



SAMUEL BAK

The Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg
Holocaust Resource Center and Archives

QUEENSBOROUGH **CUNY**
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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assistance in putting this exhibition together.

“My paintings...convey a sense of a world that was shattered...broken, of a world that exists again through an enormous effort to put everything together, when it is absolutely impossible to put it together because the broken things can never become whole again. But we still can make something that looks *as if* it was whole and live with it. And more or less this is the subject of my painting.”

—SAMUEL BAKⁱ

SAMUEL BAK'S work is born of catastrophe. His canvases are filled with artifacts and ruins of Jewish life, images of Greek mythology and childhood objects, all presented in fragments half-buried in the ground, hovering above water, or floating across a desolate landscape.ⁱⁱ These represent pieces and parts of lives lost, memories reconstructed and time interrupted. Time, in Samuel Bak's art, moves both horizontally and vertically, there is no chronological progression here. Rather, his work transports us to a world imagined only in our mind's eye, reminding us of the inability to fully comprehend the massive loss of the Holocaust, and inviting us to summon the strength to confront current atrocities, which we have not outlived.

This three-part exhibition explores landscape, object and person through Bak's themes of loss and the Jewish dictate of *tikkun olam* (“repair of the world”). It is an invitation to look and look again, and to interpret for ourselves the clues and traces and the symbols and metaphors woven into each of Bak's works.

Samuel Bak was six years old at the outbreak of World War II. His memories of loss begin with the invasion and destruction of Jewish life in Vilna, his hometown. Most works in the series “Landscapes of Jewish Experience” are a visual testimony to this trauma.ⁱⁱⁱ Some were completed following his visit to Vilna in 2001, while others were created prior to this trip. In “Temple of Learning” (2002), volumes of books dominate the scene across a smoke-darkened landscape,

some piled up casually while others stand like soldiers in orderly array. Two tower-capped bookcases stand at the entrance to the temple, as if guarding its artifacts from chaos, but the blank sheets scattered in the foreground suggest the impossibility of such an attempt. Books here are a physical base for representing the literary and symbolic role of temples, yeshivas and libraries in the Jewish community, as these institutions were the very pillars of Jewish life in Vilna.^{iv}

Gathering and staging emblems of Jewish life is a recurring compositional technique in Bak's work, as if to remind us that Jewish culture, though afflicted and assaulted, has not vanished. Such is the case with the Sabbath candles appearing in "Yizkor".^v Emerging from a ruined cityscape of tottering buildings, these two candles stand on what appear to be the remains of a wrecked ship. Their size is overwhelming and disproportional to the context. Are they, perhaps, chimneys referencing the gloom of the Holocaust rather than signs of remembrance and hope when celebrating the Sabbath? Samuel Bak is fond of using single images, like a smoking chimney, Sabbath candles, a gravestone ("Memory"), a crumbling wall ("Ghetto 21"), the Star of David ("Ghetto" and "Alone") or the Tablets of the Ten Commandments ("Hope" and "Gal-Ed"), to suggest massive disruptions.^{vi} Without actually depicting the referenced event, he is conveying the horror, leaving the viewer suspended between hope and fear, anticipation and distress, continually oscillating between these polarities, never to be anchored in one or the other.

Nowhere is Bak's technique of "substitution" (conveying atrocity without directly depicting it) more evident than in his representation of the Teddy bear series.^{vii} The works illustrated in this exhibition comprise three such images: "Teddy Interrupted", "Study for Interrupted" and "Group". Dressed in authentic clothes, surrounded by toys and leaning on a wall, the Teddy bears in each piece are portrayed vividly and take on an almost human form. However, in looking closely at each composition, we find that each scene is far from animate or playful, but rather evocative of a violent disruption and a childhood lost. In "Group", a Teddy bear sits propped against a wooden doorway, missing an arm and covered by what seems to be a blanket with no signs of limbs underneath. This bear is accompanied by another smaller "child-bear" leaning against him. They are situated in an indoor setting, gazing vacantly into space. What might we ask about these Teddy bears? What are they looking at? Do their vacant eye-sockets suggest fear and confusion? Where is their owner? For Samuel Bak, the Teddy bear

sequence is a painful return to days of childhood innocence – commenting on both, his own lost childhood and on the collective assault on all children during the Holocaust and other genocides.^{viii}

The ability to universalize a theme and reach out to a diverse audience spanning geographies over time is one of Bak's greatest strengths as a painter. In the Teddy bear series he does so by substituting an inanimate object to assume qualities of a real child. Furthermore, this substitution also occurs by placing the Teddy bears within various sites, and outside of their usual context (e.g. medical dissection room, ruined landscape, cemetery) creating a disturbing and unfamiliar scene. Such technique is also utilized in a series created of the "Boy from the Warsaw Ghetto". For Bak, this is one of the most haunting images.

"Samek-1", "Samek-2" and "Samek-3" comprise three of 36 works created to reflect on "millions of children that perish in man's senseless conflicts, wars, and genocides – past and present".^{ix}

Taken from what came to be recognized as an iconic photograph of the Holocaust, Bak is directly referencing an image and appropriating it to comment on the execution of his family members murdered in the forest of Ponari, the slaughter of Jewish children, and the execution of his good friend, Samek Epstein. In *Samek-1*, the boy is standing at an opening of his own contour, with his hands raised. A sad expression in his eyes calls us to wonder about what he sees. Fragments of the Star of David are depicted in fading yellow tones along the periphery of the opening. Wooden bars surround the edges. On the upper right hand corner of the canvas we observe the Hebrew letter *vov* and on the lower right the letter *gimel*, standing for, "Vilna Ghetto" – perhaps an allusion to the fate of Samek Epstein.^x In "Samek-3", the boy is faceless and fragmented. Situated on what seems to be a hill, his torso appears ghostly and vacant of human flesh, several pairs of shoes lie in a pile in the foreground and the two Hebrew letters "*yod*" (representing the word "God") appear above the left side of his head. What we are left with, once again, are questions. This time, questions of faith and of the existence of a God in the midst of chaos and destruction.

It is when we start asking questions as observers of a past and participants in the present that our journey begins. Bak does not answer our questions. With a stroke of a brush, he transports us to a world unfamiliar, but non-the-less accessible, taking us through ruined

cities and barricades, blind alleys and ghettos. Through his eyes, we are lead across landscapes of ravenous terrain and seascapes of insatiable waters to find evidence of destruction, as well as clues, cryptically communicated, to perhaps a better world. We are left to ponder the burdens of history and of time. How do we respond to loss and to what extent is reconciliation possible? As you turn the page do not search for answers. Look for the next question.

Ayala Tamir

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- i Lawrence L. Langer, Landscapes of Jewish Experience, (Pucker Gallery Boston in association with University Press of New England, 1997), 3.
- ii Samuel Bak, Painted in Words—A Memoir, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with Pucker Art Publications, Boston, Massachusetts, 2001).
- iii Langer, Landscapes of Jewish Experience, 3.
- iv Lawrence L. Langer, Return to Vilna, (Pucker Art Publications in association with Syracuse University Press, 2007), 1-43.
- v Langer, Landscapes of Jewish Experience.
- vi Langer, Return to Vilna, 30.
- vii Langer, Return to Vilna, 31.
- viii Langer, Return to Vilna, 31.
- ix Dana Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, "Icon of Loss", Icon of Loss: Recent Paintings by Samuel Bak (Pucker Art Publications, Boston Massachusetts), April 2008: 4-11.
- x Fewell and Phillips, 4-46.



Detail

Temple of Learning
2002
Charcoal and pastel
30" x 22 1/4"

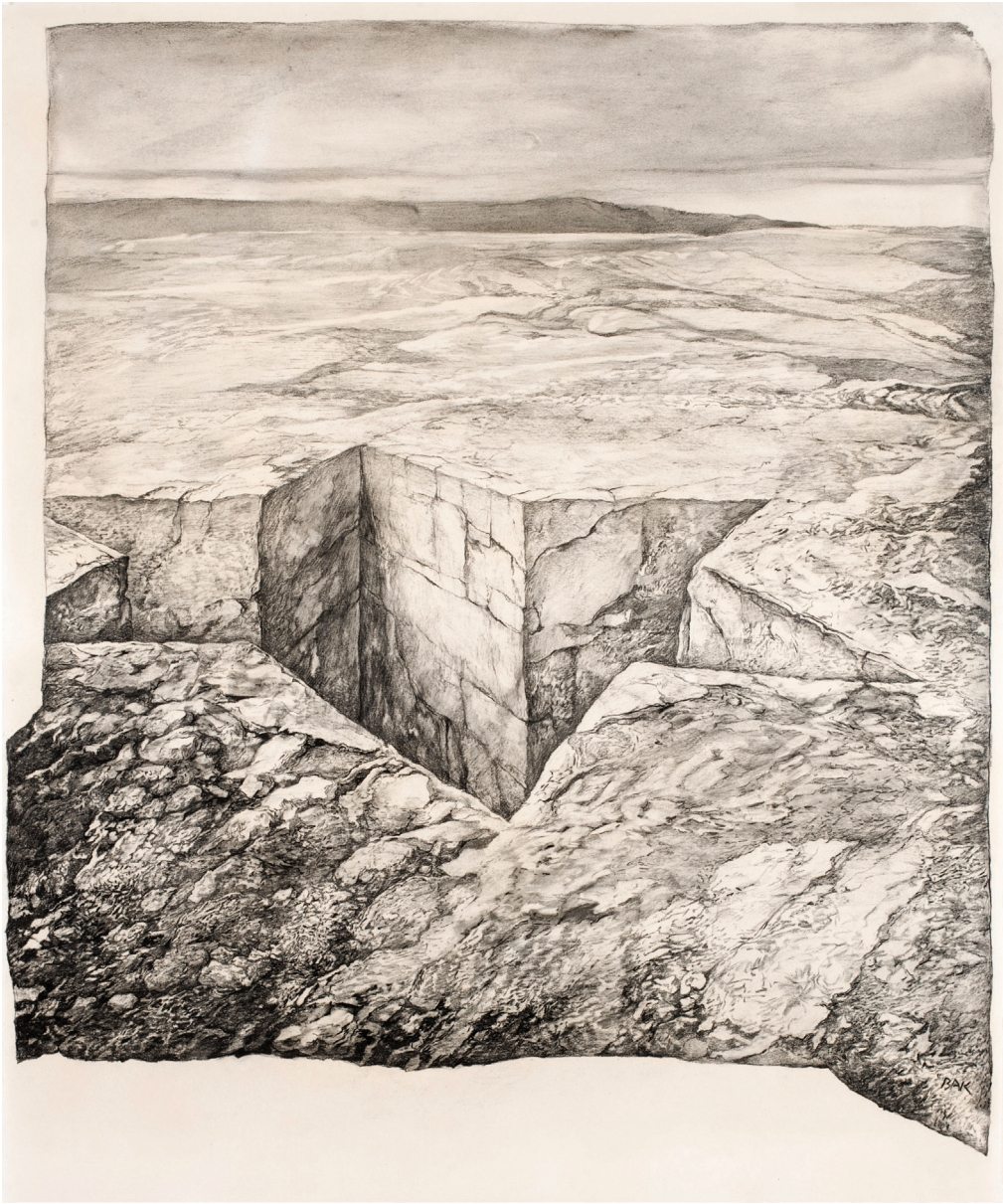




Synagogue
2001
Pencil
21" x 19"

Gal-Ed
1977
Charcoal and pastel
41 ¼" x 29 ½"





Ponari
1977
Charcoal
33 ½" x 28 ½"

Hope
1977
Charcoal
36 ¾" x 29 ½"





Yizkor
1977
Charcoal
26 ¼" x 27"

Shabbat
1977
Charcoal
32 ½" x 29 ½"





Detail

Ghetto 21
Mixed media
26" x 20"

On a Road
Mixed media
on paper
25 ½" x 19 ¾"





Memory
Mixed media
on paper
25 ½" x 19 ¾"

Alone
1994
Mixed media
on paper
19 ½" x 25 ½"





Samek - 3
1999
Watercolor
10 ¼" x 10 ¼"

Samek - 1
1999
Watercolor
13" x 9 ¾"





Samek - 2
1999
Colored pencils
and pastel
13 ½" x 10 ¼"

*Study for
Interrupted*
2002
Watercolor
14 ¾" x 11"





Teddy Interrupted
2002
Watercolor
15" x 11"

Group
2002
Mixed media
9 3/4" x 12 3/4"





To the Ghetto
2001
Mixed media
25 ½" x 19 ½"

Biography ⁱ
Samuel Bak

1933	Born 12 August in Vilna, Poland.
1940-44	Under German occupation: ghetto, work-camp, refuge in a monastery
1942	First exhibition of drawings in the Vilna Ghetto
1945-48	Displaced Persons camps in Germany; studied paintings in Munich.
1948	Emigrated to Israel
1952	Studied at the Bezalel Art School, Jerusalem.
1953-56	Army Service
1956-59	Lived in Paris. Studied at the “Ecole de Beaux-Arts.”
1959-93	1959-66 lived in Rome; 1966-74 in Israel; 1974-77 in New York City; 1977-80 in Israel; 1980-84 in Paris; 1984-93 in Switzerland.
1993	Moved to Weston, Massachusetts.

The art of Samuel Bak is represented by Pucker Gallery. For a complete list of exhibitions and publications please visit www.puckergallery.com.

ⁱwww.puckergallery.com

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