

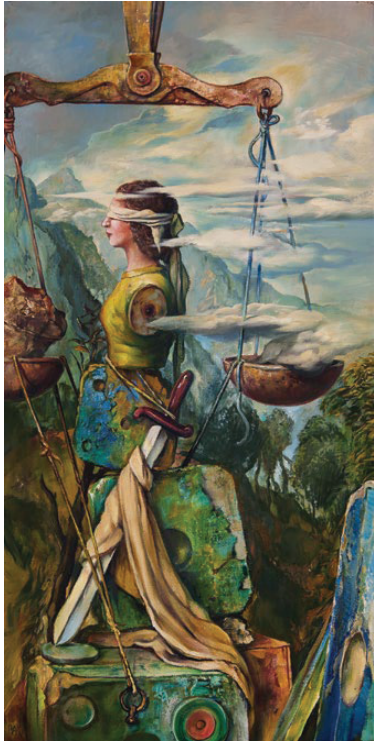
9-2019

Retrieve and Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak

Amy Morris

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

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

Samuel Bak

RETRIEVE AND WITNESS THE ART OF SAMUEL BAK

By Amy Morris

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

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

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

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

Return to Vilna

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

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



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

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

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

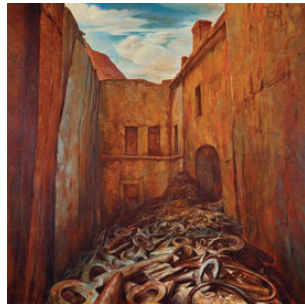


Figure 2: Remnants 2001
Oil on canvas, 36" x 36" (BK850)

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



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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

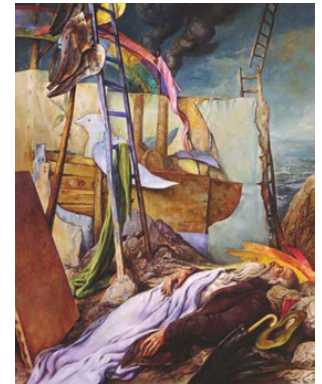


Figure 10: Noah's Dream 1999
Oil on canvas, 40" x 32" (BK736)

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

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

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



Figure 11. *The City* 1986
Oil on canvas, 39 1/4" x 35" (O58)



Figure 12. *Harvest of the Night* 1997
Oil and crayon on paper, 15" x 12 1/2" (BK493)

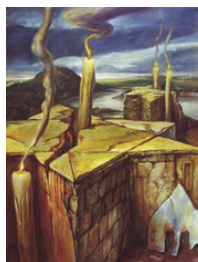


Figure 13. *One of the Memorials* 1992
Oil on linen, 16" x 13" (BK186)



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

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



Figure 15. *Voyage* 1992
Oil on linen, 39 1/4" x 32" (BK221)



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



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

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

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

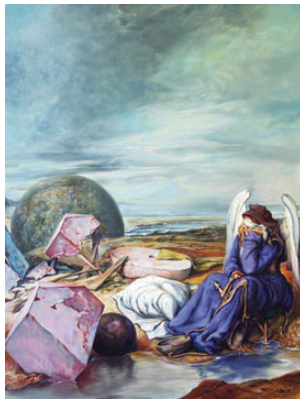


Figure 18: Guardian of Sleep 2006
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30" (BK1123)

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



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



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

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

Melencolia and Just Is

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

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



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

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



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

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

Pears, Chess, Dice, Cups and Letters

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

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

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



Figure 23: Looking Back 2017
Crayon and pastel on paper, 19 1/2" x 16" (BK2076)

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

³Return to Vilna, 3.

⁴Return to Vilna, 23.

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

⁶Between Worlds, 272.

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