



RENEWED
ENGAGEMENT

CHESS IN THE ART OF

Samuel Bak

PUCKER GALLERY
BOSTON



The Knight's Domain, 2017
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2262

“ I STRUCTURE THE PROCESS OF MY WORK IN A WAY THAT MAKES GREAT USE OF MY OLD, TRUSTED AND MYSTERIOUS ASSOCIATE CALLED THE SUBCONSCIOUS. I PAINT AND I DISCOVER WHAT I AM DOING. THAT IS THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF MY “CUISINE,” THE TRUSTWORTHY TECHNIQUE OF THE SURREALISTS. YET THE FINISHED PRODUCT DOESN'T LEGALLY BELONG TO THEIR WORLD. IT IS VISUAL THINKING. THE READING OF MY ART BY PEOPLE LIKE UTE BEN YOSEF FASCINATES ME AND DEEPENS THE SCOPE OF MY UNDERTAKING. AND THE UNDERTAKING IS A REFLECTION, A PONDERING AND WONDERING, A RECALLING AND A SHARING OF THE TRIALS OF OUR EARTHLY EXISTENCE.”

—Samuel Bak—

RENEWED ENGAGEMENT

CHESS IN THE ART OF

Samuel Bak



One Knight for All, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2303

“ I AM COMPETING AGAINST A YOUNGER SELF. ”

—Samuel Bak—

The art historian Aby Warburg coined the term *pathos formula* to describe an image with a fixed emotional charge. Contained in the image is a mythical and psychological reference to a visual prototype of human anguish which renders it unique, representing a memory that has survived a dreadful phobic experience and is stored in the collective memory of humankind.

An example of a *pathos formula* would be the Hellenistic sculpture of Laocoön (Vatican Museum) which depicts the unfortunate priest who, against the will of the gods, attempted to expose the deception of the Trojan horse. The vengeful gods sent sea serpents to attack Laocoön and his sons. The statue

epitomizes the agonies of human suffering induced by divine powers. Great artists, like Michelangelo, Albrecht Dürer, and Francisco Goya, had the ability to coin *pathos formulae* in their work. Samuel Bak, too, is endowed with this gift.

The chess motif in the art of Samuel Bak defines a *pathos formula* of the Holocaust. He uses the icon of the Trojan Horse as the emblem of murderous deception. It is represented by the figure of the chess knight, as in *One Knight for All* [BK2303; p2], in which a smoking cannon protrudes from the knight-horse's head, a vertical chess board forming its backdrop. In *The Knight's Domain* [BK2262; p1], the fateful horse, filled with pawn figures representing soldiers, stands on the battlefield on which lie dead or wounded pawns. The horse is flanked by



Observer and Observed, 2018
Oil on canvas
15 x 30"
BK2225

smoking furnaces referencing the devastation of war and the crematoria of the Holocaust.

Contrary to the other Holocaust paintings in Bak's oeuvre, the visual language of the chess motif is fundamentally secular. His engagement with the indifferent godhead is absent. Here the artist acts merely as a seismograph of the unimaginable catastrophe that engulfed humanity. Although Samuel's survival was a matter of chance, in chess there is no element of chance. The players place their pieces where they choose on a board with little room for creativity or mercy.

Chess has an additional meaning to Bak. After liberation, the boy and his mother, Mitzia, crossed Europe in a futile search for surviving family members, finally arriving at the displaced persons camp in Landsberg in Bavaria (ironically the town in whose prison Adolf Hitler had written *Mein Kampf*). Exhausted, Mitzia and Samuel were met by Nathan Markovsky, a representative of the Jewish administration of the camp, who received them with kindness and empathy. He was a survivor of the Dachau Concentration Camp and had lost both his wife and two daughters, one in the Kovno Ghetto, in terrible circumstances.

Later he became Samuel's stepfather, lovingly nicknamed Markusha. He tried not to replace Samuel's father and the

boy was careful not to invade the space that belonged to the memory of his daughters. But in an attempt to grow closer to his stepson, Markusha taught Samuel to play chess. The family settled in Israel in 1948 where Markusha, who had been involved with chess before the Holocaust, gradually began to lose his mind. Samuel Bak responded to his terribly humiliating state:

"... I tried to imagine the inner spaces of his structured world, which was governed by rational rules that had become, in his youth, the underlying source of his certitudes. I then thought about the cataclysmic forces that swept through him in the black years of the Holocaust and all the havoc and destruction that came with them. I translated those forces into images of a world of chess after the universal flood, when hardly anything remained intact." (SB)

The chess paintings are Samuel Bak's obituary in honour of his stepfather. And as Markusha's rational mind began fragmenting when the dementia ran its course, so too are rational rules wanting in the fragmenting world in which Bak's disintegrating chess pieces are scattered, eventually appearing as



Nocturnal Encounter, 2018
Gouache and pastel on paper
6.25 x 9.75"
BK2339



Hobby, 2018
Gouache and pencil on paper
8 x 9.25"
BK2343

faint echoes of the night in *Nocturnal Encounter* [BK2339: p4].

During the evolution of the human brain, the prefrontal cortex developed the capacity for empathy, sympathy, altruism, courtesy, and mutual concern. In the game of chess, in which Nathan Markovsky sought a world of rationality, this dimension is absent. This is a state alluded to in *Observer and Observed* [BK2225: p3], specifically in the head on the right, which is dismantled from the skull. This absent dimension, however, is contrary to Samuel Bak's own nature. He has studied the game of chess—and still does—with the attempted detachment of one who had been caught up in the absurdity of horrifying events which he tries to understand objectively.

In a novella by Stefan Zweig entitled *The Royal Game*, a famous chess champion with an aridly sterile mental disposition drives his highly imaginative opponent to the brink of insanity. Zweig asks about chess: is it a game, or a science, or an art, or is it something hovering between the three categories?

The game of chess is based on an atavistic imperative of war and battle. In the paintings of Samuel Bak, the rules of the game tumble into a confusion with his imaginative powers and the question "why" intercedes among the elements of horror, irony, mockery, parody, corrosion of time, and concepts of past and future. The chess theme has in the past appeared sporadically in Bak's oeuvre and was presented in two exhibitions at the Pucker Gallery, analyzed in the major publications: *Chess as Metaphor in the Art of Samuel Bak* by Jeanlouis Cornuz (1988) and *The Game Continues: Chess in*

the Art of Samuel Bak by Lawrence L. Langer (1999).

The current exhibition is a recapitulation of the chess theme, with a new dimension. Here the artist confronts his younger self in the light of past, present, and future, as in *Thinkers* [BK2326: p26] studying the melting green pawn motif, submerged in a box. The head frontally facing the viewer is echoed in *Observer and Observed* [BK2225: p3]. It arises from a brick wall, which in Bak's iconography symbolizes the crematoria. The artist has now passed the age by which all the loved ones of his childhood had perished. Time has corroded the memories of his four grandparents who were murdered in the Ponary forest outside Vilna, of his father who was shot dead shortly before the end of the war. In *Arrested Opening* [BK2274: p33], the artefacts in copper-coloured monochromes recall the metal welding workshop of the HKP camp in which his father had to weld metal sheets into wood burners with interconnecting pipes to provide fuel for military trucks. A key penetrates a pawn-shaped lock, dangling on a string, that leads nowhere.

Samuel Bak arranges fragmented scraps of memory into a larger historical picture and transforms the thematic variations of his personal emblems into individual facets. The paintings have acquired a new complexity in their varying moods, in which irony, absurdity, and the sense of the ridiculous play a prevalent role. This constitutes the "radio-active mass" mentioned by Amos Oz in his introduction to Bak's memoir *Painted in Words* (Pucker 2001). It is evident, for example, in the figure of the knight as a rocking horse in *Hobby* [BK2343: p4] and in *Hobby-*



Hobby-Royals, 2018
Oil on canvas
30 x 24"
BK2231

Royals [BK2231 p5], with the king clad in a crimson coat, the queen swathed in a white shroud, and their fragmented steed strutting by their side with rickety pride. Above their heads, a baldachin is held aloft, the cloth alluding to the childhood memory of an imaginary sailboat erected for his delight in the living room of his grandparents, Shifra and Khone.

In the series *Renewed Engagement*, the subject is not dissociated from the background but is intrinsic to the mood of the painting. The themes appear in shredded artefacts ranging from myth to history to personal biography.

The mythical phoenix is the sun bird of the Egyptian god Ra. In cyclical time periods, it perishes in fire to rise again from the ashes and is then reborn. In Christian art, the phoenix is a resurrection motif. In *The Phoenix Endgame* [BK2238; p10], the sun is absent while the levitating chess-phoenix burns incessantly, rising heavenward in suffocating smoke. This phoenix is not renewing itself.

Time and transience are captured in the figures of the king as hourglass in *Time-Factor* [BK2241; front cover], in *Time Consumed* [BK2266; p6] (in which the glass is splintered by



Time Consumed, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2266

flames), in *The Thinker* [BK2273: p11], and in *The Game of Priceless Advice* [BK2285: p23] (where the youthful and the aged opponents face each other across the decaying ruins of the past).

The age of the opponents is not always certain, as the older opponent is sometimes masked, as in *Observer and Observed* [BK2225: p3]. In *Next Move* [BK2226: p8], one player is present only through his gesturing hand and there are two masks in the scene. The mask of the old man is lying among the rubble, discarded and detached. In *Burning Need* [BK2295: p20], the older, masked player and his younger self concentrate obsessively on their game over a burning offering. The burnt offering calls to mind the narrative of Cain and Abel, in which the reason for the rejection of Cain's sacrifice will remain forever unknown.

In *Two and Two* [BK2281: p15], the ghostly heads of two chess

opponents hover over two players dressed in shtetl garb, seated on a chessboard upon a rickety table, constructed of different fragments of memory. His grandmother Shifra's blue curtain doubles as a draped tablecloth and a pawn metamorphoses into a smoking chimney. The moon dominates the scene, which is interspersed with foliage from the Ponary forest.

Wings play an important role in Samuel Bak's iconography. He has said,

"the struggle to take off, to spread my wings, is a familiar motif in my life". (SB)

In the artist's earlier works, wings appear in the theme of Icarus. In *Renewed Engagement*, winged pawns represent angels. They have transmigrated from the guardian angels whose presence he had found comforting during religious



A Gambit of Levitation, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2265

instructions in the monastery which had given him shelter. Their heavy metal wings, however, prevent them from flying despite their pathetic attempts, as in *The Winged Ones* [BK2228: p14] and *A Gambit of Levitation* [BK2265: p7]. They sometimes turn into parodies, as marionettes in *In and Out* [BK2247: p29], or plunge, like Icarus, headlong from a tumultuous sky, as in *Carrier* [BK2325: p27]. They can be saturated with complexity, as in the fiercely erect guardian angel who shelters his defenceless king with his body in *The King's Guardian* [BK2258: p27], his copper mask perhaps hiding the persona of the Malachamoves, the angel of death.

In most of the paintings of *Renewed Engagement*, the shape of an "X", which Bak uses to represent death, furtively appears. The "X" recalls the murder of Samuel Bak's father. One night towards the end of the Holocaust, when Samuel and his mother were sheltered among piles of looted books

in the monastery, perhaps cynically recalled in the pawns constructed by books in *Well Informed* [BK2246: p17], his mother related a dream to him:

"I saw your father. He was waving to me with his hand. A huge black "X" covered his chest. I felt that his life was taken away" (Painted in Words: 359).

Their roots and branches, evoking the memory of the Ponary forest, penetrate anthropomorphic chess figures and call to mind that nature takes its course and memory disintegrates, as in *Interdependent* [BK2251: p9]. In the ruins of past devastation, new tendrils and roots are growing from the figure of the king in *Rooted* [BK2304: p16]. Some pawns, as in *Stationary Troyka* [BK2250: p20], are pierced with arrows, evoking the saintly figure of Saint Sebastian, who did not succumb to his martyrdom.



Next Move, 2019
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2226

Chess boards consist of disintegrating squares between which lichens tiredly grow. They are vertical, forming a backdrop to a scene as in *Stationary Troyka* [BK2250: p20], *Display* [BK2242: back cover] and *Carnevale's Opening* [BK2232: p22] (in which the chess field is interspersed with the dice of chance), levitating as in *Air Power* [BK2240: p21], or arranged in horizontal, reflexive layers, as in *Parallels* [BK2229: p13]. They can also consist of damaged boxes in which the chess figures hide, as in *Waiting For* [BK2276: p34] and *Remembered Game* [BK2345: p31].

Whilst the king as ruler of this feudal hierarchy goes into hiding, the queen represents the formidable dominant female endowed with phallic power, as in *Interrupted* [BK2319: p28]. Perhaps she has emerged here in the figure of Catherine the Great, from the picture book of Russian historical figures which Samuel paged through as a child with grandfather Chayim.

The bishops are the representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy going up in smoke, as in *For the Early Morning* [BK2328: p25]. The rook incarnates from a feudal castle in *Royal Promenade* [BK2283: p23], on rickety stilts in *View of Rookport* [BK2234: p18], to an Auschwitz chimney in *Waiting For* [BK2276: p34], and to a broken besamim box supported and held together by the ever-valiant pawn in *Towering* [BK2340: p32].

The recurring mythological image of the great deluge, sent by an irate deity to drown the earth and its inhabitants, recurs incessantly in the work of Samuel Bak, examples of which are *Promontory* [BK2227: p12] and *In the Wind* [BK2269: p24]. Here, the chess-board promontory is a man-built ark containing pawn-people. There are times when the remnants of the flood are visible on the ocean floor, as in *Riskiers* [BK2312: p26]. In *Pawn-Wreck I* [BK2311: p16], raging waters push down a pawn carrying a life jacket, tied to a rock, unable to perform its task in the deluge.



Interdependent, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2251

Today's world is in the grip of Holocaust fatigue. People prefer not to re-live that pain anymore. Samuel Bak's series of *Renewed Engagement* is an act of resilience against this state of mind. It is a warning against the negation of the dark regions of humanity whose catastrophic eruption he experienced as a child.

A collective repression of man's propensity to evil will result in disastrous repercussions in this world, as meanwhile happened in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. If chained up in the bondage of amnesia in a seemingly utopian world, as the Olympian gods chained up the Titans, the world will once again be consumed by a revolt of the subterranean realms and erupt in an apocalypse, a twilight of the gods, in which all ethical values will topple and fall. Markussha was trapped in a disintegrating mind with a blurred reality, as Bak's chess figures are trapped in a disintegrating sense of certainty. This

is the theme of these powerful paintings, which address the viewer in multiple variations and induce a neurophysiological resonance in which an act of catharsis takes place. They are truly living entities which "know that they owe their existence to the miracle of my survival." (SB)

—UTE BEN YOSEF

Ute Ben Yosef is a contributor to several exhibition catalogues of the Pucker Gallery. She has a BA in Librarianship and a PhD in History of Art and Fine Arts from the University of Pretoria. In conjunction with her graduate work, she completed studies at the Art Historical Institute of the Free University of Berlin. She was a Senior Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Pretoria, before moving to Switzerland where she worked as an art critic for various Swiss newspapers. After returning to Cape Town she served as Head Librarian of the Jacob Gitlin library, whilst lecturing and publishing art historical research papers and monographs on contemporary artists.



The Phoenix Endgame, 2018
Oil on canvas
30 x 24"
BK2238



The Thinker, 2018
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2273



Promontory, 2018
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2227



The Winged Ones, 2018
Oil on canvas
30 x 24"
BK2228



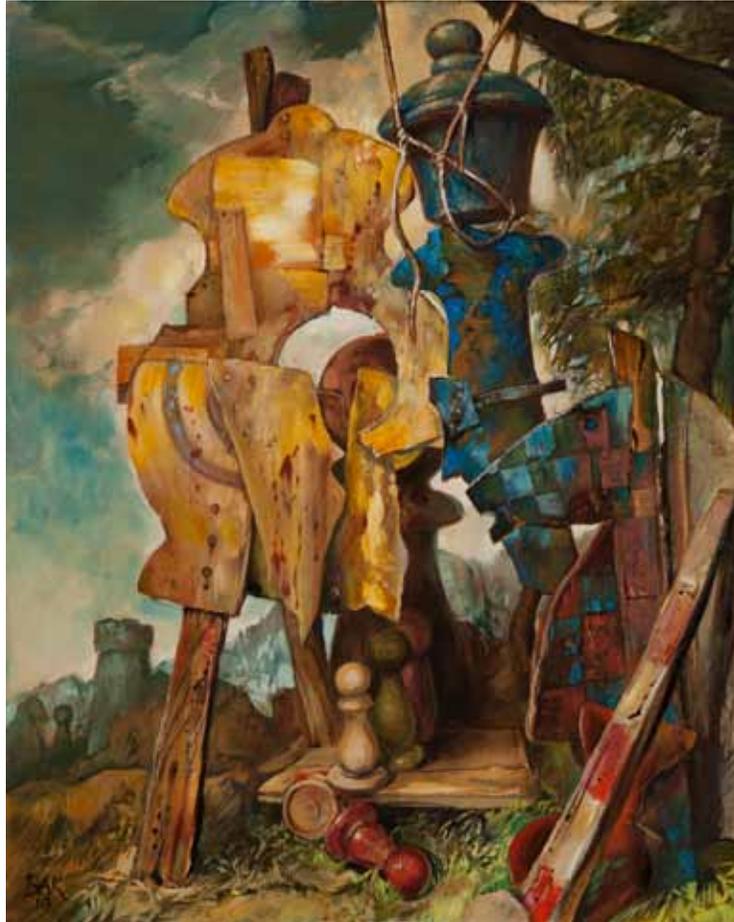
Two and Two, 2017
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2281



Rooted, 2018
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2304



Pawn-Wreck I, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2311



Cut Out for Them, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2264



Well Informed, 2017
Oil on canvas
15 x 30"
BK2246



View of Rookport, 2018
Oil on canvas
24 x 30"
BK2234



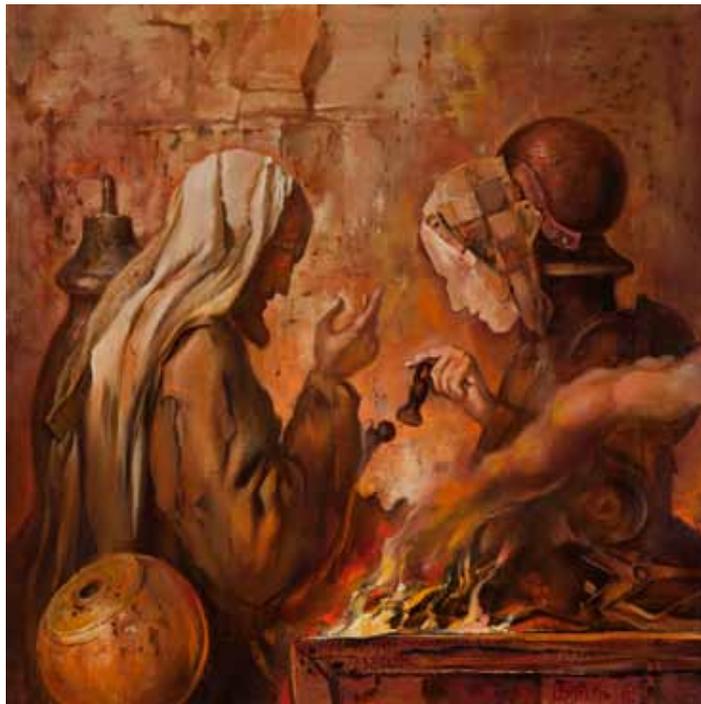
On Courage and Fear, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2260



With Best Luck, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2253



Stationary Troyka, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2250



Burning Need, 2018
Oil on canvas
16 x 16"
BK2295



Air Power, 2018
Oil on canvas
30 x 40"
BK2240



Carnevale's Opening, 2017
Oil on canvas
30 x 24"
BK2232



The Game of Priceless Advice, 2018
Oil on canvas
18 x 14"
BK2285



Royal Promenade, 2018
Oil on canvas
18 x 14"
BK2283



In the Wind, 2018
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2269



For the Early Morning, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2328



Armatures, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2330



Thinkers, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2326



Riskers, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2312



Carrier, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2325



The King's Guardian, 2018
Oil on canvas
20 x 16"
BK2258



Interrupted, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2319



Equipped, 2017
Oil on canvas
12 x 12"
BK2318



In and Out, 2018
Oil on canvas
15 x 30"
BK2247



Purple Flag, 2017
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2270



Remembered Game, 2018
Oil, pastel and pencil on paper
10 x 12.75"
BK2345



Oversight, 2018
Oil, pastel and pencil on paper
11 x 8.5"
BK2333



Three and a Half, 2018
Gouache and pencil on paper
8 x 9.5"
BK2344



Towering, 2018
Gouache, pastel and pencil on paper
9.5 x 8"
BK2340



Arrested Opening, 2018
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2274



Waiting For, 2017
Oil on canvas
16 x 20"
BK2276



Opening, 2018
Gouache and pencil on paper
6.25 x 5.75"
BK2331



In One Line, 2018
Oil, gouache and pencil on paper
5.75 x 12.75"
BK2341

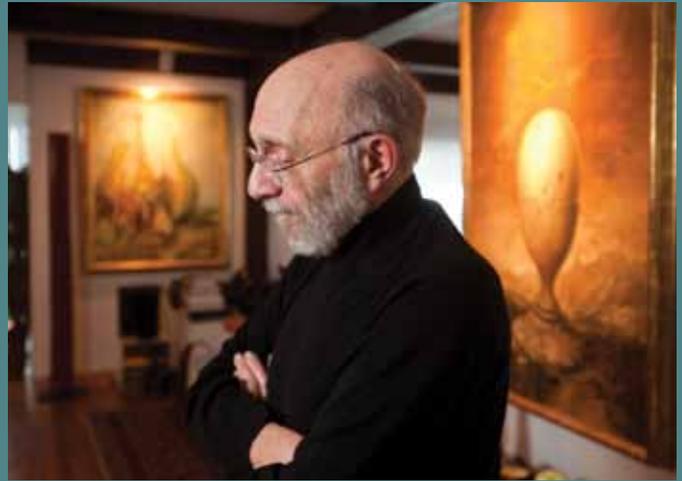
BIOGRAPHY

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 and then German occupation. Bak's artistic talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine years old. While he and his mother survived, his father and four grandparents all perished at the hands of the Nazis. At the end of World War II, he fled with his mother to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp, where he enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School in Munich. In 1948, they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. He studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956 he went to Paris to continue his education at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his artistic studies. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings was met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International" in Pittsburg, followed by solo exhibitions at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963.

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

Since 1959, the artist has had numerous exhibitions in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe,



Israel, and the United States. He has lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, New York, and Lausanne. In 1993, he settled in Massachusetts and became an American citizen. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles, scholarly works, and books. 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, Seton Hill University in Greenburg, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in the city of the artist's birth, on the first two floors of the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, with an initial donation by the artist of 50 works. Bak was nominated by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, and subsequently named by the city's mayor as an Honorary Citizen of Vilnius. In 2019, the Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan opened at the Holocaust Museum Houston to house 128 works donated by the artist. A comprehensive online catalogue raisonné exists at www.kunst-archive.net documenting nearly 8000 works by the artist, his extensive exhibition history, public collections which hold his work, and literature on the artist.

PUCKER

ESTABLISHED 1967 BOSTON

GALLERY

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Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

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Association.

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Design:

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Editors:

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Photography:

John Davenport

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Printed in Canada by Friesens, Inc.

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CHESS IN THE ART OF

Samuel Bak

DATES:

19 October through 1 December 2019

OPENING RECEPTION:

19 October 2019 • 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM

The public is invited to attend. The artist will be present.



COVER: *Time-Factor*, 2017
Oil on canvas
48 x 24"
BK2241

Display, 2018
Oil on canvas
24 x 48"
BK2242