Broken Pears: A Reading of Samuel Bak's Art[1]

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This paper tries to show that, although Bak's art is rooted in his experiences of the Holocaust, it extends them by pointing the spectator to a kind of reconciliation with the constant disintegration of the world that has been "wounded by the Holocaust." As noticed by interpreters of his works, instead of painting a more direct representation of the Holocaust, Bak uses (iconic) symbols. This is the reason that Bak's works can reach out to something more universal and is not completely tied down to the specific event of the Holocaust. His paintings have shown the world crumbling, decaying, and falling apart—apt illustrations of the Zen practice of realizing the world as devolving into original nothingness. Yet, it has also hinted at some hope, not in portraying the world becoming better than it is but by questioning assumptions about it and by blurring binary oppositions in one's perceptions about the world. In this way, Bak joins the Zen masters in their practice of active engagement in the world while training the mind to see the world as it is.

Keywords: Samuel Bak, Holocaust Art, Buddhism, Zen

A SURVIVOR-ARTIST

In 2001, Samuel Bak published his memoirs, Painted in Words, where he starts the narration of his life with his childhood days, moving from a level of affluence to a life in the Jewish ghetto during World War II. He was born in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania), on August 12, 1933 to Mitzia and Jonas Bak and four grandparents who doted on him. They lived a

1 This paper is based on an updated research done for a conference paper delivered in the 8th DLSU Arts Congress.

comfortable, middle-class life until 1941, when the Germans occupied Vilna, after which all of Bak's grandparents were killed. In September of the same year, the Vilna Jewish community was deported to the ghetto. Samuel and his mother escaped the crowd of Jewish people being herded into the ghetto. They walked the small alley ways, pretending to be taking a leisurely walk, as they headed to the residence of Mitzia's aunt, Janina Rushkevich who, marrying the son of the Archbishop of Warsaw, converted to Christianity many years earlier.

Aunt Janina took mother and son in, in spite of the dangers, and hid them in her house, avoiding suspicion by significantly cutting her helper's work hours. She then brought Samuel and Mitzia to the Benedictine Convent near her house where she was educated in the Catholic tradition and where the nuns were fond of her and highly respected her family. The then Mother Superior, Marija Mikulska, took them in and hid them in the roof of the convent. It was here that Samuel's father, Jonas, and other family and friends later on reunited with them.

At the convent, Samuel was taught Christianity as a safety measure while his innate talent for drawing and painting was nurtured. They lived a hidden but bearable life, coming down at night for their hygiene and other leisure when it was safe for them to do so. Later on, however, the Gestapo suspected the Benedictines of hiding Jews, and the nuns and priests were sent to the labor camps while the military sequestered the convent for their operations. The hiding family eventually found their way out of the convent, onto the street. Again blessed with luck, they came across a group of Jews, going back to the ghetto from a work camp. The camp workers immediately surrounded the family and gave them yellow stars to pin on their clothes. Unnoticed by the Gestapo, the family was deposited safely in the ghetto.

Here, Samuel continued drawing, painting, and sculpting, with everybody contributing whatever paper, pencils, paint, and clay they could find. In March of 1943, fellow members of the ghetto, the poets Avrom Sutzkever and Szmerce Kaczerginski, becoming very fond of Samuel, showcased the boy's works in a ghetto exhibit. Samuel was 9 years old. Later on, feeling that the ghetto was about to be liquidated, the poets entrusted the Pinkas, a notebook that kept the official record of the Jewish community, to Samuel, in the hopes that he would survive, and the records with him. Samuel used every blank page and margins of the Pinkas to draw on. He carried this with him everywhere until he had to escape the camp later on.

Jonas, Samuel"s father, was able to get himself and his family moved to the Herres Kraftfahr Park or HKP labor camp shortly before the Vilna Ghetto was liquidated. But on March 27, 1944, a children's Aktion—an SS procedure where all the children are gathered and then shot—was launched at the camp and Samuel escaped this as his parents hid him under a bed in their apartment. Fearing that the parents who lost their children would tell on them, the family planned an escape. Mitzia was able to leave the camp first, going again to her Aunt Janina for help. Samuel was later on put in a sack of sawdust that his father carried as he worked and was deposited outside the camp, through a window. He was then fetched by a Christian woman who brought him to reunite with his mother. By this time, the Benedictine nuns were returned to the convent, and once again, Mother Superior Marija Mikulska took Mitzia and Samuel in and hid them, even with the Germans occupying the convent, until their liberation by the Russians. Jonas Bak, however, was one of the camp workers who were shot dead before the liberation of Vilna in July, 1945.

Being originally Polish citizens, Mitzia and Samuel journeyed from Vilna to Lodz and then to the American-managed Landsberg Displaced Persons (DP) Camp in Bavaria where they stayed three years before taking a ship to the newly formed Jewish nation of Israel in 1948. It was in this DP camp that Mitzia met and later on married Samuel's stepfather, Natan Markowsky. In 1947, later to be known as Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion visited Bavaria, and an exhibit of Samuel's art was organized for him.

All throughout their long sojourn, Mitzia would work and save everything to buy paint and paper for her son. She would also employ several art tutors, always in search of a better teacher. While at the DP Camp, Samuel went to Munich to study under Prof. Blocherer and became entranced in German expressionism which was then filling up the Munich museums. He would carry a lot of his works from Landsberg to Israel aboard the ship, Pan York.

In Israel, Samuel went to Bezalel Academy of Art and Design before doing his military duties. After that, he went to Paris for the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, exhibited in Rome, in Pittsburg, and in Venice, before returning to Israel in 1966. But he moved to New York after that, then to Paris again, and Lausanne in Switzerland before finally settling down in Massachusetts.

The Pinkas Samuel carried with him through his journey of survival was preserved in a glass panel in a museum in Vilna. He visited Vilna in 2001 and since then would return to his hometown every now and then. He is still a prolific painter, painting hundreds of projects at a time, returning to old ones after months and working on some for years. His paintings are exhibited in Europe and in the United States. Some of his works are permanently displayed at the Pucker Gallery in Massachusetts, while some, including videos of his work processes, are available online through the Facing History and Ourselves site, being used in a curriculum that teaches about the Holocaust and other genocides.

HOLOCAUST ART

The coinage of the term "Holocaust Art" was inevitable in the aftermath of World War II. Like Samuel Bak, many of those who survived the concentration camps were professional artists who wrote and painted through their ordeal and who continued to find the need to do so even more after liberation. Even those who perished left a legacy of their creative spirits on the walls of their cells or barracks and in the ghetto and their poetry in notebooks and scraps of paper hidden behind bricks, under makeshift beds or low ceilings. The horrors under which these works were created and the memory of the experience that continually trigger their creation set them apart from other kinds of art, and they have to be specified by a particular term. "Holocaust Art," therefore, unlike other kinds of art, is not based on a movement or technique but relates itself to a very concrete experience of history. It has been defined as art "that is about the Holocaust, that is, the intentionality or content of which includes reference, direct or indirect, to the Nazi project of humiliation, deprivation, degradation, and extermination against the Jews and other marked groups (Pickford 2013, 3).

Any discussion on Holocaust Art brings to mind Adorno's pronouncement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"[2] (Adorno 1997, 34). Many have interpreted Adorno as referring to the problem of representing the evil of the Holocaust. Holocaust representation in art runs the risk of trivializing the experience of the Holocaust—by "speaking" the

2 The context of this oft-quoted statement of Adorno is "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today…" (in "Cultural Criticism and Society, Prisms, 1997, 34). He was referring to the act of "artistic production that reproduces the value of the society that generated the Holocaust" (Richardson, 2005, 1).

"unspeakable"—or of sublimating it: there is something inappropriate in the thought of deriving pleasure through poetry, for instance, based on the suffering of others. Thus, the allusion to Adorno's words in Bak's words: "After the Shoah, people wondered if art could go on existing, if it could still be produced…my answer was clear. The question itself is an expression of tragic dismay, and it triggered more paintings" (Bak, Samuel Bak, Gallery 3, http://chgs.umn.edu/museum/responses/bak/gallery3.html accessed February 26, 2017).

Bak's works, given the circumstances in which he created them and the spirit in which he continued to create them, have always been considered "Holocaust Art." This paper, however, does not intend to problematize Bak's art as "Holocaust Art." Instead, it intends to offer a reading of these works that move away from the usual parameters in which they are interpreted. It claims that Bak's works, although undoubtedly rooted in Holocaust experiences, go beyond specifically Holocaust-related themes and display insights into the nature of existence as essentially disintegrating. In this sense, Bak's paintings articulate the basic Zen view that the world continually devolves into nothingness. While this paper makes no assumptions about Bak's intentions when he paints or about his knowledge of Eastern philosophies, it attempts to interpret his images as an artist's insight about the world and show how they may remain relevant even to generations that have been fortunate to miss the Holocaust.

In a lecture Bak gave at the International Colloquy about the Holocaust and the Arts held in October of 2002 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, he said that his paintings "are responses to the miracle of [his] survival…a compulsive need to give meaning to the miraculous fact of [his] survival" (Bak, "Speaking About the Unspeakable"). Bak admits that earlier on in his career, he was reluctant in referring to his themes as Holocaust-related, because pegging it on that might also limit the meaning and, therefore, the reach of his work. But over time, it appears that he has come to terms with this and is now open to the idea that the "indelible experience" he had might be the sole inspiration for his work. But he claims, "[t]he creative process is a matter of such complexity that conscious intentions often eclipse subconscious needs. This question must remain open" (Bak, "Speaking about the Unspeakable," emphasis supplied). This is the cue this study takes as it offers a reading of Bak's works.

ILLUMINATIONS: THE ART OF SAMUEL BAK

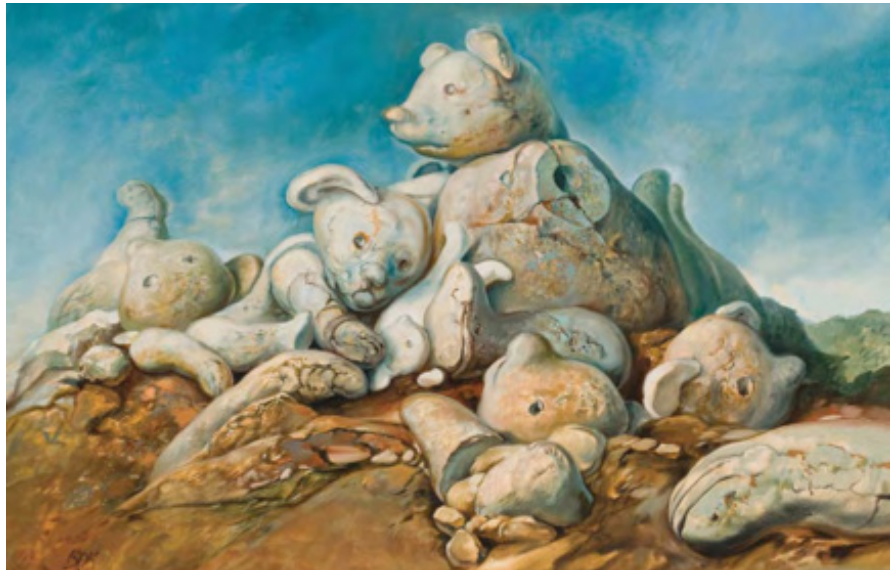
The images described and discussed below are taken from a catalogue called Illuminations: the Art of Samuel Bak.[3] Fourteen out of the 28 paintings included in this catalogue have been randomly chosen for this study. Unlike other catalogues that are mostly on a theme, and therefore include similar images, Illuminations give a wide range of themes that Bak has taken up in this painting career. It also covers the collection that has been donated to the online educational organization, Facing History and Ourselves[4] and has the propensity to be more widely known.

Although Bak's paintings have been described as "Surreal" and "Postmodern," he clarifies that, unlike surrealist art, his images do not come from dreams and that his visions are rooted in the events of the 20th century (Bak, "Speaking about the Unspeakable"). It is easy to see that Bak's paintings have the common element of ruins, most of the time in the form of rubble, suggesting a catastrophe as well as the passing of time. But even in rubble-free images, the paintings always have an element of brokenness, of destruction and decay, like leafless trees, treeless hills, crumbling walls, and worn out objects. There is, however, always an element of contrast. The desolation in the images of ruin are often contested by their background or even just by the serenity suggested by the work's title.

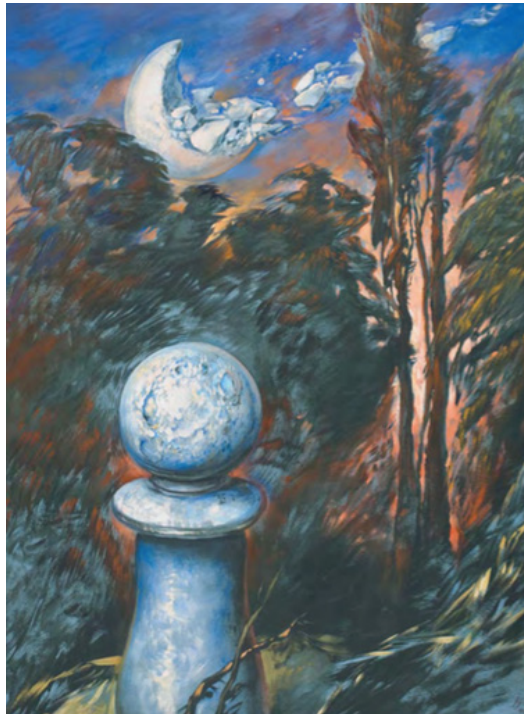
For instance , the title and the clear blue sky of Under a Blue Sky, often interpreted as representing the children that perished in the Holocaust, show a stark contrast to the images of broken teddy bears. This painting points to the loss of childhood, or innocence, of death (Langer 2010, 32). Stuffed toy bears are often made of fabric and other soft materials. Yet here, they are made of stone and strewn about, broken in pieces. But despite this, the sky remains blue and bright. One wonders if the visual statement is one of irony or hope. Similarly, the broken stone moon, with pieces floating away into space and the storm-blown trees may be strong images of violence, in the Study after Nocturnal A. But the chess pawn, standing like a human person with a head that alludes to the image of the earth as seen in space, beautifully lit by the sun, gives the feeling of serenity amidst the fleeting activities of the day, taken stock off in the nocturnal hours.

3 Langer, Lawrence. 2010. "Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak: Collection at Facing History and Ourselves." Brooklyn, Massachusetts: Facing History and Ourselves. Retrieved from https://www.facinghistory.org/For-Educators/Educator-Resources/Resource-Collections/Illuminations/Introduction-Professor-Lawrence-L-Langer February 26, 2017.

4 (https://www.facinghistory.org/ with a page on Samuel Bak's works in https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library?search=Samuel%20Bak).



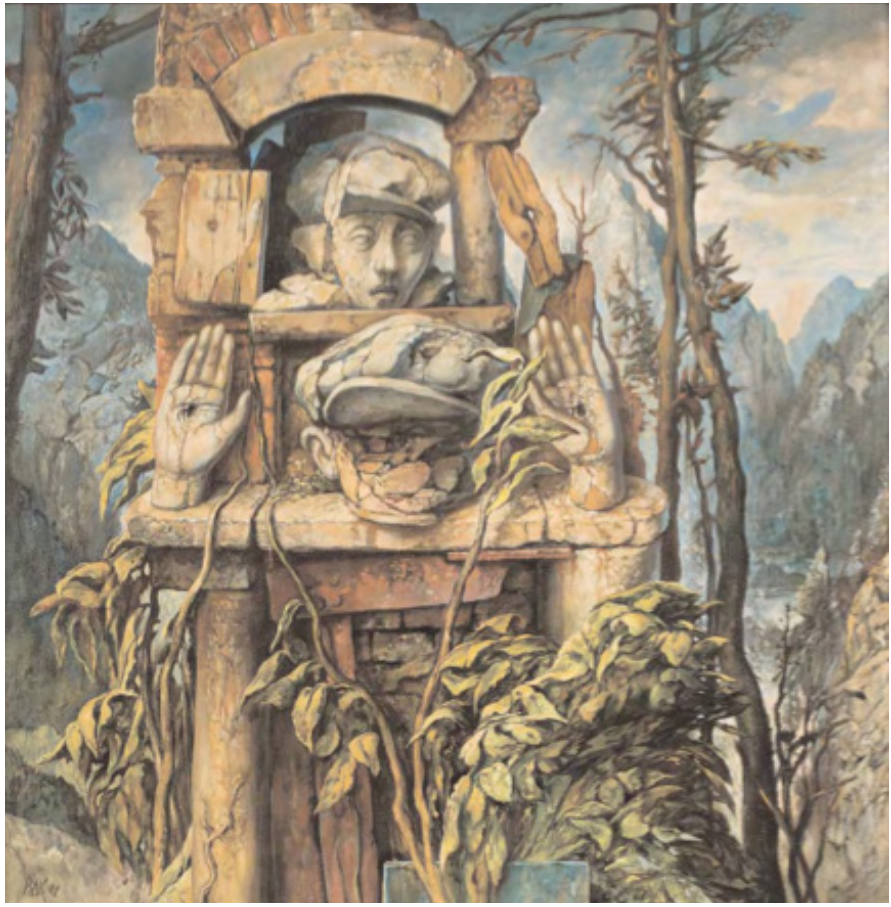
Under a Blue Sky, 2001, *Oil on canvas, 18 × 24" (Illuminations, 2010, 33)*
Under a Blue Sky shows images of stone teddy bears, worn-out, broken, dismembered, thrown about the ground, piling up against a blue sky. In the distance, green hills provide a stark contrast to the tragic fates of the broken toys.



Study After Nocturnal A, 2000, *Oil on Canvas, 25.5 × 19.75" (Illuminations 2010, 41)*
A stone chess piece appears to contemplate the waning of the broken stone moon like a pensive human being, in *Study After Nocturnal A*. Its dome "head" resembles the earth, highlighted by some light from behind. It stands amidst trees that seem to have been devastated by a storm. The fiery light that seeps through the trees dissolves into the blue sky.

In the same manner, Sanctuary and The Cup was Full both use the image of the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto (Langer, 2010, 7), a photograph that has become an icon in Holocaust imagery, showing a young boy holding his hands up in surrender to a Nazi soldier. Bak says of this image that it is "inexhaustible," associating him with his namesake, Samek Epstein, a childhood friend who was murdered in the Holocaust. Bak returns to this image in a series of paintings, as if trying to exhaust the image and his memory of his friend (Bak 2001, location 5033/75%). But in this pair of paintings showing images of the crumbling stone body of the Warsaw Boy, a face of another boy, whole and seemingly well and curious, peeps from behind. It is as if both paintings express Bak's sorrow over the child that was lost (both in himself and in Epstein) and his gratitude for or his incomprehension about his survival.

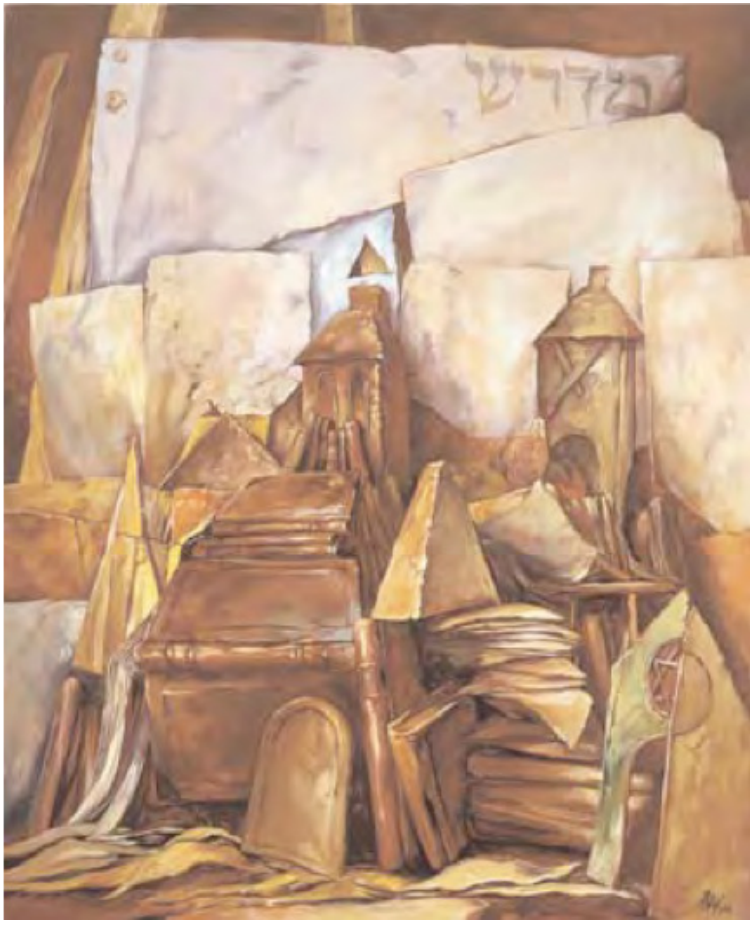
The Cup was Full, 2007, *Oil on canvas, 24 × 20" (Illuminations, 2010, 27)*
The Cup was Full shows a face of a boy behind a crumbling altar-like wall of stones. Disembodied arms are held up, as if belonging to the boy. On the shelf are worn out boots and a cap. Among these, a cup lies on its side, handle broken, with a spoon lying by it. The sky is grayish blue, neither bright nor dark.



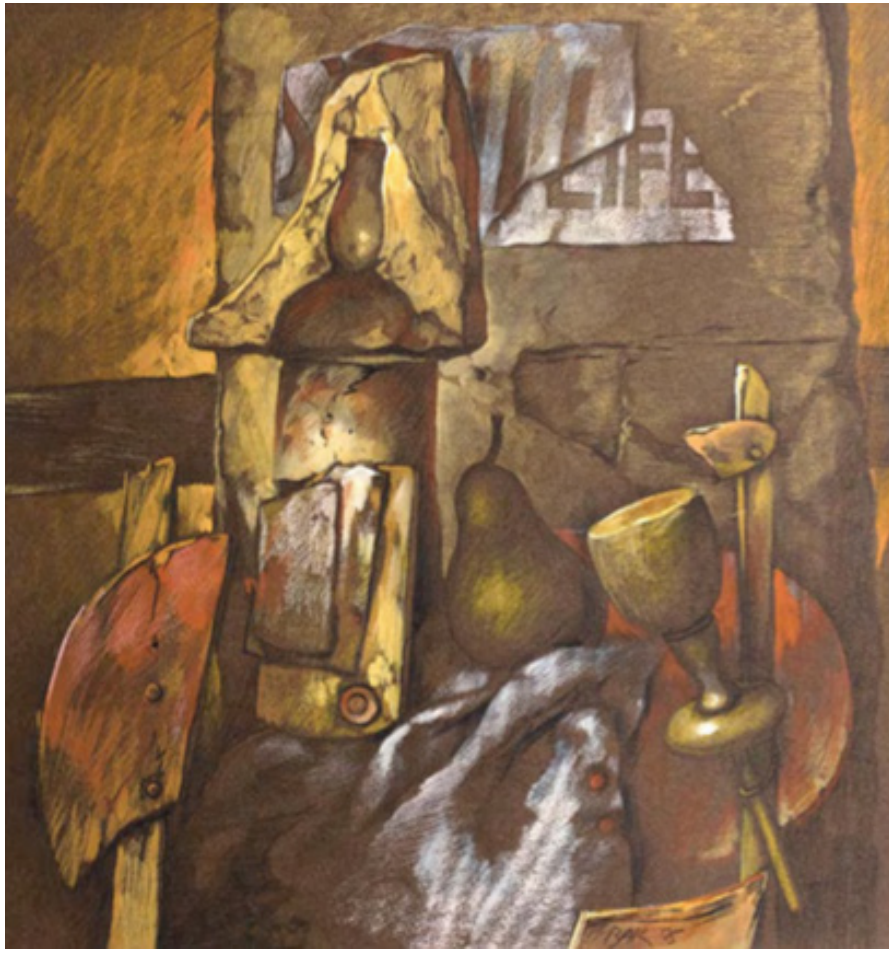
Sanctuary, 1997, *Oil on canvas, 20 × 20" (Illuminations 2010, 29)*
Sanctuary shows a monument-like structure made out of bits and pieces of a mannequin-like body, with hands pierced, propped on either side of a stone head that has crumbled, held up as if in submission to whatever punishment comes next. Behind it, propped higher, is a stone head of a similar boy, framed in broken pieces of wood and stone. Around the structure are dying plants and almost leafless trees. Mountains rise in the distance in a late afternoon sky.

Like these paintings, there is also something inherently positive in Reconstruction, a kind of rebuilding after something old has been taken down. But destruction is its prerequisite. In this painting, the towers are being built out of old books, but the blank pages that form their backdrop speaks of something fresh, a new beginning. The Hebrew letters that spell the word "Midrash"—rabbinic teachings—look toward a new narrative, seemingly hopeful that the destruction of the past will serve as a lesson learned for future

generations. (Langer, 2010, 8) The same can be said about Recovered, where the words "Still Life" could refer to the art movement, appropriate for the pear that symbolized the usual fruit arrangements for still life paintings (Langer, 2010, 48). But it could more meaningfully refer to a life that is recovered and, therefore, could become dynamic again, that is, not "still" anymore. Or perhaps, that life can still go on, even after the devastation it had to go through: there is still life in the aftermath of the Shoah, even though what is left behind to deal with are now broken and old, showing signs of decay.



Reconstruction, 2001, *Oil on canvas, 20 × 16" (Illuminations, 2010, 15)*
Two towers rise behind a structure of piled up old papers and books in Reconstruction. In the background are pages of blank papers or canvas, on the largest of which is a Hebrew word, Midrash. On the foreground, more paper lie about. On the right side are some cardboards, on one of them, half the Star of David appears, adjacent to a black half circle.

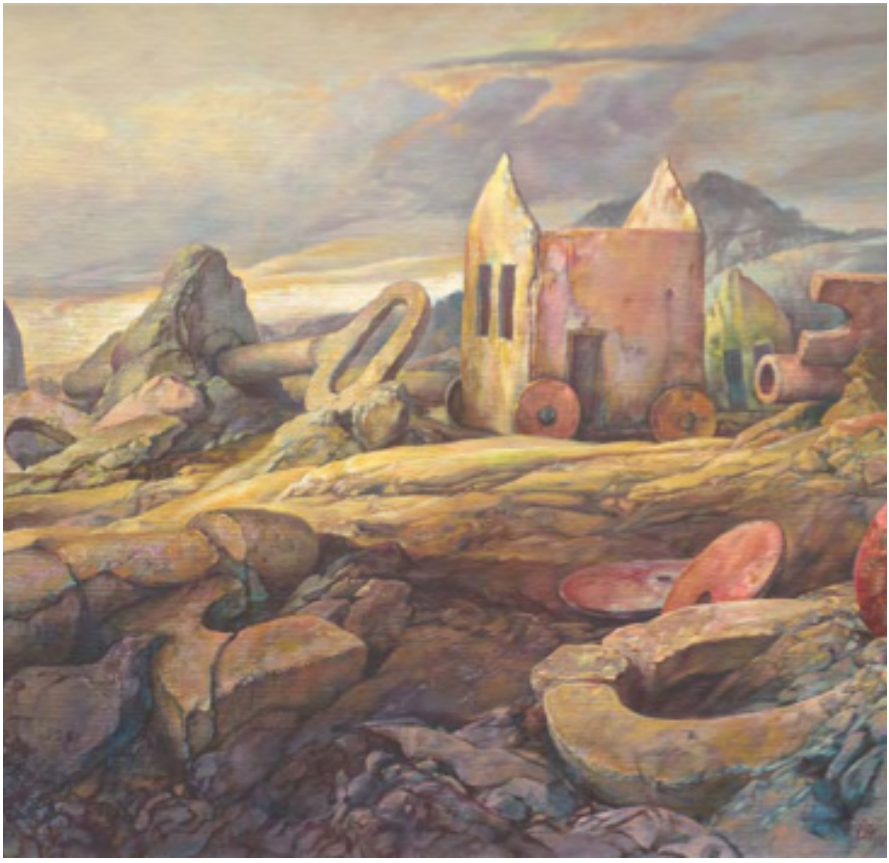


Recovered, 2005, *Pastel and Gouache on Paper, 13 × 13" (Illuminations 2010, 49)*

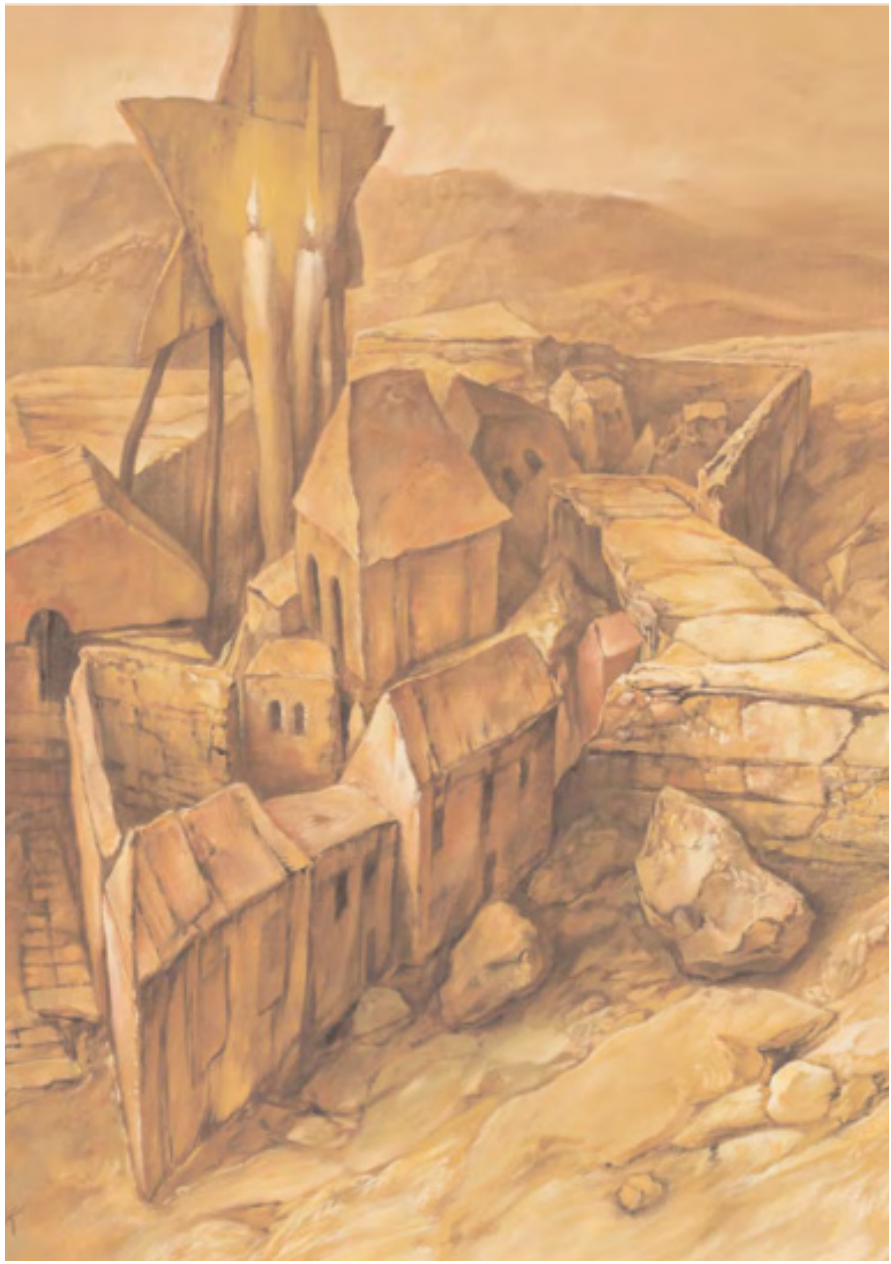
Against a bright background, Recovered shows odd items, including a pear, propped against an old, chipped wall, with a torn label that says "Still Life," although the word "Still" is partly obscured. A wooden bar crosses the wall from behind.

On the Road, Camp, and At Rest more directly portray the narrative of the Jewish plight. On the Road alludes to the perennially wandering Jew without shelter, symbolized by the roofless house on wheels, with broken stone keys that cannot anymore unlock what needs to be opened (Langer, 2010, 16). Camp is Bak's image of the Vilna ghetto a symbol of the Jewish community decimated by the War (Langer, 2010, 11). And At Rest is a representation of another Jew journeying, carrying his cross (Langer, 2010, 30). All of the images in these paintings, despite their barrenness, still carry

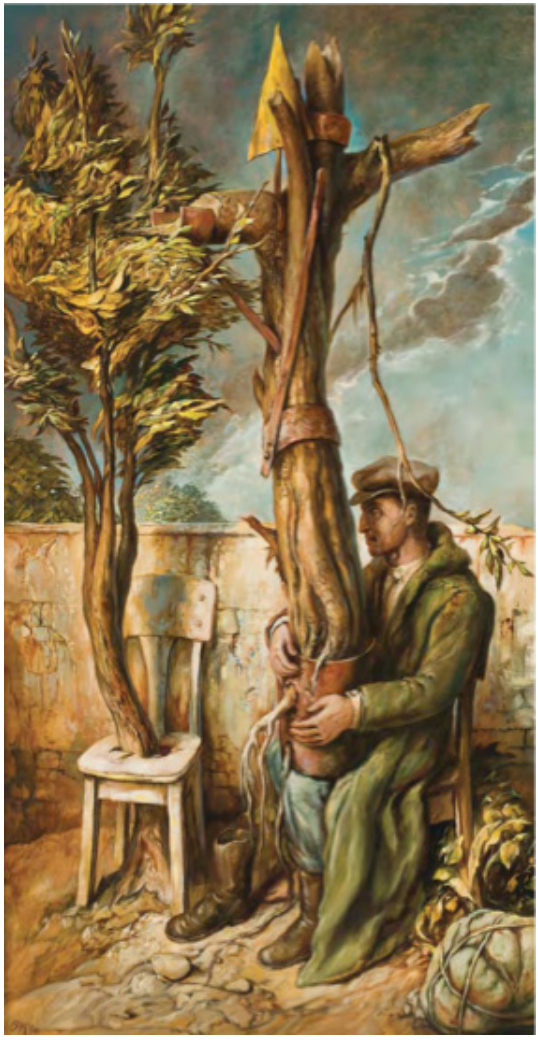
positive messages. The title "On the Road" speaks of an openness of being on the way. The clear skies give a positive avenue. In Camp, two candles tower over all the remains, lit and undefeated. In At Rest, the tree-cross has strong roots, accompanied by an equally strong alternative, vibrant with life.



On the Road, 1992, *Oil on canvas, 21.25 × 25.5" (Illuminations, 2010, 17)*
A roofless house on wheels stands on a hill of ruins, with huge broken stone keys scattered around it. *On the Road* has a bright sky and a mountain in the distance is visible against it.



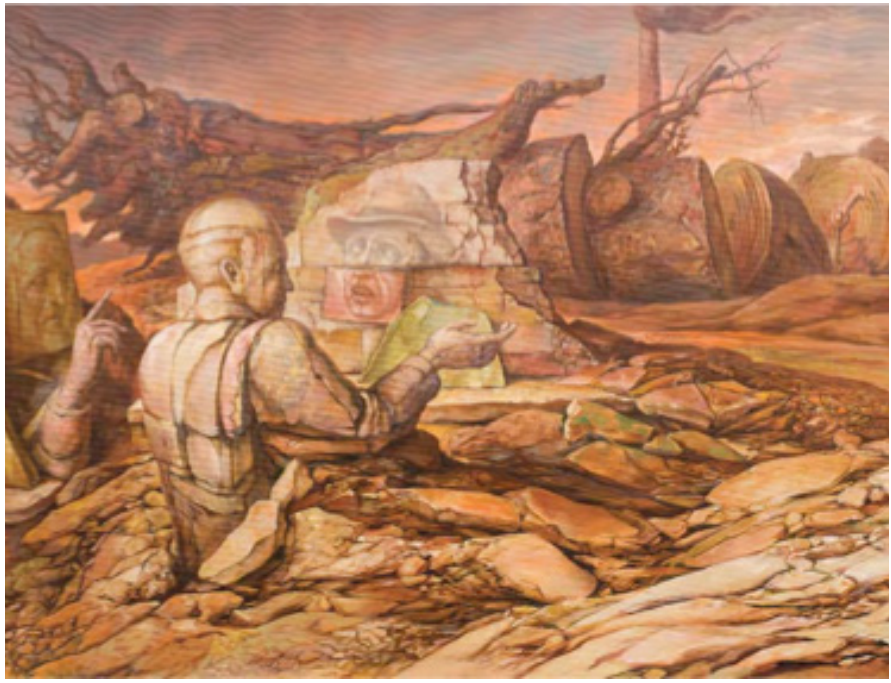
Camp, 1992, *Oil on canvas, 16 × 13" (Illuminations, 2010, 19)*
A monochromatic painting, Camp shows in earth colors the ruins of a village (or a ghetto), its walls forming the shape of the Star of David, amidst a stony hill. Two lit candles rise in the middle of the destroyed buildings, against boards propped up high that also form the shape of the Star of David.



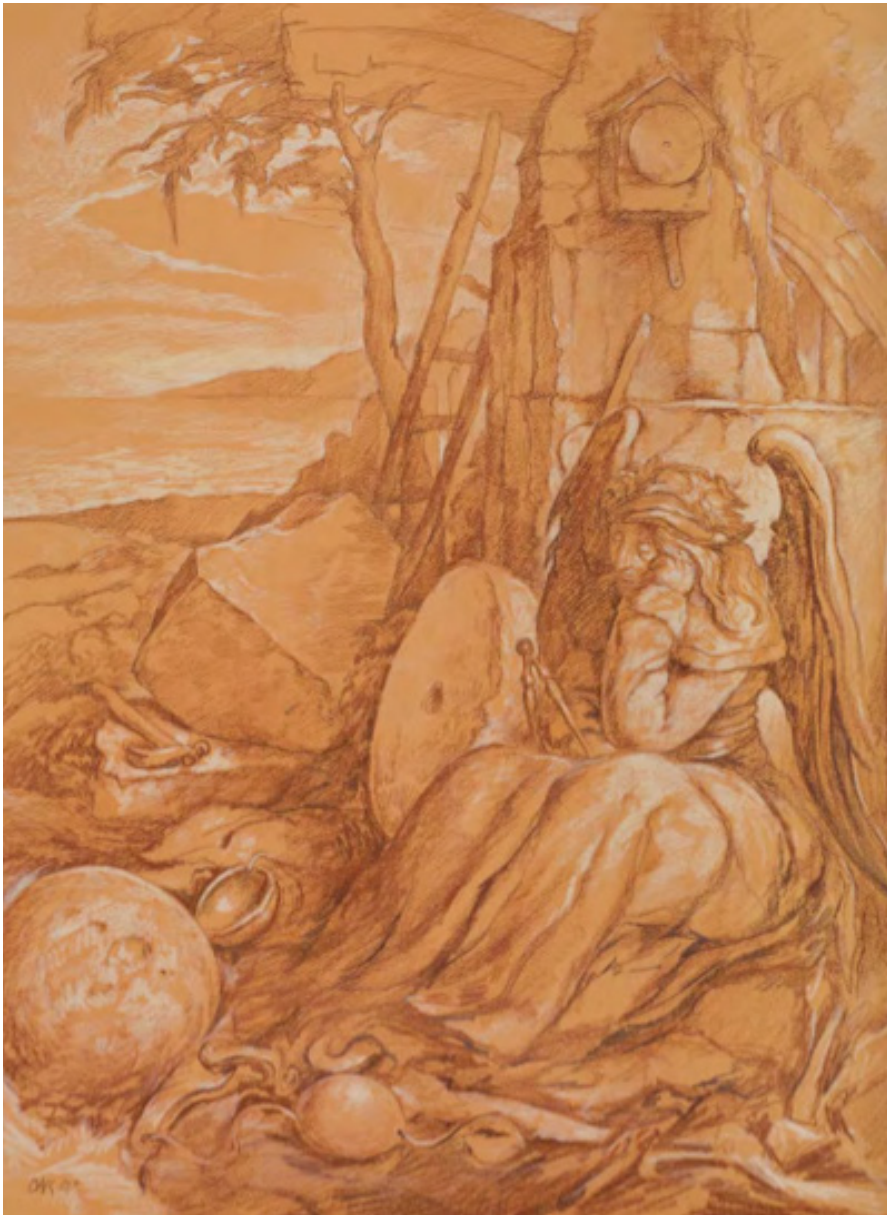
At Rest, 1996, *Oil on canvas, 30 × 16"*
(Illuminations, 2010, 31)
A man seated on a chair in travel clothes, holding on his lap a bucket where a strange tree grows out of, and whose roots pierce it. The tree is leafless, forms a cross with its branches, and is wrapped in iron bands, connected by iron rods, with an arrow-like figure jutting out on top. *At Rest* shows a traveler seated on a chair, his right boot is off his foot, and his bundle on the ground by his side. To his right is another chair with a tree growing from the ground through its seat. This tree, in contrast to the traveler's, is vibrant with leaves. The scene is sectioned off by a low wall. Beyond are tree tops, and a grayish blue sky.

About Time shows faces in the ruins of wood and stone, seemingly giving a lecture to or discussing with the half-buried, broken stone man. It reminds one of philosophers or sages of the past, involved in an argumentation over important issues. Amidst the ruins, however, a couple of trees still stand tall, and a well-working chimney spews smoke into the sky (Langer, 2010, 24). Is the latter a symbol of the gas chambers or does it stand triumphant with the few remaining trees? After Durer, on the other hand—Bak's homage to his indirect mentor, Albrecht Durer—shows an angel looking depressed and as Bak himself describes him, "[t]he angelic figure of Durer's great Melancholia, in a soldier's greatcoat" (Samuel Bak — Gallery 3,). But the ruins that surround him, his frustration and disappointment, are themselves set within a larger, brighter scenario of the ocean, at once a source of destruction and life, under, once again, clear

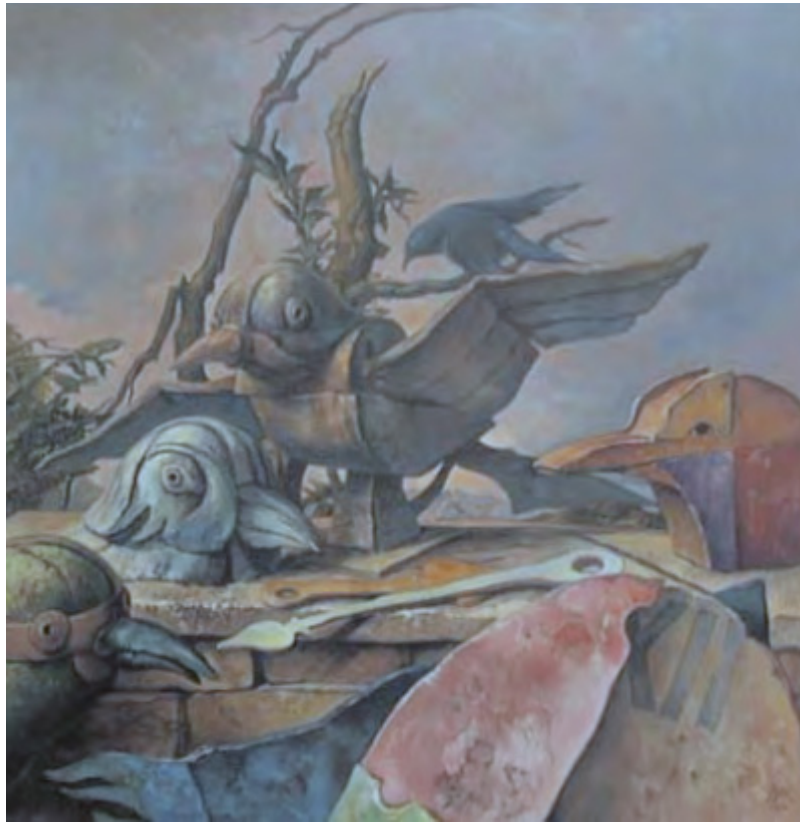
blue skies. Unexpected Visitors suggests similar sentiments, given the real, live bird on the wing of a stone one. Which one—the iron bird or the real one—is unexpected, one will have to guess. Perhaps the constructed birds are symbols of bomb-releasing planes during the war, and thus symbolize death, and the live bird, life. Or the latter the sweet release of death itself, after a life of toil. Whichever reading is given is a response to the uncertainties the contrasting elements in the work suggest.



About Time, 1999, *Oil on canvas, 20 × 30" (Illuminations, 2010, 25),* About Time shows a ruined statue of a man, half buried in rubble. The statue faces a huge tree in the background, fallen and sawed into big pieces. Around the statue, as if conversing with him, are mosaics of faces mounted on pieces of wood. A disembodied hand is propped up, as if in the middle of a lecture.



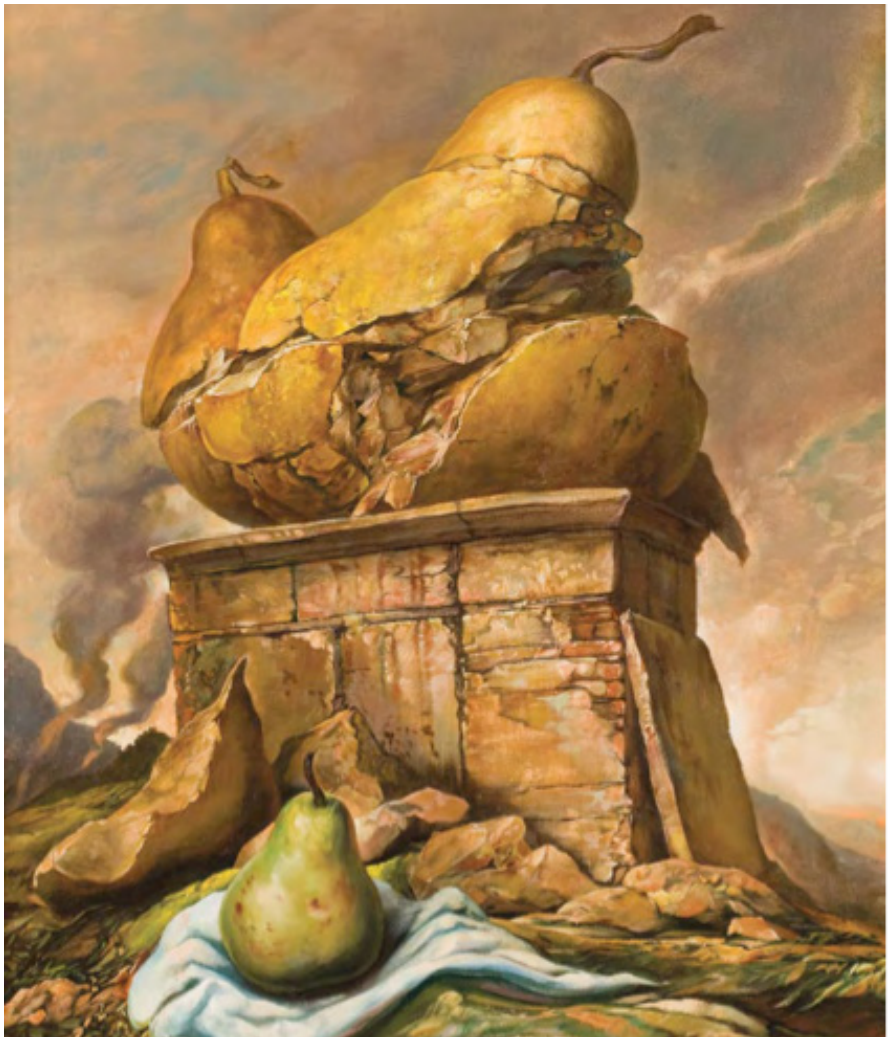
After Durer, 2007, *Pastel on paper, 25.5 × 19.5" (Illuminations, 2010, 53)*
After Durer shows an angel seated among the rubble of a ruin, by the sea. The angel has his head on his left arm, looking tired, asleep or dispirited. The sky seems bright. The mountain far away is distinctly visible in the horizon.



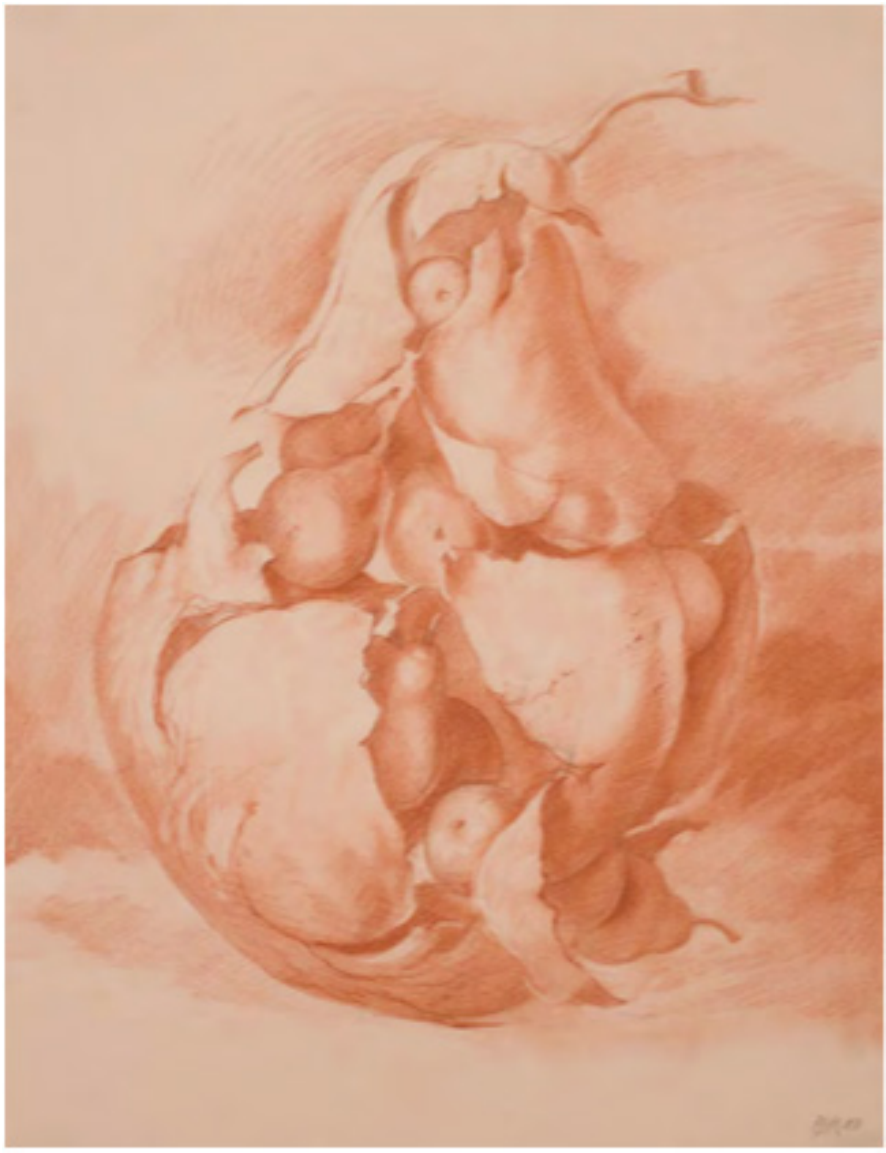
Unexpected Visitors, 2000, *Oil on Canvas, 20 × 20" (Illuminations 2010, 35)*
Unexpected Visitors show ruined constructions of birds in stone and metal lying about a brick wall, surrounding a pair of hands, presumably from a disassembled timepiece, that are bent and rusting. Ruined trees appear from behind the wall, with a few leaves sprouting around broken branches. A real bird is perched on the wing of one of the constructed birds, seemingly pecking at it.

Pears figure in many of Bak's paintings. He has substituted the proverbial (Biblical) "apple" with it and refers to it as the "fruit of wisdom. The fruit given to Adam and Eve that made them lose the world" (Bak, Illuminations (video) 17:02–17:53). According to Lawrence L. Langer (2010, 38), Bak saw "something vulnerable, almost human about their form…they became thoughts in search of thinkers, coded messages, questions without answers, parables of our human condition." In the foreground of Falling Memorial, against the crumbling stone pears, is a fresh pear, protected by a piece of white cloth, a stark contrast to the wasteland depicted all around it. The fall of the memorial is not absolute, for there is something that can triumph

over the inhospitable environment. Here is a pear that can actually be eaten, that can sustain life. Envelope, on the other hand, reveals something new amidst the death of something old and worn out, reminiscent of the snake's shedding of its skin. The image accepts that things come to an end, but they are also always renewed.



Falling Memorial, 2002, *Oil on canvas, 20 × 16" (Illuminations, 2010, 37)*
Falling Memorial shows huge stone pears crumbling, atop an altar-like structure amidst rubble of what seem to be stone flesh of other pears as well. A fresh pear is on the ground before the altar, cradled in a white cloth. In the background, something burns. Dark smoke rises but the sky shines bright in the distance.



Envelope, 1989, *Mixed Media on Paper, 25.5 × 19.75" (Illuminations, 2010, 43)*
A pear is drawn in Envelope as peeling away. But inside, showing through the tears and spilling out of the original, huge pear, are fresh pears. The disintegrating pear appears to float against a bright, clear sky.

It is very evident, that Bak's themes always carry with them the sense of loss and suffering. He (Samuel Bak — Gallery 2,) says of his paintings:

> … most of my paintings, even the most abstract, echoed my past trauma. They always suggested destruction, erosion and annihilation. I couldn't help it; whatever I painted seemed to arise from the tragic sediments of the Shoah. Yet — did the world need more images of pain? The authentic documentation of the Holocaust provided us with images so shattering that no art could rival their power. I felt that my own images, answering to my need for letting them surface, nonetheless asked for a certain transfiguration.

This "transfiguration" is what allows Bak to refer to the suffering of the Holocaust without showing what was actually there. He (Bak, "Speaking the Unspeakable") says, "If I had to define my art's language and style, I would situate it in allegory and metaphor." This works so well in his paintings that no matter how easily relatable his images are to the horrors of the Holocaust, they also point to something more general and aspire to the universal: this is the fact of the human condition. Things crumble, things change, things get broken. But there is, in each portrayal of these themes, a desire to repair without a promise that things can be or will be repaired. Bak asks, "have these efforts managed to transform the world's wreckage into a viable reality?" ("Speaking the Unspeakable") He hopes so.

Yet, this "hope" is not an uncritical hope. In his memoirs, Bak wrote that, in his paintings, "he imagined abused angels. Chess pieces…involved in games without rules. Huge fruits…in various stages of reinvention…pears in the form of hovering planets—metaphors of a world without explanations. *My paintings carried no answers, only question*" (2001, location 6542/97%, italics supplied).

ZEN, ART, AND THE PAINTINGS OF SAMUEL BAK

The crumbling images in Bak's paintings, especially of the pears that he loves so much, bring to mind the characteristics of wabi-sabi art. "Wabi" is a Japanese term that refers to loneliness and sadness, while "sabi," to the state of being old and withered (Gold, 2004, 16). It is art that moves away from

conventional forms of beauty and encourages it in ordinary, even normally considered "ugly" things. At the foundation of its aesthetic ideal is a shared worldview with Zen Buddhism. As such, wabi-sabi is closest to the art of the Japanese tea ceremony. From tea utensils to the minimalist decorations in the teahouses, wabi-sabi is captured in bamboo vases that leak, in driftwoods that decay, in tarnished iron kettles and unglazed and chipped teacups. "Wabi sabi embodies the Zen nihilist[5] cosmic view and seeks beauty in the imperfections found as all things, in a constant state of flux, evolve from nothing and devolve back to nothing" (Juniper, 2003, 1).

Zen is one of the forms of Buddhism that developed in Japan (Chinese Ch'an). Kalupahana (1997, 167), tracing the transformations in the teachings and practice of Buddhism from its early beginnings in India through its travel through China, and to Japan, shows that Zen is mostly an offshoot of the Madhyamika–Yogacara syncretism, two Mahayana schools that became quite popular in China. It claims to be a "special tradition" because it places itself outside the textual tradition that other forms of Buddhism are founded. It rejects the text or any kind of verbalization of Buddhist teachings for it is "not founded on words and letters," and emphasizes emptiness (Suprun, Yanova, and Nosov, 2013, 50).

Basic to Buddhist teachings is the understanding of the workings of causality, which explains the coming to be and the dissipation of things. Our ignorance of this causes our suffering. The Arthaviniscaya Sutra says, "… Having heard the characteristics of the truth of suffering—impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and absence of self—and not understanding them [causes other kinds of ignorance to arise" (2002, 75). Since things arise and pass away because of causes and conditions, things are therefore impermanent, nonsubstantial, and unsatisfactory (troubled or causes suffering).

Impermanence refers to the state of things in this world as always changing. Nothing in the world ever stays the same. In fact, as soon as things arise, they are also already beginning to dissipate. This includes the "self" which is second-nature to us to believe in. Since our birth (arising) depends on some conditions, we, too, change and eventually pass away; thus, the idea that there is no "self" or nonsubstantiality or emptiness of things and selves. Nothing stands on its own. Nothing endures. Unfortunately, this runs counter to our tendency to be attached to things or experiences ("grasping"), thinking them to be permanent. The result is suffering ("trouble" or

5 "Nihilist" here must be taken in the Zen context of "things going back into nothingness" as they decay and die.

"dissatisfaction") (Kalupahana, 1997, 36–41):

> Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, separation from what is pleasant is suffering, association with what is unpleasant is suffering. What one desires and searches for, if it is not obtained, is also suffering. In brief, all the aggregates of clinging are suffering. This is the Noble Truth of Suffering. (Arthaviniscaya Sutra (VI), 2002, 13)

The cure to this suffering, therefore, is the proper understanding of the nature of the world as empty (that is, no independent substance), continually arising from and devolving into nothingness. To accomplish this, Zen Buddhism[6] employs koans, "…a brief saying, question, story, or a snatch of conversation that a student of reality takes up and examines" (Tarrant, 2005, 24). Two of the well-known koans include: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" and "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him." (Tarrant, 2005, 24). Another tells of the monk Tung-shan who asked, "Who is the Buddha?" and the answer given was "Three chin of flax." These pieces of conversations are meant to shatter ordinary views in order to bring the would-be practitioner to enlightenment.

Since the main task of Zen followers was to overcome the limitedness of their consciousness, the first stage in executing it will be to intellectually grasp the reasons for this limitedness. One of the most important reasons for the limitedness of consciousness is our verbal, logical, sign-based mode of reflecting and comprehending Reality. With the aid of concepts one delimits Reality by applying a kind of virtual, conceptual grid of coordinates to it, but it is impossible to exhaust the nonfinite with the finite.

> "We spent the whole day debating Zen. What can be learned from our debate?" Isan asked. Kyozan drew a line in the air.
>
> "If you showed this to someone else, he would not understand," said Isan. (Blais [Blyth], 2001, p. 244). (Suprun, Yanova, and Nosov, 2013, 53)

The point of koans is to destroy mental structures that perpetuate binary

6 That is, specifically the Rinzai or Lin-chi tradition.

thinking and introduce the view of Emptiness. Koans are meant to shock so that the complacent mind will start asking questions. Zen encourages doubt and treats all students' questions as questions about enlightenment (Tarrant, 2005, 25). In response, a Zen teacher "often made no rational sense yet possessed a strangely compelling quality…the words would work away in the mind, gradually drawing the student out of a limiting view he or she held" (Tarrant, 2005, 26). Like wabi-sabi art that stands in contrast to the usual conceptions of beauty and puts together simple, natural, and organic things as decorations to serve as reminders of the constant journey into nothingness, in this way, koans nudge the ordinary "grasping" mind and free it so that it can contemplate emptiness.

THE QUESTIONS OF SAMUEL BAK

As a "painter of questions",[7] Bak shows not the usual perception of the world that has been "fixed" after the Holocaust. He paints images of destruction, or devolution, or a world that has been marred by the past and is continually disintegrating. Bak seems to have shed his illusions about a perfect world and tries to show the world as it really is. Lawrence L. Langer (2010, 5–6) says of Bak's images:

> We fight wars to establish peace, we purge peoples to create ethnic "purity," we strive for reconciliation after the most unimaginable massacres, and we seek justice after deeds so unjustifiable that surviving victims are left bereft at the slow progress toward that impossible goal. By assaulting our perception with elegantly composed images haunted by an aura of decomposition, of pictorial scenes whose edges seek to burst through the frames containing them, of creatures in diverse stages of disintegration and buildings clinging to formal outlines while simultaneously threatening to collapse into a pile of rubble, Bak recapitulates the tensions that constitute the disturbing diet we are obliged to consume virtually every day of contemporary life. His work urges—or more precisely, compels—us to cast off the consoling bonds of myth and legend and to look at the scarred features of

7 This phrase is the title of Jon W. Sparks write up on "Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak" retrieved from http://www.commercialappeal.com/lifestyle/samuel-bak-exhibit-painter-of-questions February 26, 2017. Bak also refers to himself as such.

> modern history—and not only the history of the Holocaust—until we begin to recognize that the apparently surreal content of his canvases represents not a flight from current reality but a venture into the caverns of its deepest disquietudes (emphasis supplied).

It is in this sense that one could offer a Zen-inspired interpretation of the art of Samuel Bak. His works are like visual koans that make us feel uncomfortable and shake us from usual notions that keep us deluded, until we open ourselves to an alternative view that admits of change, of uncertainties, of both the light and the dark. Bak's images show opposites: clear sky and desolate land, crumbling walls and a figure that is saved from its disintegration, blue skies and broken toys, blue waters and a disheartened angel. But between what seem to be opposites are a wide range of possible views to take. This "dual vision," according to Langer (2010, 7) "is one of the principal legacies of [Bak's] art. Its philosophical implications have scarcely been recognized." His view is critical and always unmasking what most would want to hide or ignore. It is, perhaps, here that he pours in what he referred to as "hope": that in his painterly questionings, people would become critical of their own views, start asking questions, and become aware of what the world has become and the roles they have to take if they are to repair it. Personally, he sees his art as

> …an expression of pain and loss, [but] is also the pleasurable product of an artist's desire for accomplishment, the material evidence of a mental journey. The world I depict is clearly postcataclysmic, but my art is also the therapeutic response to a personal search for serenity, beauty and balance. Had I not feared to sound presumptuous, I would have said that art is the vehicle of our hope for human betterment. (Samuel Bak — Gallery 3,)

This is where Bak's survival lies all along. Through his art, these critical images that never stop interrogating, he has opened himself to the fact of the world's constant disintegration, its falling into emptiness. As Langer (2010, 48) observes, "Bak is less committed to beginnings and ends than to uncertainties…" It is a constant reminder that nothing is for certain, and yet, through this openness to accept the chaos, to affirm the wounds of the

past, we can hope and act to reconstruct the world. Bak's paintings are a call to awareness, to snap out of complacency, and see the world as it is, and if possible, to stir up the decision to walk the way of compassion in order to heal it. It is, as he himself wrote in his memoir, his tikkun haolam, "the repair of the world" (2001, location 5023, 74%).

SERENITY AMIDST DISINTEGRATION

Although nobody would want to deny that Bak's art is "Holocaust Art," a term that has not been without complications in the field of Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art, his images have served as metaphors that point to something beyond and more than the facts of history. In this, it may be said that his works transcend the usual boundaries built around "Holocaust Art."

This paper has attempted to show that apart from the usual readings of Bak's paintings, one can also relate it to the basic teachings of Zen. The predominance of disintegration in Bak's images and their usual setting in serene backgrounds bring up the interplay of the positive and the negative, the light and dark, which operate in the world in a cyclic process. One could see in these, not just laments about the past or a mere lip service of hope for the future, but the awareness and the acceptance that the world has been marred by something "unimaginable" and "unspeakable" and it is the way that it is. It falls, it crumbles. In presenting his images, Bak hopes to make his viewers snap out of the daze that makes them believe that the world is whole again and that we are all safe.

The fact that Bak himself admits that his paintings are questions makes him closer to the Zen masters who pose incomprehensible questions or give seemingly nonsensical answers to their disciples, and to wabi-sabi artists who make of their creations a reminder of the nature of the world. His hope, it seems, lies in the possibility that his questioning paintings will awaken the same awareness in his audience as these Zen practitioners tried to instill in their students, and from there find a path for a healing of the world. But this "healing" is not to be a once-and-for-all solution to the dangers in the world, but a continuing effort to do a tikkun in terms of understanding its basic nature as emptiness: nothing stands alone and everything that happens is a product of conditions that we ourselves, in our connectedness, cause. Seen this way, Bak's paintings, like Zen koans, may be a way to attain enlightenment, through both light and darkness.

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