’s audience to ponder.



Broken Strings, 2009
Crayon, tempera and oil on tinted paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4"

After Dürer

The title of this drawing leads us in two directions, since it refers both to the passage of time (what happened “after” the age in which Dürer lived) and the influence of art, since it contains figures and images that first appeared in the famous 1514 engraving by Albrecht Dürer called *Melencolia I*. To indicate the measure of time, Dürer included a simple hourglass; Bak changes it into a clock, but its pendulum is broken and its face is blank—clearly the time is out of joint. Whereas Dürer had the rays of a bright sun capped by a rainbow shining in the distance, Bak has introduced clouds to cover the sun, and the striking rainbow has been transformed into a fragmented arc of wood behind the clock, curtailing any sign of promise it might once have revealed. Dürer’s engraving includes several unblemished geometrical forms: a flawless white sphere and a multi-sided block of stone, emblems of the coming renaissance in new scientific thought. Bak’s sphere is an imperfect circle (now resembling the globe of the earth) whose pockmarked surface hints at some kind of attack on its integrity. The stone polyhedron has also been assaulted, an edge having been chipped off, while the instrument of destruction, a hammer,

lies beside it. Hammers were initially designed to build, not to destroy. Somewhere between Dürer and the modern era, the constructive uses of science seem to have gone astray.

Both Bak and Dürer offer us brooding angels, but the source of their melancholy is not the same. The world “after” Dürer has suffered some injury, though Bak leaves to our imagination the task of defining its nature. Some visual clues may help. In Dürer a cherub sits beside the angel; in Bak it has disappeared. The ladder of aspiration that in Dürer connects earth to heaven in Bak leads to nowhere, its broken top rung limiting the height to which an adventurous spirit might try to climb. The scales of justice that figure prominently in Dürer’s work now lie in ruins at the angel’s feet, its hollow cups having been deprived of their original purpose. Is it any wonder that the angel is perplexed as it occupies its landscape of loss, pondering how to regain its ancient role by rebuilding a shattered universe and restoring spiritual meaning to the world? At least Dürer’s angel has the advantage of worrying only about where the future might lead. Bak’s angel bears the heavier burden of brooding about where the disasters of the past have already led.



After Dürer, 2007
Pastel on paper, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2"

Afterword

Philosophy may be defined as the art of asking the right questions. . . . awareness of the problem outlives all solutions. The answers are questions in disguise, every new answer giving rise to new questions.

—A.J. Heschel
God in Search of Man

For me, there is no more perfect description of the approach and mission of Facing History and Ourselves and the art of Samuel Bak than in Heschel's words.

For some years we have been thinking of an appropriate place to donate a major body of Bak's art. We sought an organization with a profound commitment to the important issues, questions and challenges of our day and a vision of a better world.

Over our three decades of involvement with Facing History and Ourselves it became clear. These works of art, these images of query, should become part of the educational program for students across the globe. Bringing together Professor Larry Langer, Sam's art and the educational energies of Facing History and Ourselves made ultimate sense. We inaugurate this body of art with a confidence and a dream that art truly is an effective instrument for questioning, learning and change.

Sam and Josée Bak embraced the idea of this donation from its inception. Everyone at Facing History and Ourselves: Margot Strom, Marc Skvirsky, Ilana Klarman, Chris Stokes, Judi Bohn and the entire team, added to the dream. Gallery staff, especially Elizabeth Burgess, Destiny M. Barletta, Justine Choi, Alfred Zuniga, and Josh Miner helped to realize this dream. All will expand the power of the paintings to effect change.

This feels like the beginning of a new and unique journey. It is our hope that we can expand the meaningful role of Bak's art with the remarkable energy and effective programming of Facing History and Ourselves. This paired effort can raise and offer new questions into the souls and minds of our young people so that we will help make this a slightly better world.

In closing, I would like to share one of Brother Thomas' quotes that serves to describe what you all do and what we all aspire to do: *Good is what we do, Holy is what we become.*

—Bernard H. Pucker
Owner and Director
Pucker Gallery, Boston

Biographies

Samuel Bak was born on August 12, 1933, in Vilna, Poland, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under first Soviet, 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. While both 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 and his mother fled to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp. Here, he was enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School, Munich. In 1948 they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. Bak studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956 he went to Paris where he continued his studies at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his studies.

In 1959, Bak moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International" in Pittsburgh, and two one-man exhibitions were held at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963. It was subsequent to these exhibitions, during the years 1963-1964, that a major change in Bak's 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.

In 1966 Bak returned to Israel. He lived in New York City (1974-1977), Paris (1980-1984), Switzerland (1984-1993), and in 1993, moved to Weston, Massachusetts.

Since 1959, Samuel Bak has had solo exhibitions at private galleries in New York, Boston, London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Tel Aviv,

Jerusalem, Zurich, Rome and other cities around the world. Numerous large retrospective exhibitions have been held in major museums, universities, and public institutions. Included among them are: the Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem; the Tel Aviv Museum; the Bronfman Center, Montreal; the Heidelberg Museum; the Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg; the Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf; the University of Haifa; the Temple Judea Museum, Philadelphia; the Dürer Museum, Nuremberg; the Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main; Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York; the Spertus Museum, Chicago; the Mizel Museum of Judaica, Denver; the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Los Angeles; The National Catholic Center For Holocaust Education, Seton Hall College, Greensburg, PA; the Holocaust Museum Houston & B'Nai B'Rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, DC; Phillips Exeter Academy Exeter, NH; the Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen; the Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame; the Florida Holocaust Museum, Saint Petersburg; the National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius; the University of Scranton, PA; the Neues Stadtmuseum, Landsberg am Lech; the Canton Museum of Art, OH; Clark University, Worcester, MA; the 92nd Street Y, New York; the Jewish Cultural Center and Memphis College of Art, TN; the City Hall Gallery, Orlando; Texas Tech University, Lubbock; the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Duluth.

Publications on Samuel Bak's work include 12 books, most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*, and his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*. Bak has also been the subject of two documentary films.

Lawrence L. Langer was born in New York City and educated at City College of New York and Harvard University. He is Professor of English Emeritus at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. Among his books are *The Holocaust and The Literary Imagination*, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism in 1991, *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*, *Preempting the Holocaust*, and most recently *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*. He has also collaborated with Samuel Bak on five volumes of the artist's work, for which Langer wrote critical introductions and commentaries.

Bernard H. Pucker is the Founder, Owner, and Director of Pucker Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts. He studied History and English Literature at Columbia University and received a Master of Arts degree in Modern Jewish History from Brandeis University. Mr. Pucker is a Trustee of Facing History and Ourselves; a member of the Board of Directors for the Jewish Publication Society; an Advisory Board member for the Terezin Chamber Music Foundation; a member of the Board of Directors for the Boston Center for

Jewish Heritage; and a member of the Arts and Letters Council for The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies. Pucker Gallery was founded in 1967 in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood and has represented the art of Samuel Bak since 1969.

Margot Stern Strom, President and Executive Director of the nonprofit organization *Facing History and Ourselves*, is recognized as a global leader in education for justice and civic engagement. Through her commitment to honoring the voices of teachers and students and her deep belief that history matters, she has enabled millions of teachers and their students to study the steps leading to the Holocaust, to investigate root causes of racism, antisemitism and violence, and to realize their obligations and capabilities as citizens in a democracy. Ms. Strom's deepest conviction is that young people are moral philosophers, and that it is critical to listen to their voices, honor their teachers, and understand how to make education meaningful to them and to the world they will enter. The art of Samuel Bak, which Margot used in her very first Facing History classroom, continues to be used as an integral teaching tool in Facing History resource books and classrooms today.

About Facing History and Ourselves

Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry. As the name Facing History and Ourselves implies, the organization helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives, and offers a framework and a vocabulary for analyzing the meaning and responsibility of citizenship and the tools to recognize bigotry and indifference in their own worlds. Through a rigorous examination of the failure of democracy in Germany during the 1920s and '30s and the steps leading to the Holocaust, along with other examples of hatred, collective violence, and genocide in the past century, Facing History and Ourselves provides educators with tools for teaching history and ethics, and for helping their students learn to combat prejudice with compassion, indifference with participation, myth and misinformation with knowledge.

Believing that no classroom exists in isolation, Facing History and Ourselves offers programs and materials to a broad audience of students, parents, teachers, civic leaders, and all of those who play a role in the education of young people. Through significant higher education partnerships, Facing History and Ourselves also reaches and impacts teachers before they enter their classrooms.

By studying the choices that led to critical episodes in history, students learn how issues of identity and membership, ethics and judgment have meaning today and in the future. Facing History and Ourselves' resource books provide a meticulously researched yet flexible structure for examining complex events and ideas. Educators can select appropriate readings and draw on additional resources available online or from our comprehensive lending library. Our foundational resource book, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, embodies a sequence of study that begins with identity—first individual identity and then group and national identities,

with their definitions of membership. From there the program examines the failure of democracy in Germany and the steps leading to the Holocaust—the most documented case of twentieth-century indifference, de-humanization, hatred, racism, antisemitism, and mass murder. It goes on to explore difficult questions of judgment, memory, and legacy, and the necessity for responsible participation to prevent injustice. Facing History and Ourselves then returns to the theme of civic participation to examine stories of individuals, groups, and nations who have worked to build just and inclusive communities and whose stories illuminate the courage, compassion, and political will that are needed to protect democracy today and in generations to come. Other examples in which civic dilemmas test democracy, such as the Armenian Genocide and the U.S. civil rights movement, expand and deepen the connection between history and the choices we face today and in the future.

Facing History and Ourselves has offices or resource centers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom as well as in-depth partnerships in Rwanda, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Facing History and Ourselves' outreach is global, with educators trained in more than 80 countries and delivery of our resources through a website accessed worldwide with online content delivery, a program for international fellows, and a set of NGO partnerships. By convening conferences of scholars, theologians, educators, and journalists, Facing History and Ourselves' materials are kept timely, relevant, and responsive to salient issues of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

For more than 30 years, Facing History and Ourselves has challenged students and educators to connect the complexities of the past to the moral and ethical issues of today. They explore democratic values and consider what it means to exercise one's rights and responsibilities in the service of a more humane and compassionate world. They become aware that "little things are big"—seemingly minor decisions can have a major impact and change the course of history.

Facing History and Ourselves is an international educational and professional development organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of genocide, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. For more information about Facing History and Ourselves, please visit our website at www.facinghistory.org.

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FRONT COVER IMAGE:

Falling Memorial, 2002
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"

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Visit facinghistory.org/illuminations for a virtual audio tour, a collaborative, multi-media slide show, a video about Samuel Bak's art, and additional resources for use in the classroom and beyond.