



Beholding **AFTER**

Samuel Bak's Art of H·O·P·E·

PUCKER GALLERY • BOSTON

Abandon all hope you who enter here.
Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'intrate.
DANTE ALIGHIERI



From Here On | Oil on canvas | 40 x 30" | BK1775

COVER: *Green Pieces* | Oil on canvas | 35 x 46" | BK1776

¹Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto III, line 9, trans. by Robert & Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 42.

Beholding AFTER

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BY HENRY F. KNIGHT

"Abandon all hope you who enter here."¹ With these words Dante Alighieri marked the entrance to hell as he began his poetic journey through the afterlife. Accompanied by Virgil, his classical mentor from the netherworld, Dante descended into and made his way through the imagined terrain of hell. Thirty-four Cantos and ten descending circles after the journey began, Dante and Virgil emerged ready for the next stage: Purgatory, then Heaven. His way out was the way in, emerging on the other side. Dante's afterlife was imagined and entered in the context of Christian ritual of the Easter Triduum of medieval Roman Catholicism. For Dante the journey was a disciplined spiritual undertaking, begun on Holy Thursday of the Christian year 1300 as an act of intentional reflection and prayer.

BAK AND AFTER

For artist Samuel Bak, like other Jews who have survived the mass atrocity of the Holocaust, the realm of *After* is not an imaginary place at all. It is real and is experienced in this world, not the next. Such a place is not chosen as a spiritual discipline, but imposed without choice. For survivors like Bak, the realm of *After* is a consequence of catastrophic violence and the rupture of one's trusted, if sometimes dangerous world — a massive, collective trauma as well as a personal one. And this *after*-life is encountered on this side of mortality, in many ways betrayed by the other.

Born in August 1933, Sam Bak survived the destruction of his cherished Jewish world of Vilna, Poland and lost scores of family members, including his grandparents and father to Nazi cruelty. Bak and his mother survived through the combined and valiant efforts of his father, an aunt (his mother's sister and a convert to Christianity) named Janina, and the particular efforts of a Benedictine nun known as Sister Maria who gave Bak and his mother shelter in a convent in Vilna. That precarious mix of traumatic loss and human courage informs Bak's views of *after*-life as he reminds those who stand before his prolific corpus of work that we live in the world we see; and what we see makes all the difference in the world.

Bak does not directly depict in his art the violence that occurred during the series of events we have come to call the Holocaust. Instead, he offers us images that help us see the aftermath of that time more clearly. There are significant indicators, of course: the numerous images of the Warsaw Ghetto Boy in an earlier series; or the myriad yellow stars washed ashore as remnants of a previous flood in several of his *Elegy* renderings. Yet even these images are stylized ways of beholding *After* rather than direct portrayal of the traumatic violence that occurred. The presence of images like these provides a particular sense of absence. Nevertheless, and particularly in this collection of paintings and drawings, Bak invites us to pause in the midst of our seeing to ask questions:



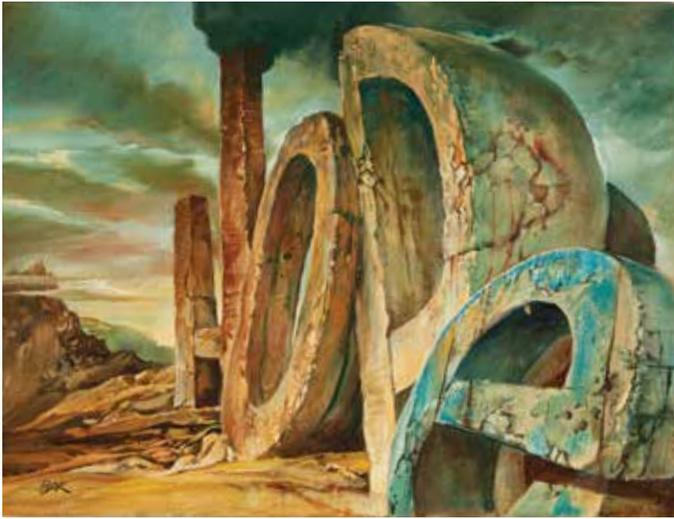
A Painter's Window | Oil on canvas | 40 x 30" | BK1688

"What, how, and why do we see? And even, what do we not see that we might expect to see?" These questions evoke the landscapes or still lifes within us, but they grow out of the landscapes and still lifes before us. And they depend on what we are able to see. Bak's paintings are like conceptual maps constructed from critically important images in his world.

With a canvas called *The Painter's Window* (BK1688) Bak invites us to pause before his images with a sense of double vision, alert to what we see while being aware of the frames through which we see. In this case, we are invited to peer into a canvas that is both a doorway and a window. The image is

framed by a faded, but solid rainbow from which a raggedly constructed and partial window frame hangs by two loosely connected cords. Through the frame we can make out an unreflecting mirror and the branches of a once thriving tree painted on the remnants of another internally rendered canvas. In front of the frame we see an easily overlooked table, haphazardly covered by a rumpled tablecloth, an overturned cup, and an oddly constructed pitcher with a detached handle in the shape of a question mark. A closer look reveals that these familiar items from a family dinner table are reflected in ghosted images on the partial canvas above it. An even closer look reveals the letters *H*, *O*, *P*, and *E* are present in two locations on the canvas – first slightly obscured by the cobbled window frame just below the faded rainbow, and also hidden on the table among discarded pieces of taken-for-granted, daily life. These artifacts are now of a lost civilization, specifically items that express the routine of daily life related to food and drink, from formal Sabbath meals to casual teas.

In his own introduction to these images, Bak tells us that words and letters are part of his palette; in addition to the strong and vivid colors we expect to find in his work. We find the letters to spell the word *hope* on each canvas. Sometimes the letters are clear and monumental. Other times they are broken and in disarray. Sometimes they are obvious, even foreboding. Other times they are hidden in plain sight. Their size and arrangements vary, defying order and even recognition. Their condition often signals a sense of ambiguity; they are wounded yet resilient, unconnected yet awaiting connection. How they are interpreted depends on what we see and how we approach their presence. Are they awaiting our reclamation, or victims of human carnage, or perhaps both? Bak's title for this series, *H.O.P.E.*, implies that he is offering us elements of hope that require our active participation to be combined or constructed in order to be more than disconnected letters, indeed, more than disconnected aspects of our lives. The punctuation of the word *hope* into distinct, capitalized letters separated by



After the End | Oil on canvas | 9 x 12" | BK1689

periods breaks up our usual regard for the word, as well as for the phenomenon of hope, calling attention to the way we build the word and the active character of our regard in this important human phenomenon. That is, hope is dependent on the eyes of its beholder and how we behold. This recognition calls attention what we have been given to complete or ignore. How we regard the world before, within, ahead, and behind us makes all the difference.

In *After the End* (BK1689), for example, we gaze at a barren landscape with wounded letters of hope. The *h* is formed in part by a still smoking chimney. The scarred letters and subsequent word, *hope*, are ambiguous. What is hope's place on this bleak landscape? Is it a wounded but lingering presence? Or is it a monumental witness to its having been a victim with all the other victims? Perhaps both options are possible. There is room for a range of perspectives strong enough to confront the destruction of most, if not all, of the elements that constitute our hoping as well as to invite the reclamation and rebuilding of those threatened elements into a resilient hope on the other side of hope's undoing. The ambiguity that Bak preserves invites us into deeper exploration of these matters.

In *After the Oncome of Peace* (BK1690) Bak has gathered the fragments of *After* into an oversized still life contemplating the panoply of ruins with which he works in this series. The empty chair and shoes beside it are telling – likewise, the closely gathered artifacts of a lost civilization. They are crowded together as if they had been gathered for storage. Nonetheless, anyone pausing before them will notice the richness of composition and color that beckons to be held in contemplation, inviting visual exploration of the elements gathered in this image. The verticality and oversized character of the objects call attention to themselves in the same way memorial markers in a cemetery might – except that the persons missing from this image have no graveyards. These pieces of their lives are their memorials. They represent familiar rites of family and culture along with the people who practiced and participated in them. For many of the victims only fragments like these remain.

While the unordered and reversed letters for *hope* can be discerned in the rubble behind the large pears, the word *hope* can be more easily recognized reading from the left hand side to the right. That should not surprise us, but in this case it may also give us pause. Giant fruit and fragments of equally large bottles, cups, and a pitcher with its questioning handle fill out the middle of the canvas in contrast to the table standing on



After the Oncome of Peace | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1690



Man, Woman, and Child | Oil on canvas | 9 x 12" | BK1785

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its end with its normal-sized artifacts of hospitality placed on its edge. In the background of this crowded still life we can make out the ruins of a building and a still smoking chimney – reminders of the systemic perpetration responsible for the artifacts gathered before them. Nearly hidden in the back, Bak has placed the outlines of a window and a door – incomplete and beckoning for recognition.

With every painting in this collection Bak has challenged his viewers to behold the landscapes and still lifes of *After*, to look through his stylized windows at the remnants and traces of *Before*, asking “What do you see?” and “How does seeing matter?” in the afterlife of catastrophic trauma. *From Here On* (BK1775) expresses the unfinished enterprise of beholding *After*, of articulating what has been lost, and recognizing what can be reconstructed with others along the way. Facing the canvas, the viewer stands before a mixed portrait of shattered hope that opens to a promising landscape. The immediate setting at the bottom right of the canvas is filled with the scattered letters of hope strewn as traces of hostility on a torn prayer shawl nailed to a tabletop, articulating its violated respect for the sacred. Three directional arrows guide the beholder’s gaze across the canvas, moving from the lower left hand corner to

the table and its disrupted images on the lower right. There we encounter an overturned cup, a sliced pear, and the torn prayer shawl along with a second arrow pointing the way forward to a partially covered box. The box, which in another journey through the wilderness was filled with the broken tablets of the Ten Commandments, is filled with fruit (more pears perhaps) a cup, a pitcher and a bottle. A plumb line weighted by a suspended pear hangs above the box. Another arrow points upward to the right leading the careful observer deeper into the image toward a table prepared for a single guest – perhaps the viewer him or herself. The table is dressed with a cloth, a cup, pitcher, wine or water bottle, and a bowl of fruit. The table and chair are placed under a draping canopy reminiscent of a huppah or sukkah – providing a place of respite in this modern wilderness or, perhaps inviting a more lasting commitment to the work ahead. Just beyond and to the left is a makeshift, wooden sign pointing farther into the landscape beyond. It simply reads, “Hope.”

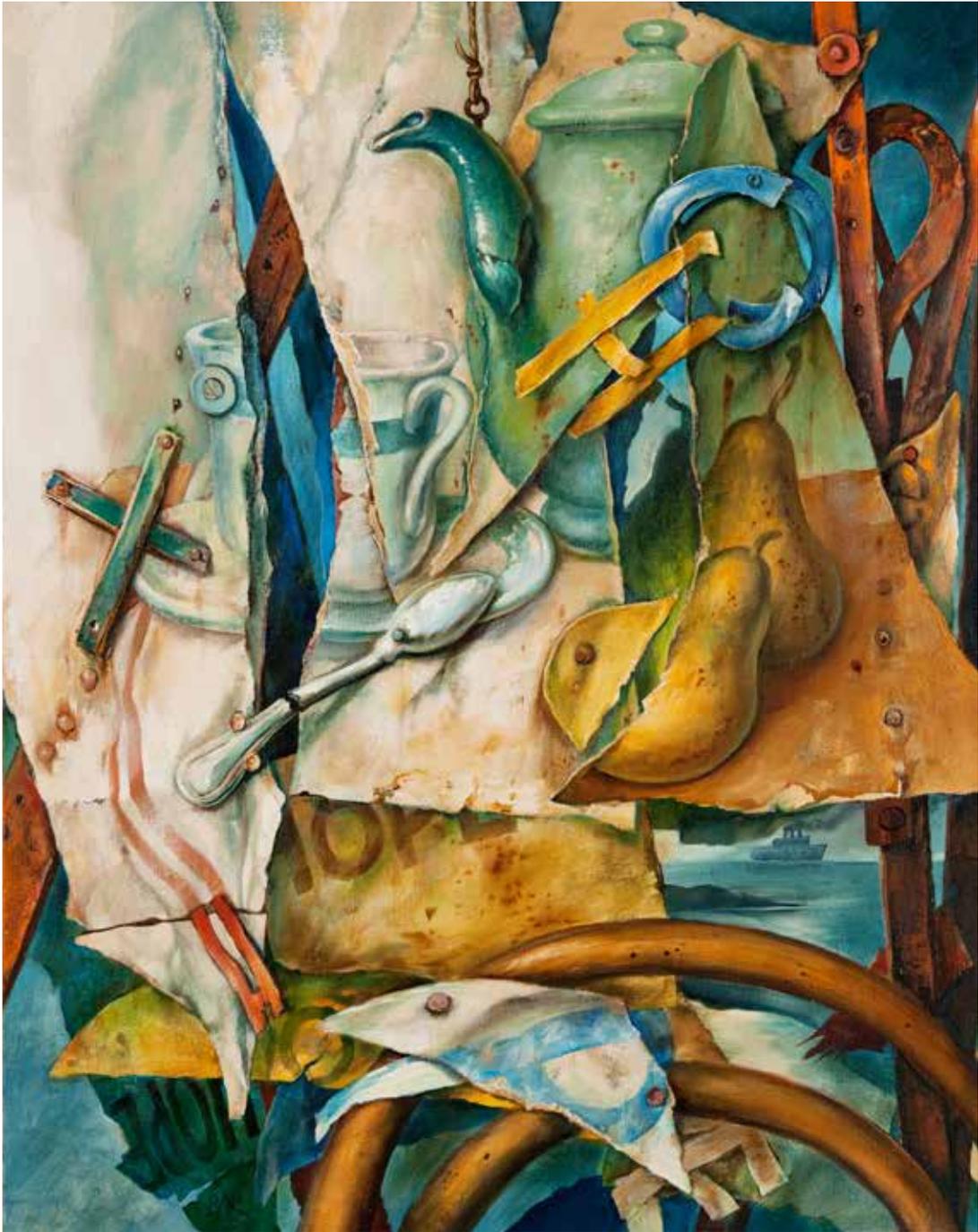
Dr. Henry Knight is the Director of the Cohen Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College in New Hampshire and teaches in the College’s academic program, offering the nation’s first undergraduate major in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. He serves on the Church Relations Committee of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC and several other national and international advisory committees related to Holocaust Studies. Knight earned his B.A. in English from the University of Alabama and his M.Div. and D.Min. degrees from Emory University where he concentrated in theology and pastoral hermeneutics. Active in national as well as local interfaith relations, Knight also served as Director of the Council for Holocaust Education of Tulsa, Oklahoma – a partnership of the Jewish Federation of Tulsa and The Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art. He joined the Keene State College community in July 2007.



With a Yellow Patch | Oil on canvas | 35 x 46" | BK1806



Reflecting | Oil on canvas | 30 x 40" | BK1794



Chairmanship | Oil on canvas | 30 x 24" | BK1769



Identities | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1778



Under Attack | Oil on canvas | 12 x 12" | BK1801



Still Life with Letters | Oil on canvas | 9 x 12" | BK1796



Stormy | Oil on canvas | 12 x 16" | BK1797



Patience | Oil on canvas | 12 x 12" | BK1791



To My Eye | Oil on canvas | 40 x 30" | BK1799



Ink | Oil on canvas | 20 x 20" | BK1779



Ongoing | Oil on canvas | 20 x 20" | BK1790



Wanderer's Tea Cup | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1803



With an O in the Middle | Oil on canvas | 15 x 18" | BK1805



Red Thread | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1793



Light Seism | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1784



Basics | Oil on canvas | 12 x 16" | BK1766



The Swinging Ones | Oil on canvas | 20 x 24" | BK1798



Shared Vision | Oil on canvas | 20 x 20" | BK1795



As Ever | Oil on canvas | 12 x 16" | BK1764



From Above | Oil on canvas | 16 x 12" | BK1774



Hanging On | Oil on canvas | 16 x 12" | BK1777



Trace of Smoke | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1800



Leaning | Oil on canvas | 12 x 9" | BK1783



Upward | Oil on canvas | 28 x 22" | BK1802



Proclaimer | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1792



Into a Wall | Oil on canvas | 16 x 12" | BK1781



Foreground with Moon | Oil on canvas | 16 x 12" | BK1773



Explorer | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1772



Into the Future | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1782



Obstructed View | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1789



Engaged | Oil on canvas | 28 x 22" | BK1771



In the Box | Oil on canvas | 26 x 21" | BK1780



Many More Times | Oil on canvas | 24 x 36" | BK1786



Multiples | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1787



A Soldier's Tale | Oil on canvas | 12 x 9" | BK1765



White Cup and the Rest | Oil on canvas | 12 x 9" | BK1804



Carrying Over | Oil on canvas | 9 x 12" | BK1768



Borrowed Identity | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1767



Act of Balance | Mixed media on paper | 25.5 x 19.5" | BK1807



Asleep | Mixed media on paper | 25.5 x 19.5" | BK1808



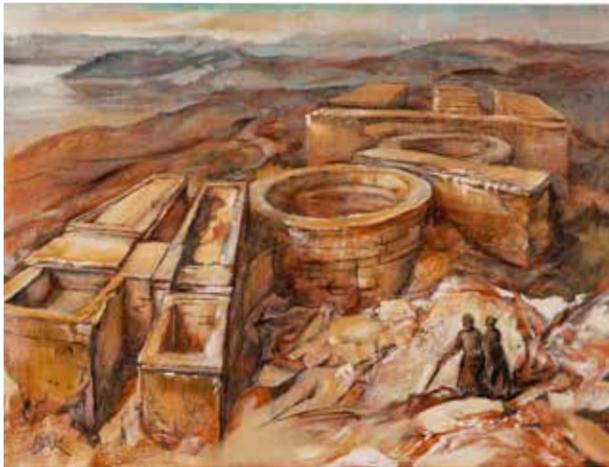
Marked | Mixed media on paper | 11 x 12.5" | BK1814



Green Cup | Mixed media on paper
11 x 8.5" | BK1811



Four Letters | Mixed media on paper | 8.5 x 11" | BK1810



Too Distant Lights | Mixed media on paper | 8.5 x 11" | BK1819



Bystanders | Mixed media on paper | 8.5 x 11" | BK1809



Indications | Crayon and gouache on paper | 6 x 15" | BK1812



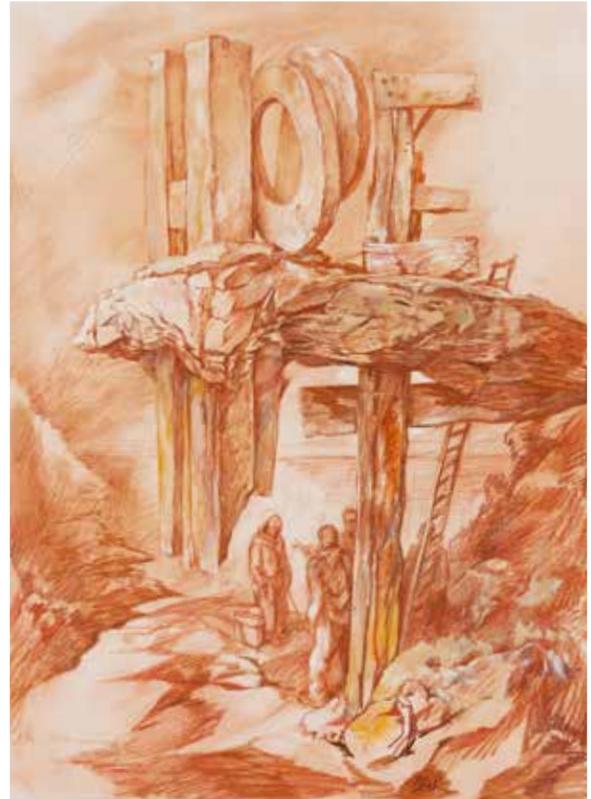
On the Threshold (A) | Mixed media on paper
30 x 22" | BK1815



On the Threshold (B) | Mixed media on paper
25.5 x 19.5" | BK1816



On the Threshold (C) | Mixed media on paper
25.5 x 19.5" | BK1817



In the Right Direction | Mixed media on paper
25.5 x 19.5" | BK1813

Biography

Samuel Bak



Samuel Bak was born in 1933 in Vilna, Poland, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under 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 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 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. The art of Samuel Bak weaves together personal history and Jewish history to articulate an iconography of his Holocaust experience. Across seven decades of artistic production Mr. 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.



Time Wise | Mixed media on paper | 21.5 x 19.5" | BK1818

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. Mr. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles, scholarly works, and fifteen 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 honorary doctorate degrees from the University of New Hampshire in Durham and Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.



Nesting | Oil on canvas | 36 x 24" | BK1788

Credits:

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PUCKER GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1967 BOSTON

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Please visit www.puckergallery.com to view current and past exhibition catalogues, artist biographies, and subscribe to the *Artwork of the Week* e-mail list.

GALLERY HOURS

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

Sunday 10:30 am to 5:00 pm

We offer one free hour of validated parking at the 200 Newbury Street Garage. The garage driving entrance is located on Exeter Street between Newbury and Boylston Streets. The nearest MBTA stops are Hynes Convention Center or Copley Station on the Green Line.

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

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DATES

18 July through 6 September 2015

OPENING RECEPTION

18 July 2015, 3:00 to 6:00 PM

The public is invited to attend.

The artist will be present.



Enduring Light | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20" | BK1770