

Your Move

NEW PAINTINGS BY SAMUEL BAK



P U C K E R G A L L E R Y • B O S T O N 2 0 1 2

Chess Revisited in the Art of Samuel Bak

Chess invites metaphor. From the names of the pieces to the precision of the rules, the implications for the human condition are legion. Because of the game's antiquity, moreover, the analogies have a long pedigree. Thus, Charles Darwin's most famous disciple and advocate, Thomas Huxley, once wrote: "The chess-board is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us." Nor have artists lacked such inspiration. One example is a panel painted around 1508 by the Dutchman Lucas van Leyden, which portrays a chess game that has attracted a group of spectators. But the gestures of the bystanders, and the fact that not all of them are paying attention, have prompted speculation as to Lucas's intentions. The most recent interpretation has suggested that, because a woman is playing a man (and seems about to win), the painting is a comment on the relations between men and women.

A viewer might not agree, but that may well be the point. Because chess is so strictly structured, and everything about it is so ordered and coherent, it can come to represent a vast variety of behaviors, conditions, and outlooks. There can be few more fertile stimuli to an expansive imagination. It is not

too surprising, therefore, that Samuel Bak, a master of the surrealistic embrace of nature, the history of art, and the power of symbols, should have turned his attention to the many layers of meaning that can emerge from the images that embody the game of chess.

Bak himself has said that those who try to understand his work have "a lot to chew on." Indeed, it is far from self-evident; even if one reads the titles he has given his paintings, to decipher his intentions. Not that he himself is unaware of the difficulty: as he has put it,



BK1503 *Dismissed History*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"

“when I paint, so many things occur that come from something which must be the subconscious.” It may be that, as he has also said, “I very often paint in order to understand what it is that I am doing.” But the fact that mysteries remain does not absolve the viewer from trying to understand the effects that arise from his deployment of various themes and images. Some, like the smoking chimneys that evoke Nazi gas chambers, raise implications that seem natural to a man who is a Holocaust survivor. But others, like pears, openings in walls, vast landscapes, and keys and keyholes, are recurring elements in a vision that defies easy explanation.

What is clear in the chess series is that the presiding metaphor, as Huxley noted, encompasses the entire world. So rich are the echoes that there is almost an overabundance of references and connections that the viewer can recognize. At times, as in the floating stones in *Moonlight* (BK1483, cover image), one seems to be in Magritte territory, where reality is super-precise, with the exception that gravity has lost its meaning. At others, as in *Dismissed History* (BK1503), one sees ominous glimpses into prisons and labyrinths that evoke Piranesian scenes of darkness and menace. The atmosphere changes so dramatically from painting to painting that one has to resist simple explanations. Even Bak’s own sustained comment on the metaphor does not take us very far: “Chess represents a game that is rational. In the game of life, of playing for a position of strength and power, and making games, we walk on very unsafe ground. The rules are not always implied in life as they are implied in games.”

There are, nevertheless, a number of leitmotifs that one can identify within the series as a whole. Most pervasive is an atmosphere of oppression. Again and again, the chess pieces themselves bear signs of physical abuse: sections have crumbled away; surfaces are peeling or have been marred by gouges or cracks; nails have been pounded into their surface; and many are blindfolded. Even in a more lyrical canvas, such as *Outlook* (BK1474), with its distant vista of a gentle landscape, the pawn that is the focus of attention is nothing if not isolated and alone. In the foreground, moreover, lies an area of devastation that contrasts sharply with the calm, pastoral scene which—while perhaps the object of the “outlook”—remains dream-like, far off, and probably unattainable. In this as in other canvases, the divide remains stark between an unsettling foreground and the serenity of a bird’s-eye-view landscape in the background. This airborne perspective, an invention of Flemish artists of the sixteenth century, conjures up the immensity and the beauty of the natural world, and it is conspicuous in a number of the “chess” paintings (such as *Final Face to Face*, BK1517, pg 4). But Bak



BK1474 *Outlook*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1517 *Final Face to Face*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"



BK1515 *Aftermath*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"

seems to use such landscapes primarily as a way of distinguishing between an ideal, almost inaccessible tranquility and the far harsher reality in the foreground.

With oppression and violence so widely present in the paintings, it is no surprise that warfare should provide a recurring image. This has long been one of chess's metaphoric roles, since the very game encourages the connection through its knights, its castles, its stratagems for controlling territory, and its talk of "capture." Bak occasionally brings the issue to the fore in his titles: *Battle Scene*, *Battlefield*, *About War's End*, or *A Knight of the Intifada*. But the subject is never far away. *Aftermath* (BK1515) records war's end; troops, often with weapons, are arrayed in many a scene; and subjects like *Encircled* (BK1504) bring to life situations that are immediately associated with warfare.

Given this concentration, what is it about warfare that the chess metaphor enables Bak to convey? Occasionally, there is a hint of the élan and camaraderie that drive men into the military life. Parades and flags, in particular, give a hint of the fondness for display and the appeal of acting in unison with others that draw soldiers into armies. One painting, *Flagstaff*

(BK1472), seems especially close to the depictions of military standard bearers by sixteenth-century artists and, in the following century, by such notables as Hendrick Goltzius and Jacques Callot. These were conspicuous figures on battlefields, famous for the encouragement that troops drew from their presence. Yet the mention of Callot reminds us that, although much in demand for his documentary depictions of armed conflict, the Frenchman is best known for his devastating series of engravings, *The Miseries of War*. If anyone can stand as an archetype for Bak's work, it is Callot.

Like his great predecessor, but through metaphorical allusion rather than direct comment, Bak is a relentless chronicler of the agonies, disillusion, and destruction that are the handmaidens of warfare. The subject matter may be



BK1504 *Encircled*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"



BK1472 *Flagstaff*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 9"



Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558-1617)
The Great Standard-Bearer, 1587
Engraving on ivory laid paper
11 ¼ x 7 ¾"
Collection of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Jacques Callot (French, 1592-1635)
Standard Bearer with Battle Scene in the Background, 1617
Engraving (plate engraved in Florence, Italy)
2 ¼ x 3 ¼"
Collection of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



BK1486 *About War's End*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18"



BK1458 *Battle Scene*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"

obvious at first glance, as in *About War's End* (BK1486) or *Battle Scene* (BK1458, which immediately brings to mind the final stages of the Trojan War), but more often it requires a closer look. Take, for example, the canvas entitled *Gray Eminence* (BK1495). The original gray eminence was the Capuchin friar, always dressed in gray, known as Father Joseph, who was a close advisor of one of the chief warmongers of the seventeenth century, Cardinal Richelieu. Father Joseph always worked in the background—hence the meaning of a shadowy, never fully visible figure. Bak, however, has his gray eminence front and center. The question is: to what purpose? Is he—a perfect, unblemished pawn—the leader of the band of disheveled, ragged, bandaged pawns in the foreground, facing, through the archway, the powerful array of enemies at the top of the chessboard hill? Or is he (more likely) the emissary of those enemies, coming to accept the capitulation of the exhausted remnants of a fighting force? They have been defending the building in whose archway the gray eminence stands, and one of them holds a white flag of surrender. Since a pawn has no front or rear, we cannot tell which way the eminence faces, but the “surrender” scenario seems the more plausible. As in many of the other paintings in the series, the desolation that emanates from the foreground figures is almost palpable.

It also bears noting that they are all pawns, the gray eminence included. These are the foot soldiers, the least significant of the pieces on the board, the front-line weaker brethren who are exploited by their more powerful colleagues. They are by far the most frequent presence on the canvases, but it is not as if Bak sets greater store by the dominant forces of the chessboard. A castle lies on its side, its cannon useless, in *About War's End*. Knights and bishops suffer from fissures and other signs of decay. And even the one beautifully presented King and Queen, the shiny red pair who are the central figures in *Abdication* (BK1481, pg 8), are unmistakably helpless—hemmed in and defeated, as the very title of the painting suggests.

Warfare, however, is but one of the many themes the paintings suggest. The crumbling and damaged surfaces that permeate just about every scene imply a forlorn omnipresence of shabbiness and decay. These are not cheerful canvases, and yet nature herself seems immune to the prevailing mood. In the hands of some artists, landscapes can be ominous, haunted, or even threatening. One need but recall the



BK1495 *Gray Eminence*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40"

background to Albrecht Dürer's engraving of *Knight, Death, and the Devil* to recognize the menace that can emanate from ordinary trees and rocks. For Bak, however, it is in the scenery—in mountains, trees, bodies of water, and radiant blue skies—that peace and calm are to be found. The distinction comes across repeatedly, and not only when the foreground has grim implications.

The enigmatic *Crossing Shadows* (BK1468, pg 8), for example, poses many puzzles. For a start, what is it that undermines the laws of physics (creating non-parallel shadows despite their apparently being cast by a single light source)? Also, why do the two pawns, which seem to have descended from the chessboard, resemble children's toys? And how do shadows stand up? Such questions arise all the time in surrealist pictures; what is telling, however, is that these mysterious objects and effects are placed within a large, peaceful, and easily comprehensible landscape. It is as if nature herself functions as a kind of reproach to the tragic or impenetrable actions of mankind.

Noteworthy in the series is the relative rarity of overt allusions to Jewish themes. There is a reference to the Intifada, and *Eternal Flame* (BK1505, pg 9) not only takes its title from a feature of synagogue architecture, but also summons

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BK1481 *Abdication*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1468 *Crossing Shadows*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1539 *Regrets Only*
Crayon and oil on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1505 *Eternal Flame*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 48"

up, with its flammable piles of books, the book burning that has been a means of assault against Jewish culture through the centuries, and especially in Nazi Germany. Moreover, the viewer is regularly driven to regard the chess pieces, and particularly the pawns, as the victims of persecution. In addition to their damaged condition, they are often in confined spaces or in danger. But they have no specifically Jewish attributes, other than the recognition that the history of the Jews is marked by oppression and destruction to a degree that no other people can match.

It is also worth noting that there are very few humans in these paintings. Very occasionally there is a face, often in profile, and in *Regrets Only* (BK1539, pg 9) a human gesture of despair that underlines the tone of the entire scene. But the most intriguing use of human features is in the painting mysteriously entitled *The Eternity of the Right Angle* (BK1518). Even in the suggestions of a chessboard, right angles are hard to find, though a carpenter's tool does lend justification to the title. What is compelling in the picture, though, are two



Photograph of Dartmoor, Devon, England

faces, seemingly carved out of rock, and possibly at right angles to one another, that rise out of the ground in the middle distance. Without claiming to unravel Bak's intentions, let alone the subconscious purposes the canvas serves, one should at least point out that the face on the left resembles nobody so much as Leonardo da Vinci. The Italian master, who also dabbled in mathematics, referred to right angles a number of times in his notebooks and treatises, and on one occasion offered his own proof of the Pythagoras theorem (whose basic element, the square, is made up of right angles). This is not to argue that any of the pictures, let alone this particularly inscrutable one, has

a specific "meaning." It is merely to give a hint of the connections, the ideas, the feelings, and the thoughts to which these paintings give rise.

One final observation may be appropriate. If artists often shape the way we view reality (one has but to think how different the English landscape might seem without John Constable), then Bak is no exception. I recently came across a photograph of Dartmoor that was taken during the filming of *War Horse*. Looming over the landscape are two rock formations that look just like the metaphoric shapes that, in a Bak painting, would set the mood for the entire setting. Once again, it seemed, life imitated art.

—Theodore K. Rabb

Theodore K. Rabb is Emeritus Professor of History at Princeton University. The author of several books, Rabb's most recent release, *The Artist and the Warrior: Military History through the Eyes of the Masters* was published in 2012 by Yale University Press.

All of the quotations by Samuel Bak were taken from *Commentary on the Vilnius Collection*, an interview with the artist filmed in 2011.



BK1518 *The Eternity of the Right Angle*
Oil on canvas, 54 x 54"



BK1496 *Endless Degrees of Separation*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40"



BK1478 *Lost Kingdom*
Oil on canvas, 15 x 30"



BK1501 *A Knight of the Intifada*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"



BK1506 *Blue Royalty*
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30"



BK1507 *Spoilers*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40"



BK1502 *Endgame Exercise*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36"



BK1479 *Game of the Lower Deck*
Oil on canvas, 15 x 30"



BK1497 *Sovereignty*
Oil on canvas, 36 x 24"



BK1459 *In Reserve*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1491 *Hidden Knight*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1470 *Bystanders*
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12"



BK1516 *Rider*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"



BK1464 *Added Perspective I*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1476 *Growth*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20"



BK1484 *Followers*
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



BK1487 *Added Perspective II*
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



BK1463 *Pawns B*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1492 *Flags*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1489 *Supervision*
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



BK1465 *Marked*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1461 *Stone Age*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1509 *Questionable*
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"



BK1508 *As Far As Possible*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40"



BK1485 *Blending In*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18"



BK1466 *Idée Fixe*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1513 *Your Move*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"



BK1514 *At the Arch*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"



BK1511 *Immovable Parade*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 48"



BK1510 *Brinkmanship*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20"



BK1512 *To Become a King*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"



BK1498 *Suspense*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"



BK1500 *Moonstruck*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"



BK1488 *Key Position II*
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18"



BK1455 *Key Position I*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12"



BK1499 *The Bishop's Move*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"



BK1564 *Immoveables*
Crayon on blue paper, 13 x 19 ¾"



BK1559 *In the Wind*
Gouache on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1543 *Partial Victory*
Gouache on paper, 8 ½ x 11"



BK1563 *The Sound of Blues*
Crayon and oil on paper, 14 x 11"



BK1558 *Good Luck*
Gouache on paper, 8 ½ x 11"



Left column

BK1562 *Recalculating*

Crayon and oil on paper, 10 ¼ x 14 ¾"

BK1561 *A Game for a Horse*

Oil on paper, 10 ½ x 12 ¾"

BK1560 *Road Crew*

Charcoal and Gouache on paper, 8 ½ x 11"

BK1551 *Attempt*

Watercolor on paper, 7 ¼ x 9 ½"

Right column

BK1536 *The Intifada's End*

Crayon and oil on paper, 6 ¾ x 10 ½"

BK1527 *Clearing Horizon*

Gouache on paper, 10 x 10"

BK1555 *Gambiters A*

Gouache on paper, 11 x 14"



BK1552 *Playfully*
Gouache on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1556 *Small and Big*
Gouache on paper, 14 ¾ x 10 ¼"



BK1557 *Getting the Hang*
Gouache on paper, 11 ¼ x 14 ¾"



BK1535 *Temporary Eternity*
Crayon and oil on paper, 9 ¾ x 9 ¾"



BK1553 *Parading*
Brown wash on paper, 10 ¾ x 13 ¾"



BK1533 *Through and Through*
Gouache on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1547 *In the Storm*
Black Gouache on paper, 8 ¼ x 11 ¾"



BK1546 *Delicate Balance*
Watercolor on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1538 *Debate*
Gouache on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1537 *Relaunched Game*
Crayon and oil on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1544 *From the Horse's Mouth*
Gouache on paper, 8 ½ x 11"



BK1524 *Resigned*
Crayon on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1545 *In Wait*
Oil on paper, 8 ½ x 11"



BK1523 *Behind the Wall*
Black Gouache on paper, 9 x 11 ¼"



BK1542 *Figures of Power*
Watercolor on paper, 13 ½ x 9 ½"



BK1525 *At a Loss*
Watercolor and crayon on paper, 8 ¼ x 11 ¾"



BK1541 *Alterable*
Brown crayon on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1534 *The One and Only*
Black Gouache on paper, 11 ½ x 13"



BK1532 *Red Stain*
Crayon on paper, 9 ½ x 6 ½"



BK1522 *Aspirations*
Pencil and oil on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1520 *Foursome*
Watercolor on paper, 6 ¼ x 4 ¾"



BK1519 *Against a Wall*
Watercolor on paper, 6 ¾ x 4 ¾"



BK1526 *Good Spot*
Watercolor on paper, 8 ½ x 11"



BK1457 *Blue Bystander*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12"



BK1456 *A Wall's Tale*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12"



BK1550 *Above, and Red*
Crayon and oil on paper,
10 ¼ x 5 ½"



BK1549 *Spare Wing*
Crayon and oil on paper,
11 x 8 ½"



BK1554 *In and Out*
Crayon on paper,
11 x 8 ½"



BK1529 *Winged B*
Mixed media on paper, 11 x 8 ½"



BK1528 *Winged A*
Watercolor on paper, 9 ½ x 6 ½"



BK1521 *Cover Up*
Crayon and oil on paper, 9 ¾ x 6 ¾"



BK1530 *Winged C*
Crayon and wash on paper,
9 ½ x 6 ½"



BK1540 *Two Winged Ones*
Wash on paper,
9 ½ x 6 ½"



BK1548 *Shielded*
Mixed media on paper,
11 x 6 ¾"



BK1531 *Winged D*
Crayon on paper,
11 x 8 ½"



BK1494 *Survivors*
Oil on canvas, 18 x 14"



BK1467 *Red Knight*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1462 *A Knight's Tale*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1480 *Openings*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1473 *Battlefield I*
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12"



BK1482 *In Thought*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1493 *Royal Branch*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1490 *Pawns in Waiting*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



BK1469 *Connected*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 9"



BK1453 *Emerging*
Oil on canvas, 14 x 11"



BK1475 *Directions*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1477 *On Rights*
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24"



BK1460 *Pawns A*
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16"



BK1454 *Floaters*
Oil on canvas, 11 x 14"



BK1452 *Study for Greatness*
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12"



SAMUEL BAK *Biography*

Samuel Bak was born on August 12, 1933, in Vilna, Poland, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under first Soviet, then German occupation. Bak's artistic talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine. While both 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 and his mother fled to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp. Here, he was enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School, 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 where he continued his studies at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his studies. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings met with considerable success. In 1961, he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International" in Pittsburgh. And, in 1963 two one-man exhibitions were held at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums. It was subsequent to these exhibitions, during the years 1963-1964, 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.

In 1966 he returned to Israel. He lived in New York City (1974-1977), Paris (1980-1984), Switzerland (1984-1993), and in 1993, moved to Weston, Massachusetts.

Since 1959, Samuel Bak has had solo exhibitions at private galleries in New York, Boston, London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Zurich, Rome and other cities around the world. Numerous large retrospective exhibitions have been held in major museums, universities, and public institutions internationally. Included among them are: Bezalel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel; Bronfman Center, Montreal, Canada; Heidelberg Museum, Heidelberg, Germany; Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg, Germany; Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf, Germany; University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel; Temple Judea Museum, Philadelphia, PA; Dürer Museum, Nuremberg, Germany; Jüdisches Museum, Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Germany; Jewish Institute of Religion, Hebrew Union College, New York, NY; Spertus Museum, Chicago, IL; Mizel Museum of Judaica, Denver, CO; Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Los Angeles, CA; National Catholic Center For Holocaust Education, Seton Hall College, Greensburg, PA; Holocaust Museum of Houston, Houston, TX; B'Nai B'Rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, DC; Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH; Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen, Germany; Snite Museum of Art, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, IN; Florida Holocaust Museum, Saint Petersburg, FL; National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius, Lithuania; University of Scranton, Scranton, PA; Neues Stadtmuseum, Landsberg am Lech, Germany; Canton Museum of Art, Canton OH; Clark University, Worcester, MA; 92nd Street Y, New York, NY; Jewish Cultural Center, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, TN; City Hall Gallery, Orlando, FL; Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX; Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Duluth, MN and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel.

Publications on Samuel Bak's work include twelve books, most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*, and his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*. He has also been the subject of two documentary films.

Your Move

NEW PAINTINGS BY SAMUEL BAK



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The artist will be present.

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Photography: Leslie Anne Feagley

LEFT:

BK1471 *Crown Princess*

Oil on canvas, 9 x 12"

COVER IMAGE:

BK1483 *Moonlight*

Oil on canvas, 24 x 20"

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