

# BAK LOOKS BACK

ARTIST CURATED COLLECTION: 1946–2023



PUCKER GALLERY | BOSTON



**FORMATION, 1990**  
Oil on linen  
21.75 x 18.25"  
BK2915

***"Living with paradoxes is one of the dances of life itself."***

**— BROTHER THOMAS BEZANSON**

Living with the art of Sam Bak is both a joy and a source of questions about the meaning and purpose of life. We have been privileged to present dozens of exhibitions of his art, and most shows are an in-depth visual exploration of a specific object or symbol (the 6-pointed star, the pear, the game of chess, birds, (un)still lifes, to name just a few). Questions continue to propel the conversation and exchange. How do we make this a better world? Can Art—specifically that of Bak—help the world find a clear path to respect and equity? We believe it can. This artist-curated retrospective is another opportunity to engage with the artist's journey. Welcome. May you once again be challenged by the paradoxes that energize and make up Life.

**— BERNIE AND SUE PUCKER**



**EXPLANATION, 1947**  
Ink on cardboard  
8.25 x 11.75"  
BK2771

## A FEW SHORT AND INCOMPLETE INSIGHTS INTO MY LIFE'S LONG STORY

### MY OWN SELF IN A NUTSHELL

**H**ere is our plan: An essential retrospective of my art from its early beginnings till now. Caringly put together of small-sized but meaningful artworks. They shall be displayed at the Gallery of my dear friend Bernie Pucker, who began exhibiting my art in 1968 and gave me the great fortune of uninterruptedly representing my output. Words can't express the gratitude I owe him, not only for the success of my American venture, but so far beyond it. His unflinching belief in the importance of my art has determined many of my life-changing decisions.

This show will include a "first:" early creations dating from 1946, gouaches I made in a DP camp in Germany, as well as later works I did in Israel, Paris, and in the Rome of the early sixties, a city that brought me my early success. Altogether about sixty works curated by me, many of which have never been shown. They are important samples of my artistic past, of which I am as satisfied as I am of many of my later works.

What a wonderful challenge! I always believed that less is more, and that the magical little that contains a lot is the secret of true art. My present show promises to be small but dense.

These days—since my very "promising future" is now mostly behind my back—grant me a fresh view of the entire landscape of my creations, as well as of my life. And when I meander over their ups and downs, thinking of the life-changing choices I made, remembering events of joy and of pain, revisiting my beginnings, recalling the unexplainable chances of survival, wondering, and wandering through my past—I inevitably ponder my artistic legacy. How could I assess it? Will it be understood in the years that shall survive me?

*Cogito, ergo sum*, or in English: I think, therefore I am (that is about all the Latin I possess and most of what I know about Monsieur Descartes). However, since *I am and I think, I draw and I paint* (and, yes, sometimes like now, *I write*). For innumerable years I have been painting every

day of the week, and for many hours, with a passion resembling a disciplined obsession—or the other way round, an obsession that looks like a passion. It explains the sheer volume of my catalogue raisonné. The art of painting is my language; unspoken, made of images, of shapes and colors, and a myriad of brushstrokes, visible and invisible. And when it shouts it is silent.

The different visions of what my art consists of, parallel realities of our familiar world, have been produced since my very young beginnings, and throughout my long life. A life in which at the reach of my senior years I learned to master the technique of art's digital tools. All in all, this passion has allowed me to grow, temporarily leave aside the burdens of trauma, have fun, learn and absorb, read and listen, attract amazement and attention, become more adult, more serious, grow a beard, make a living, create a family, become a parent, establish a reputation, then divorce and remarry, and feel at ease in my skin. Alongside that, it has often been for me a mental mirror that helped me to look into myself. Since for years I tried to understand what was going on in my head, what defined my thoughts, and determined my character. This inner self questioning demanded intimate honesty. Reaching one soul's lowest layers can be unbearably painful. It is better accomplished when

attempted with help. This is what I chose.

The old questions of "who am I" and "what is the nature of the world into which I have been cast" is the characteristic predicament of most artists. The answers vary, and so do the choices of their usage. Some perceptions are kept private, others are offered to the public domain.

At present, at 90, I feel as if I have lived numerous lives. It is a feeling I share with many others of my age. However, one of my lives is quite special. When I was about age 3 or 4, my family became conscious of my unusual talent and decided to consider me a future artist. The artworks that I have produced since then, in the 86 years of irrepressible creativity, speak not only of my person and its psyche, but also of the multiple cultures that have shaped my worldview. Of how they enriched my perception of the trials and tribulations of the humans on the multifaceted continents of our planet. My personal experience of the Holocaust, in which humanity had exposed itself at its extremes, the worst of its capabilities—and their best, though too rarely—made me especially conscious of our human condition. The banality of evil isn't a legend; nor is the story of human altruism. We are, therefore we must think and think well. We think, therefore we are prepared, not only for the worst, but also for the best.



**FACE, 1946**  
Watercolor on paper  
12 x 11"  
BK2770



**MARKET DAY, 1947**  
Watercolor on paper  
10.75 x 14.25"  
BK2772



**WET ROAD, 1947**  
Watercolor on cardboard  
14.25 x 10.75"  
BK2773

Both have generously fallen into my lap. A Catholic priest and several nuns risked their lives and helped to save mine, and the life of my mother. Let their God bless their souls. After we survived the Holocaust, we found ourselves stuck in the Empire of the Soviets of which we had to escape. What followed were three years in a camp for Displaced Persons in Germany. Formerly, the Nazi invaders and their local collaborators had slaughtered most of the Lithuanian Jews, among them my father and grandparents. Some Litvaks who survived, and partly overcame their shocking trauma, nostalgically clung to their pre-war

mentality. Among them, I guess, was my mother. She tried to bring me up in the spirit of our old Vilna Yiddishkeit, tainted by a secular view of the world; it meant being resilient, rational, and intellectually committed. It meant being well dressed and always looking proud. And on top of it all, as a bright cherry on a succulent cake—have an undeniable dose of self-irony.

In 1948, Mother insisted that we emigrate to the newly established State of Israel, while I preferred Paris. She had to drag me by my hair to the Jewish state and I am grateful for what she did. I learned a decent Hebrew and a lot about what it meant to be an educated Jew of the twentieth century. Fine teachers from Germany infused me with a good dose of Jewish culture and a view of our traditions that did not clash with my God-fearing atheism. I owe them so very, very much. It was at a time when the Israel of its beginnings was almost the opposite of what it has become.

Israel, oh Israel of the days of promises, how well I remember our arrival to its shores. We are on a boat that reaches Haifa. We feel so profoundly harmed and innocent, and so disregarding of what, in our name, is being done to others. The war of independence is still on. It is a time of great austerity. We settle in Tel Aviv, and I begin my studies in a language that I hardly possess. Later I study art. The Israeli Art scene is irremediably fragmented between local geniuses seeking power. It has little patience for the bespectacled and shy youngster, who for almost three years is forced to wear the sweat soaked uniform of the Israeli army. But I have a dream. I must go to Paris. I believe that only Paris can grant me what I so much desire: the true “revelation” of the secrets of great art.

In Paris I quickly have a revelation of another kind: the sponsored university restaurants, which aren't the best in the world, are the cheapest. It is a great point in the city's favor. The Beaux Arts School is still marinated in an academic sauce but the true Avant Garde is happening nearby. Narrow and dark streets lead to small art galleries where everything happens. But the famous Parisian art scene of this glorious city is as morcellated as anywhere else. Aesthetic perception that tells us what Koshher beauty is must be dug up in the numerous political manifests of the Existentialists, Marxists, or flagbearers of other ideologies. It all comes to words, words, and words. Thank you, Mister Hamlet.

And yet Paris is great. I learn to speak a French tainted by my residue of Polish and Yiddish. I am also a foreigner, exempt from fighting in Algeria! The famous art galleries aren't everything. My university card guarantees many reductions. I enjoy the availability of classical movies, they mesmerize me, theaters and concerts abound, the coffeehouses provide great conversations, and the museums, oh, the museums...

For many centuries artists learned to paint by openly copying their masters; not anymore in the twentieth. Now they cleverly and secretly imitate. They often borrow or brashly steal, giving their outputs some clever twists that claim undisputed originality. The rest is left to the artistic invisibility of financial exploitations.

That is the new Zeitgeist, yet I love it. I meander in the streets packed with art galleries, focusing on the things that intrigue me. I sniff to my right and my left, return home "inspired," and exercise in the spirit

of what I saw. What I do in the academy, I discard. What I do for myself, I keep. Folders and canvases begin to pile up in my lodgings. A Parisian art gallery becomes interested in my output, but I avoid being committed. It is too soon. Vive la Liberté!

Then I give up part of my liberty, marry, and move to Italy.



**RAIN IN TEL AVIV, 1950**  
Oil on paper  
19 x 12.5"  
BK2885



**TREES, 1950**  
Oil on paper  
19 x 12"  
BK2887

Italy loves my art, and I love Italy. Preserving my slight Polish accent, I learn to speak Italian, and some people think that I am from the Vatican. The paintings I create in Rome become more and more abstract, while my inner spirit, forever in awe of the great Masters of the Renaissance, begins to absorb the long-lasting lessons of Mantegna, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and others. My perception of their art gives me the knowledge of a much-needed craft.

Slowly I enter a transitional phase, which gradually prepares me for a representational mode of painting. I invent images, seemingly realistic, and pack them with metaphors and symbols that covertly enable me to tell the story of my tragic past and prepare me for an expansion of my basic discourse. I am on the move. I pack up our belongings, my family, and we leave...

The Israel of 1966 welcomes me and my art with open arms. Having become representational, I am bringing back to it the inexistent Jewish art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I begin selling so well that most of the artistic establishment jealously questions the value of my output. I try to ignore it. I suffocate, I need air.

Gradually, all these local disenchantments begin to lose their relevance. An international awareness to what I am producing brings me to New York. In later years, back to Paris, then Lausanne, and finally to my ultimate station, a civilized and sheltering bubble based near Boston. Wonderful writers liberate me from the difficult task of interpreting or explaining my art. I can't thank them enough!

What I am painting, an alternate world of my invention, seems to have become a *fait accompli*, and the many wonderful interpreters of my art continue doing their brilliant jobs. Ironically, the Holocaust is of

help because it explains a lot about my strange world. A lot, but not everything, as art often contains mysteries that remain enigmas even to its own makers. Paintings aren't rebuses, they do not contain definitive solutions. I am delighted when people look at my work and wonder. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston acquired one of my large canvases and displayed it in its rotunda; some of its docents told me that it attracted many viewers and

triggered interesting interrogations.

I am still pondering the basic nature of my artistic legacy. I hope that it can be enjoyed for its formal aspects, but it is more. It summarizes my view of the world's present concerns. An ecological menace that grinds whatever it finds. Social injustice: for certain humans the world is great, for some it is okay, for many others—a perpetual struggle, a mess. Things aren't what they seem to be. As ever before, people are capable of the worst and the best. Wars and genocides continue to brutalize humanity. Yet life's force inspires us to overcome all menacing ordeals. Things must be repaired and restored, even when we assume that they will again be destroyed. The timeworn slogan

of "enjoy your life, enjoy the day," isn't totally wrong. The light on the horizon is always aglow, and the promise of hope, so indispensable for our existence, is forever inscribed into the man-made rainbows of my artistic reporting, they guarantee a whole palette of salvations. Please, take into your hand the brushes that fit, and you will acquit...

Have I gone too far?

I know, I know—but think about it—irony provides us with a much better perspective. Irony humanizes us, it isn't cynicism or sarcasm. It allows for humor. When we are lucky, when there is bread on the table, there is so much to enjoy. Music, painting, good writing, friendships, love, and why not a mini retrospective of... *Samuel Bak*.



**WORKERS, 1950**  
Gouache on paper  
20 x 25.5"  
BK2888





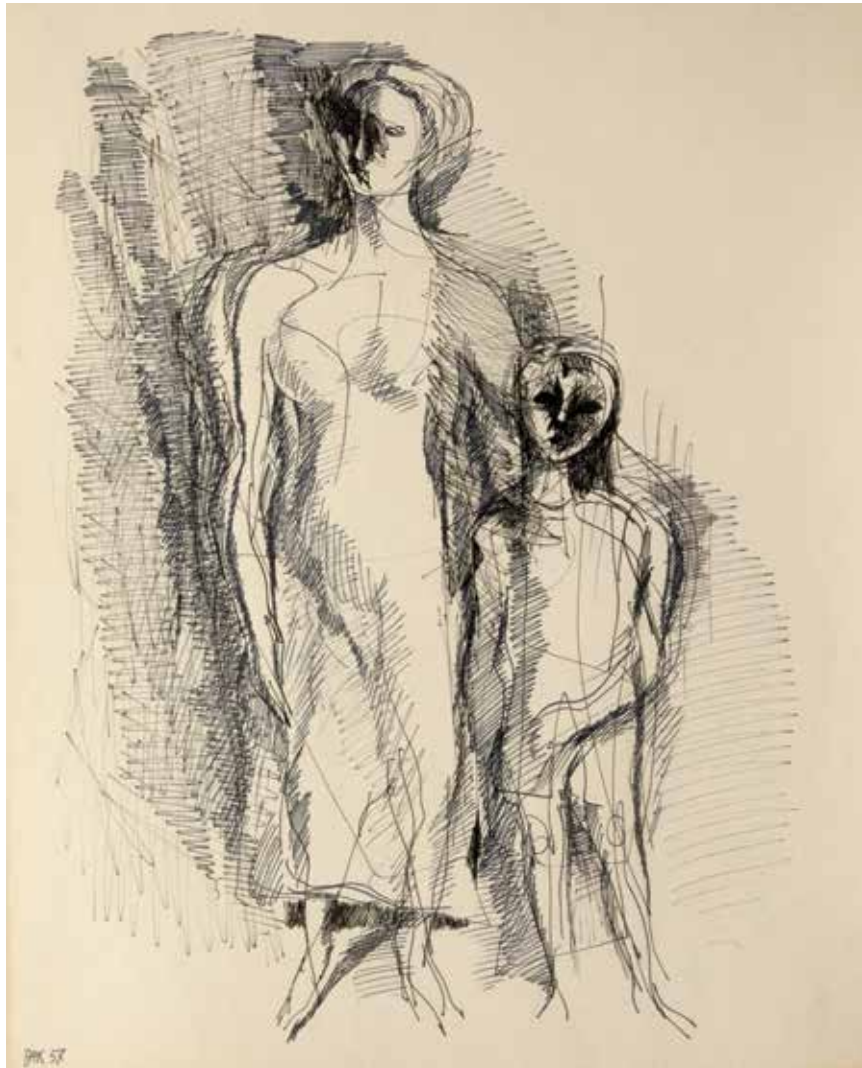
**HAIFA PORT, 1952**  
Oil on paper  
12 x 18.5"  
BK2886



**IN MY ROOM, 1956**  
Ink on paper  
14.5 x 10.5"  
BK2889



**CAFÉ, 1956**  
Ink and black pencil on paper  
10.5 x 14.75"  
BK2890



**MOTHER AND SON, 1957**  
Ink on paper  
18.5 x 15.5"  
BK2893



**THE CONCERT, 1958**  
Watercolor on paper  
8.75 x 11"  
BK2894



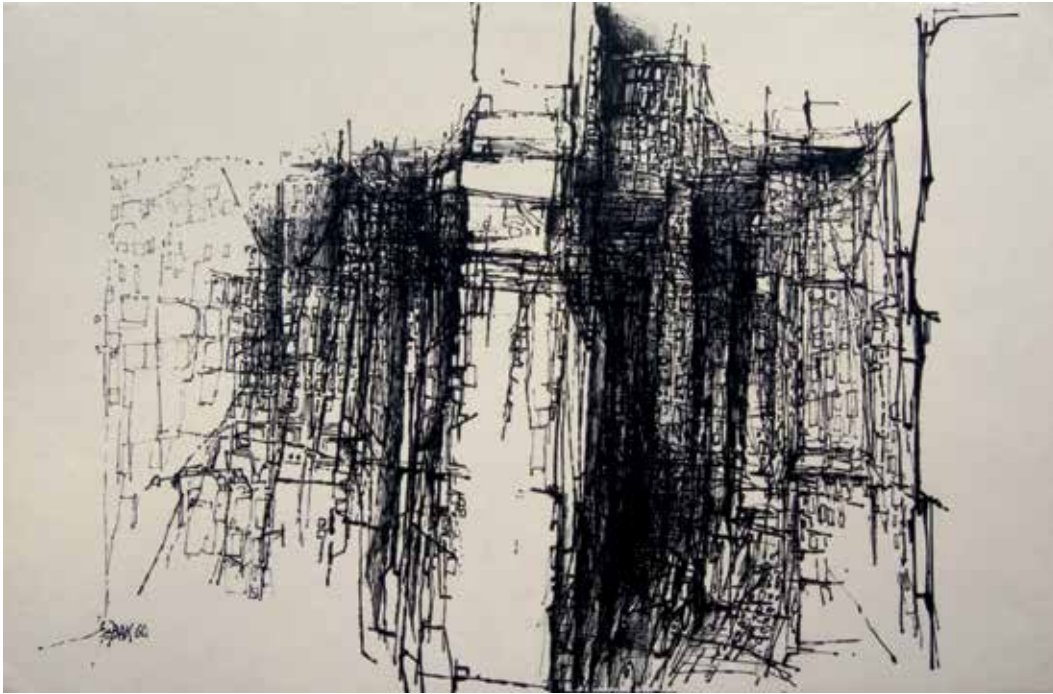
**HAPPY PRINCE, 1958**  
Gouache on paper  
25.75 x 19.5"  
BK2891



**SAD PRINCE, 1958**  
Gouache on paper  
25.75 x 19.75"  
BK2892



**ON THE LAKE**  
1959  
Oil on linen  
16 x 23.75"  
BK2909



**TWO STREETS**  
1960  
Ink on paper  
13 x 20"  
BK2895



**EXCAVATION, 1959-1960**  
Gouache on paper  
19.75 x 27.75"  
BK2904



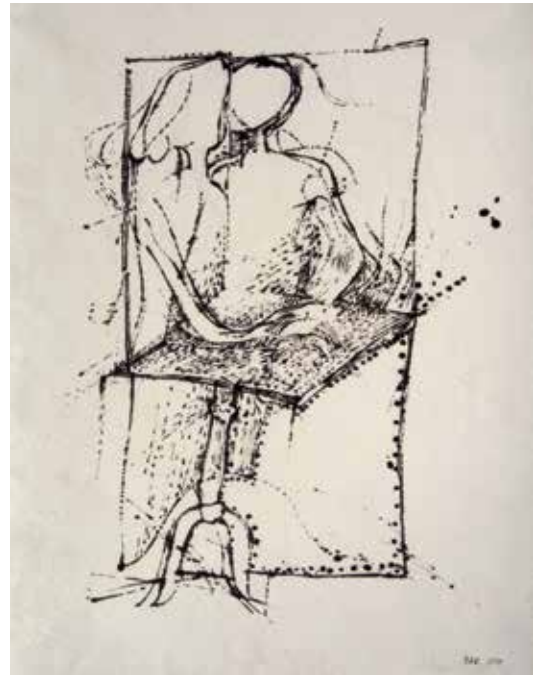
**STAR, 1962**  
Mixed media on paper  
22 x 13.25"  
BK2907



**OPEN DOOR, 1963**  
Gouache on paper  
19.75 x 14"  
BK2897



**CONVERSATION, 1963–1964**  
Ink and crayon on paper  
9.5 x 12.75"  
BK2908



**TWO LOVERS AND ONE TABLE, 1964**  
Ink on paper  
12 x 9.5"  
BK2899

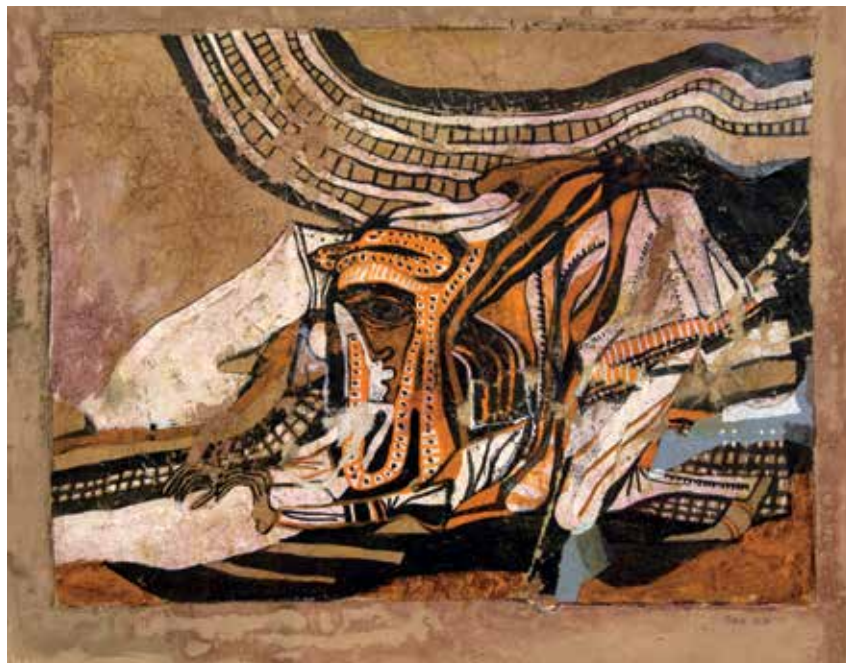


**OLD VILLAGE, 1964**  
Mixed media on paper  
20 x 14"  
BK2905



**BLUE ANGEL, 1964**

Oil on linen  
19.75 x 23.75"  
BK2910



**RITUAL, 1964**

Gouache and collage  
on paper  
11.5 x 14"  
BK2900





**UNCERTAIN ANATOMY, 1965**  
Ink on paper  
9.25 x 12.25"  
BK2911



**B & A & K, 1965**  
Gouache on paper  
10 x 14"  
BK2898



**THREE TIMES THREE, 1965**  
Gouache and collage on paper  
19.75 x 14"  
BK2896



**ADJUSTMENT, 1965**  
Oil on linen  
19.75 x 24.25"  
BK2903



**FIGURE (NUDE DESCENDING), 1965**

Oil on linen  
24 x 18.25"  
BK2906



**LOCAL COLOR, 1967**  
Oil on linen  
9.75 x 14"  
BK2902



**IN THE PARK, 1967**  
Oil on linen  
16.5 x 13"  
BK2901



**ROOTS, 1968**  
Ink on paper  
15.5 x 10.5"  
BK324



**REISENDES OBJEKT, 1973**  
Black and white pencil on gray paper  
13 x 11.5"  
BK2912



**THE LISTENER, 1973**  
Oil on linen  
14 x 10.75"  
BK2916



**VOYAGE IN TIME, 1975-1976**  
Oil on linen  
9.5 x 13.75"  
BK2913



**TI-KUN, 1978**  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 16"  
z9



**SHEMA, 1979**  
Oil on linen  
14 x 17.5"  
BK2917



**IN LINE, 1984**  
Mixed media on paper  
9.5 x 13"  
BK551



**TEA TIME, 1986**  
Oil on linen  
18.25 x 14.5"  
BK2914





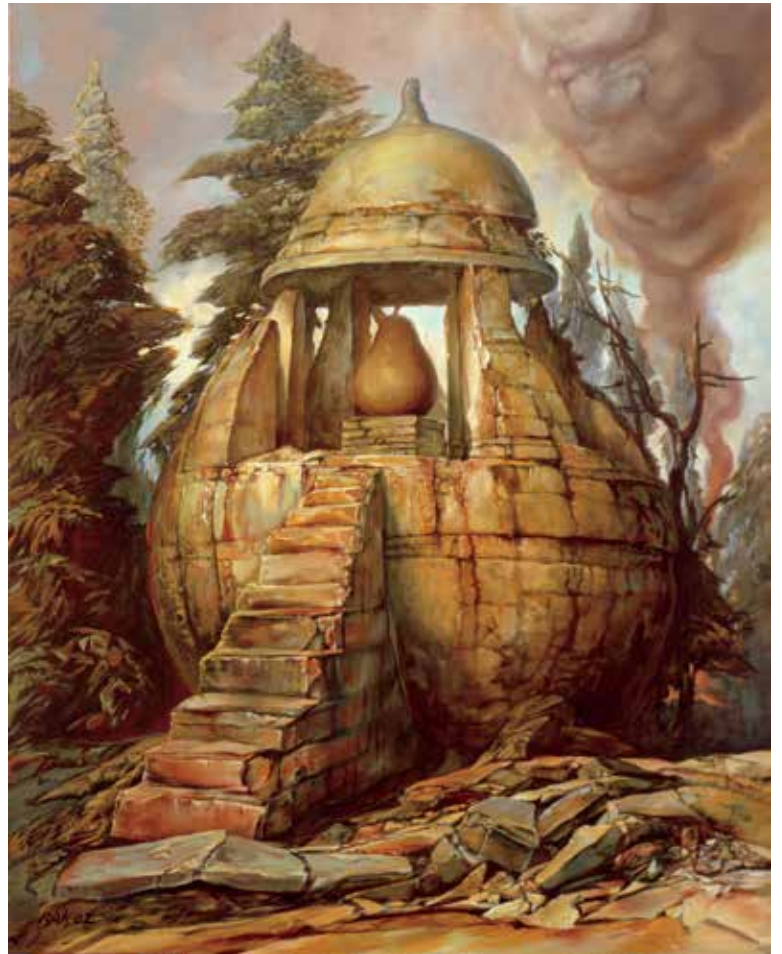
**INTO EXILE, 1994**  
Oil on linen  
18 x 21.5"  
BK194



**STUDY FOR KRISTALLNACHT, 1992**  
Oil on linen  
16 x 13"  
BK184



**DARK LIGHT, 2001**  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 12"  
BK819



**SANCTUARY W, 2002**  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 16"  
BK971



**TEDDY INTERRUPTED, 2002**  
Watercolor on paper  
15 x 11"  
BK1108



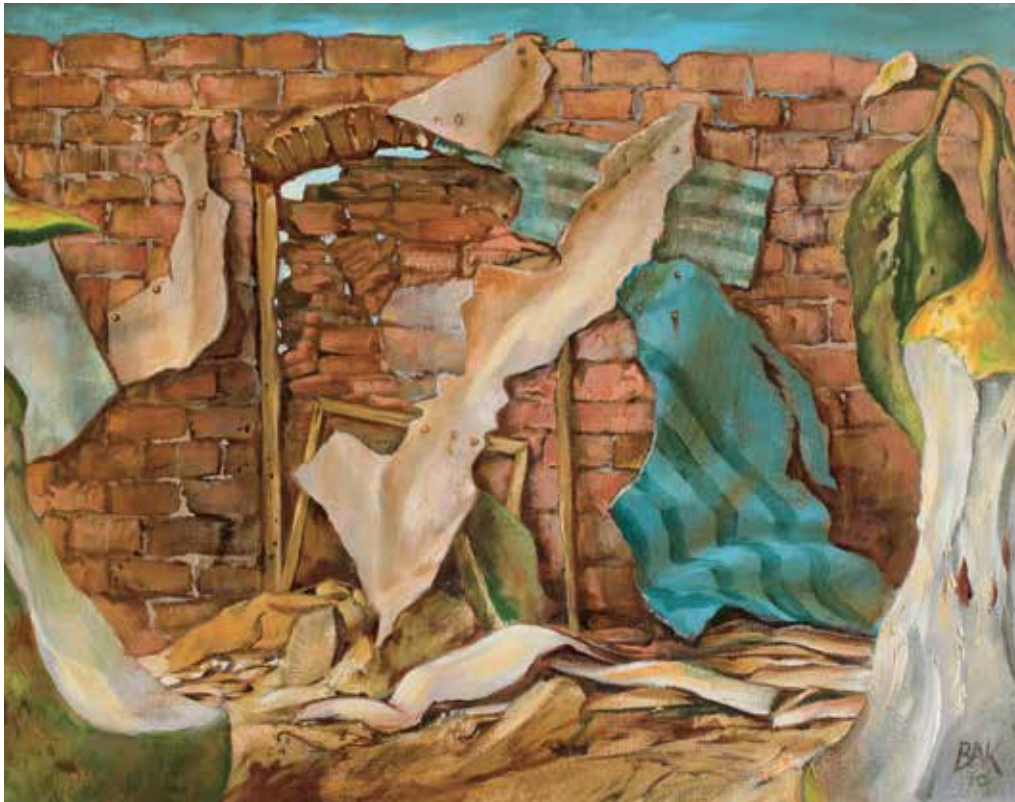
**STILL LIFE WITH OPENING, 2005**  
Pastel and gouache  
9 x 16.5"  
BK1085



**FROM ASHES, 2006**  
Oil on canvas  
14 x 11"  
BK1178



**ADRIFT, 2006**  
Oil on canvas  
10 x 14"  
BK1202



**ADAM AND EVE AND THE HAPPY END, 2010**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16"  
BK1393



**LETTING GO, 2013**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16"  
BK1652



**TRIO AT REST, 2013**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16"  
BK1738



**TWO, 2015**  
Ink on paper  
7.75 x 7.75"  
BK1870



**VERY INVOLVED, 2016**  
Watercolor and egg tempera on paper  
8 x 11.75"  
BK2022



**MENTIONED, 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 12"  
BK2126



**EQUIPPED, 2017**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 12"  
BK2318



**VIEWPOINTS, 2023**  
Gouache and crayon on Procreate  
16.75 x 13"  
BK2918



# SAMUEL BAK

Samuel Bak was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933, 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 the war, 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. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings was met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, followed by solo exhibitions at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963.

It was after these exhibitions that a major change in his art occurred. There was a distinct shift from abstraction to a metaphysical figurative means of expression. Ultimately, this transformation crystallized into his present pictorial language. Bak's work weaves together personal and Jewish history to articulate an iconography of his Holocaust experience. Across eight decades of artistic production, Samuel Bak has explored and reworked a set of metaphors, a visual grammar, and a vocabulary that ultimately privileges questions. His art depicts a world destroyed, and yet provisionally pieced back together, preserving the memory of the twentieth-century ruination of Jewish life and culture by way of an artistic

passion and precision that stubbornly announces the creativity of the human spirit.

Bak has exhibited extensively in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States. He lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, New York, and Lausanne before settling in Massachusetts in 1993 and becoming an American citizen. Bak has been the

subject of articles, scholarly works, and over twenty books, most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*. In 2001, he published his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*, which has been translated into four languages, and a biography entitled *Art & Life: The Story of Samuel Bak* was published in 2023. He has been the subject of two documentary films, was the recipient of the 2002 German Herkomer Cultural Prize, and has received honorary doctorate degrees from: the University of New Hampshire in Durham; Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania; Massachusetts College of Art in Boston; the University of Nebraska Omaha; and Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA.

In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. In addition to the more than 50 works already donated by the artist, the Museum will accept more than 100 works in the coming years, and ultimately build a collection that spans the artist's career. In 2019, The Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan, opened at the Holocaust Museum Houston to house more than 125 works donated by the artist. A 2020 exhibition at University of Nebraska Omaha led to the Samuel Bak Museum: The Learning Center, which opened Phase One at UNO in early 2023. Phase Two envisions a brand new, state-of-the-art, free-standing facility to house over 500 works donated by Bak.

**PUCKER GALLERY**

240 Newbury Street, 3rd floor  
Boston, MA 02116  
617.267.9473  
contactus@puckergallery.com

**GALLERY HOURS:**

Monday through Saturday:  
10:00 AM to 5:30 PM  
Sunday: 1:00 to 5:00 PM

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

**CREDITS:**

*Design:*  
Leslie Anne Feagley

*Editors:*  
Jeanne Koles and Beth Plakidas

*Photography:*  
John Davenport and  
Briana Howard

© 2023 Pucker Gallery  
Printed in Canada by  
Friesens, Inc.

Cover:

**WITH A CLEAR BACKGROUND, 2013**  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 9"  
BK1741



**ADAM AND EVE, DAY AND NIGHT, 2010**  
Oil on canvas  
Dptych, 16 x 12" each  
BK1388



# BAK LOOKS BACK

ARTIST CURATED COLLECTION: 1946–2023

**DATES:**

21 October through 3 December 2023

**PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION:**

Saturday 21 October 2023, 3 to 6 PM  
The artist will be present.

**ONLINE EVENTS:**

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

Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) to view current and past exhibition  
catalogues and subscribe to the *Artwork of the Week* email list.