



ONGOING CONVERSATION

Birds in the Art of
SAMUEL BAK

PUCKER GALLERY • BOSTON

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The Hebrew expression *tzipor hanefesh* translates to “bird of the soul” and refers to that thing which is essentially important to one’s person. Consider the painting by Samuel Bak entitled *To the East and to the West* (BK2376), within whose manifold layers a portrait of the artist emerges. What does this painting say about the *tzipor hanefesh*—the bird of the soul—of Samuel Bak? In the central ground



To the East and to the West

sits the Vilna Ghetto where, in the rubble of the Holocaust, the story of the artist begins and a pivotal question of his life and work arises: where does one go from here? Hovering above, connecting the terrestrial and the celestial, a series of birds carved of negative space or constructed of discarded items merge in a visual push and pull. These birds are in conversation and contradiction, formed of interconnected parts yet reaching in different directions. As they endeavor to leave their painful past behind, they are united yet simultaneously struggle against one another. They are created out of the destruction but are not fully free to escape it. This is a portrait of an artist who carries on his wings over eighty years of personal history, a first-hand relationship with historical suffering, and an empath’s connection to the universal human experience.

The motif of the bird in Bak’s work is not a lark; it first appeared in the early 1960s when he was just beginning to gain public repute. By then, he had already gone, as his painting hearkens, *To the East and to the West*. A child survivor of the Holocaust, he immigrated with his mother in 1948 to the newly established state of Israel, went to Paris in the 1950s to study at the École des Beaux Arts, and was living in Rome at about the time the birds first manifested themselves in his work. (He would continue to move around Europe, Israel, and the United States before settling in Boston in 1993.) Eager to avoid being typecast as a “Holocaust” painter, but nonetheless compelled to weave his traumatic memories into his work, symbols such as the bird (and other ubiquitous objects) became parabolic devices to express a true and dark suffering that is at once very specific to his experiences but also universally relatable. The haunting chiaroscuro

birds of the early 1960s, very much influenced by popular artistic styles in Europe at the time, soon gave way to the surrealist archetypal silhouette that endures today. In this new body of work completed over the last five years, the artist takes a long view of his life. The work, in its richness, displays a maker whose thoughtful perspective on the early horrors that framed his existence provokes challenging questions about human evil and redemption.

The bird as symbol crosses cultures and eras and has long been an allegorical trope of writers and artists. The peaceful dove is a messenger of God, the raven is a harbinger of death and destruction, and the Phoenix is the resilient force that rises from the ashes. For a painter of questions such as Samuel Bak, the metaphorical incongruities of the bird make it an ideal tool for *double entendres*, hidden meanings, and symbolic puzzles. Birds are our connection to ancient forms of life but also inhabit a more divine plane than our earthbound existence will ever know. They enjoy the “birds-eye” view that humans aspire to but often fail to achieve. Birds possess the freedom of flight yet are vulnerable targets for hunters or ecological disasters. They move together through instinctual migratory patterns and fine-tuned group communication, protecting each other by sounding warnings and filling the air with their birdsong. But they also cast their shadows upon the earth as menacing observers hovering above us.

Through the myriad and often oppositional associations with the bird, and in concert with other symbols in his pictorial language, Bak narrates a spectrum of experiences and emotions ranging from annihilation and terror to survival and hope. Each work unfolds in a process of discovery, revealing itself to the close observer who recognizes that all is not what it seems. As René Magritte wrote, “everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.” The notion of hiding is familiar to Holocaust survivors, as harrowing stories of dissimulation, identity concealment, and subterfuge abound. Bak’s own account of survival includes obscuring himself under beds, being smuggled out of the HKP forced labor camp in a burlap sack, and taking shelter in the sacred recesses of a Benedictine convent where he learned basic Christian rites and tenets in case he found himself in a situation where convincingly feigning another religion could save his life.

In *Still Life of a Green Bird* (BK2379), Bak describes “an appearance of reality of unreal things.” The birds are made not of bone and feather but are an assemblage of wooden and metal scraps. Dice references raise the question: what are the chances these birds will ever

fly away, their timber wings bolted and roped together, as “still” as the still-life bottles, themselves adorned with futile wings, secured to the makeshift table? And yet, there is a sense of abundance and optimism in this vibrant painting, of a piecing-together of life against all odds. The yellow fabric strips in the large bird’s mouth (perhaps the remnants of the star badges that Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust), echo the branch of hope sent by God in the beak of a dove to alert Noah that the waters had abated and the catastrophe of the flood had passed. In re-framing the Holocaust and its aftermath in the form of a bricolage still-life with birds, Bak manifests a contrapuntal portrait of damage and promise. In it, human determination and optimism balance cataclysmic historical events; an invitation is proffered to acknowledge our role in contemporary persecution and suffering, to question what impediments to freedom still exist, and to consider how we might stand up and disrupt present-day humanitarian catastrophes.



Still Life of a Green Bird

Symbolic plurality abounds in *Firebird* (BK2378) with its oscillation between ruination and restoration, its references to Bak’s personal anecdotes and Biblical scholarship, and its commentary on the universality of the human struggle to overcome hardship and prevent future suffering. Bak recalls a childhood tradition of storytelling through a dance called the “Bird of Fire.” In *Firebird*, the bird is less of fire than *on* fire, his enigmatic story being told on canvas. The two-faced bird looks expectantly upwards, blissfully ignorant of the peril around him. Dark, choking plumes emanate from the flame but the bucolic landscape fends it off. What is the next chapter in this story? Does he burn to the ground in a hopeless endeavor to flee or is the flame an engine that propels him to safety? Eleventh-century French Jewish scholar Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, or Rashi, wrote of the phoenix: “It is a bird whose name is *chol*, and death has no power on it, because it did not taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge. At the end of a thousand years it renews itself and returns to its youth.” How does one bear witness to the worst in humanity and preserve in small part the unsullied innocence and optimism of youth? What is the essential thing—the *tzipor hanefesh*—that allows Bak to hold the horrors of the Holocaust within him, share them in a universal way, and be a source of renewal and hope? In the Talmud it is written:



Firebird

“Just as the dove is only saved by her wings, so, too, the Jews are only saved by the merit of their *mitzvot*.”

It is indeed a *mitzvah*—a good deed—that Bak does through his artwork. Visual punning and clever wordplay abound, rewarding close looking and intellectual inquiry. Works such as *Unexpected* (BK2382) bring levity to a heavy subject, which instead of betraying the severity of the Holocaust create a touchpoint for entry into its darker recesses. Bak cleverly illustrates the timeworn question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? A bluebird, artificial in its two-dimensionality, emerges from a petrified egg and chirps hungrily at a toy bird ill-equipped to feed it. Tree trunks and branches are also born from stony eggs. While bearing new life, the ossified and battered eggs are helpless to protect the fledgling chicks and trees from the hostile environment into which they arrive. Toy birds such as the ones that appear in *Unexpected* and *Chase* (BK2369) recall an early memory of Bak’s from the Vilna Ghetto, which helps explain the roots of his interest in the bird. In his own words:



Unexpected



Chase

One day, some men of the Ghetto, clad in their worn and dirty working clothes, started to pile up planks, boards, bricks and other building materials in front of our door. They worked a few days, reinforcing the wall that separated us from the exterior, closing the gaps and the windows, blocking every possibility to have a glimpse of the other side. Then they went away, but a considerable mountain of trash was left behind.

What an unforgettable moment of joy and happiness!

With two friends, boys my age, we started the construction of a huge bomber. An old crate served as the cabin for the pilot. The wings were made of boards supported by stones and old bricks. There was a tail, a propeller of sorts and even a mast with sails of old sacks to help out with the wind ... We would sit in the crate, one at a time, and dream. The hands holding a substitute steering

wheel made of an old frying pan, our lips producing a noise of a possible motor. We would become one with the bomber, we would decimate the enemy soldiers, we would land as heroes in a promised land, or on the Red Square, next to the Statue of liberty.

When my turn came, I would linger in the cabin. Behind my closed eyes the bomber turned into a magical bird. The wooden wings would take on a slow and steady beat. They would carry me away, away from the gray and dreary ghetto into a world of light, of freedom, of life.

Today, instead of a makeshift bomber wrought of the detritus of imprisonment, Bak sits in a studio filled with light, freedom, and life and creates artwork that simultaneously carries him toward and away from the gray and dreary past. As one painting's title suggest, there is an *On Going Conversation* (BK2370) between painful memories, inescapable realities, and the defiant acts of creation and hope epitomized in each work of art. Against the backdrop of a disjointed yellow star, everyday items hover willfully off the ground while a bird perches quietly on an empty chair. The bird is a symbol of both tranquility and uncertainty



On Going Conversation

here, theoretically capable of flying but permanently grounded by the artist's brush. The chair's absent inhabitant has deserted his post, perhaps yearning for liberation from the heaviness of his grief. However, he must ultimately accept the futility of flight and recognize, as Bak does with each work of art, that by sitting with pain he is capable of reconciling with the past and materializing a better future. Bak says "the process of painting is for the artist to discover what is possible in the space being born in front of their eyes." The process of painting is for the beholder as well, each work of art like a bird that eventually flies the nest of the artist's studio. Others are then invited to bring their own perspectives to bear, so that the *tzipor hanefesh*—the bird of the soul—of the artist, and the *tzipor hanefesh*—the bird of the soul—of the viewer enmesh in a singular experience of creation.

• *Jeanne V. Koles* •



Suspence, 2019
Oil on linen • 25.5 x 21" • BK2374



Bird's View, 2017
Oil on linen • 22 x 28" • BK2380



Unexpected, 2019
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2382



Departureland, 2018
Oil on linen • 22 x 28" • BK2381



Roots, 2019
Oil on linen • 35.5 x 48" • BK2377



A Nest of One's Own, 2019
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2371



After a Long Journey, 2019
Oil on linen • 16 x 20" • BK2368



Timeless, 2020
Oil on linen • 28 x 22" • BK2373



Step by Step, 2019
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2364



To the East and to the West, 2019
Oil on linen • 35.5 x 48" • BK2376



Encounter, 2019
Oil on linen • 16 x 20" • BK2372



Chase, 2019
Oil on linen • 16 x 20" • BK2369



Camouflage, 2020
Oil on linen • 22 x 28" • BK2375



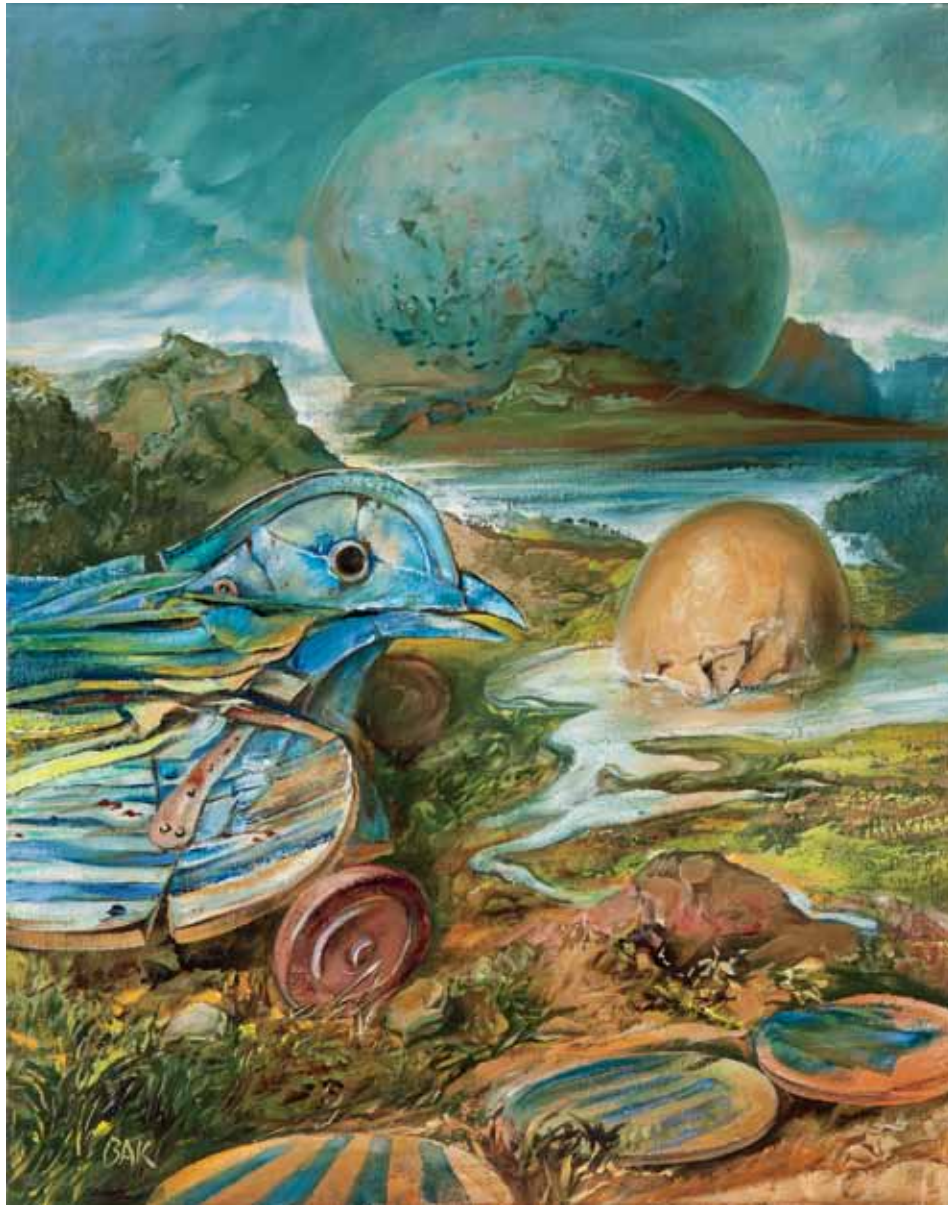
All of a Sudden, 2018
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2366



On Going Conversation, 2019
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2370



The Whisperer, 2019
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2365



Looming, 2018
Oil on linen • 20 x 16" • BK2383



Foreboding, 2018
Oil on linen • 15.75 x 20" • BK2384



Still Still, 2019
Oil on linen • 16 x 20" • BK2367



Expected Visitor, 2018
Oil on linen • 15.75 x 20" • BK2385



Four of Them, 2013
Oil on linen • 12 x 9" • BK2386



To the Left, 2013
Oil on linen • 12 x 16.25" • BK2387



In the Air, 2014
Oil on linen • 12 x 16.25" • BK2388



The Weight of Fortune, 2019
Oil on linen • 12 x 16" • BK2389



Bird-Portrait, 2017
Oil on canvas • 14 x 11" • BK2392



Meeting Point, 2014
Oil on canvas • 12 x 16.25" • BK2390



Where To?, 2018
Oil on linen • 18.25 x 14" • BK2363



Forever, 2019
Crayon and watercolor on paper • 11 x 8.5" • BK2359



Horizontally, 2019
Gouache and pencil on paper • 8.5 x 11" • BK2360



Study for Migration, 2019
Gouache on orange paper • 6.5 x 12.5" • BK2354



Disguised B, 2019
Gouache on gray paper • 8.5 x 11" • BK2357



Advice, 2019
Gouache on brown paper • 8.5 x 11" • BK2358



The Green Ones, 2019
Gouache on brown paper • 6.25 x 8.5" • BK2353



Dependability, 2019
Tempura on orange paper • 6.25 x 9.25" • BK2362



Disguised A, 2019
Crayon, watercolor and tempura on blue paper • 8.5 x 11" • BK2361



In a Box, 2019
Watercolor on paper • 8.5 x 11" • BK2393



Steadfast, 2019
Gouache on brown paper • 5 x 8.5" • BK2355



Passing By, 2019
Gouache on brown paper • 5 x 8.5" • BK2356

SAMUEL BAK

Biography



Samuel Bak

Samuel Bak was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933, at a crucial moment in modern history. From 1940 to 1944, Vilna was under Soviet and then German occupation. Bak's artistic talent was first recognized during an exhibition of his work in the Ghetto of Vilna when he was nine years old. While he and his mother survived, his father and four grandparents all perished at the hands of the Nazis. At the end of World War II, he fled with his mother to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp, where he enrolled in painting lessons at the Blocherer School in Munich. In 1948 they immigrated to the newly established state of Israel. He studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem and completed his mandatory service in the Israeli army. In 1956 he went to Paris to continue his education at the École des Beaux Arts. He received a grant from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation to pursue his artistic studies. In 1959, he moved to Rome where his first exhibition of abstract paintings was met with considerable success. In 1961 he was invited to exhibit at the "Carnegie International"

in Pittsburg, followed by solo exhibitions at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Museums in 1963.

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

Since 1959, the artist has had numerous exhibitions in major museums, galleries, and universities throughout Europe, Israel, and the United States including retrospectives at Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, and the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. He has lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, New York, and Lausanne. In 1993 he settled in Massachusetts and became an American citizen. Bak has been the subject of numerous articles,



Two Birds with One Tree, 2015
Oil on canvas • 12 x 12" • BK2391



Bak's bronze piece from 1977-78 entitled In Flight features the archetypal bird silhouette that still figures prominently in his current work.

scholarly works, and eighteen books; most notably a 400-page monograph entitled *Between Worlds*. In 2001 he published his touching memoir, *Painted in Words*, which has been translated into several languages. He has also been the subject of two documentary films and was the recipient of the 2002 German Herkomer Cultural Prize. Samuel Bak has received honorary doctorate degrees from: the University of New Hampshire in Durham; Seton Hill University in Greenburg, Pennsylvania; Massachusetts College of Art in Boston; and the University of Nebraska Omaha.

In 2017, The Samuel Bak Museum opened in the city of the artist's birth, on the first two floors of the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. In addition to the more than 50 works already donated by the artist, the Museum will accept more than 100 works in the coming years, and ultimately build a collection that spans the artist's career. The Museum honors Bak's life and art and is a testament to his commitment to educate current and future generations. Also in 2017, Samuel Bak was nominated by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, and subsequently named by the city's mayor as an Honorary Citizen of Vilnius. He is only the 15th person to receive this honor, joining Ronald Reagan and Shimon Peres for their exceptional contributions to Lithuania. In 2019 The Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center, In Loving Memory of Hope Silber Kaplan opened at the Holocaust Museum Houston to house more than 125 works donated by the artist; and The Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy as well as the Natan & Hannah Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies partnered with Pucker Gallery to create *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak*, an exhibition of Sam Bak's works at University of Nebraska Omaha.

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GALLERY

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GALLERY HOURS:

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10:00 AM to 5:30 PM

Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

Pucker Gallery is a member of the Boston Art Dealers Association and the New England Appraisers Association.

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Printed in Canada by Friesens, Inc.

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DATES: 11 July through 20 September 2020

OPENING RECEPTION: 11 July 2020, 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM

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



Firebird, 2015–2017
Oil on linen • 35.75 x 35.75" • BK2378

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