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story

# JEWISH LIFE

## To repair the shattered

Samuel Bak's response to a world turned upside down

By **GILA WERTHEIMER** ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**I**F SAMUEL BAK IS THE PROVERBIAL WANDERING JEW, THE NEW EXHIBIT AT THE BLOCK MUSEUM OFFERS BACKGROUND TO HIS, AND BY EXTENSION ALL, JEWISH WANDERING.

The exhibit, "Drawn from Memory: Holocaust and History in the Art of Samuel Bak", is one of three separate exhibits mounted this fall by Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, showcasing artistic expressions of 20th Century war and oppression.

The other exhibits focus on the repression of Communist Poland, in drawings by Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Japan in 1945, as captured in photos taken by Hollywood photographer John Swope, with a Navy-issued camera.

**S**amuel Bak's wanderings began when he was still a child. Born in 1933 in Vilna (then a part of Poland), he survived the war with his mother (some of it in a Benedictine monastery), spent time in DP camps in Germany, arrived in Israel in 1948 at age 15, where another war, this one for the fledgling state's independence, was being fought.

Bak studied art at the Bezalel Academy, served in the Israel Defense Forces, then from 1956-66, lived and studied in Paris and Rome. He returned to Israel, spent several years in New York and Paris, before moving to Switzerland in 1984.

Fifteen years ago, he moved to the U.S., and today lives in Massachusetts. His wandering is, perhaps, at an end.

The 21 drawings and paintings in the Block Museum exhibit are filled with images of destruction and breakage and dislocation, metaphors for the losses suffered in the Holocaust.

Repeated in his works are figures and motifs from classical works, as well as his own symbols. The symbols recur in his landscapes, city scapes and his still life paintings.

One of the classical iconic figures he returns to over and over, reconfiguring it so that it becomes his own, is the figure of Melencolia (below right), taken from the German painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

Bak's large oil painting "Measure of Time" (below), with Melencolia brooding before a broken hourglass into which buildings sink, is the entryway into the exhibit.

It is a contemplation of modern tragedy by this classic

figure, whose entire body bespeaks hopelessness and loss. Bak has reached back through the centuries to Dürer's engraving "Melencolia I", from 1514, to portray the Holocaust experience.

In Dürer's engraving, the hourglass in the background shows time running out; in Bak's vision, with its broken hourglass now dominant in the forefront, time has already run out.

Another image from the Dürer engraving — the rainbow — re-appears in Bak's "Then and Then", only in the Bak work, its arc is broken. The village buildings beneath it become tombstones.

Destruction and implicit death also appear in a mixed media work simply titled "A Train". There, lop-sided village buildings form a train, with piled-up houses comprising an engine that belches smoke. It's all bathed in a reddish glow, as if everything is burning.

"Ponar Trees", a work in charcoal and pastel that depicts trees severed from their roots, is a direct reference to Bak's personal history.

The Ponary forest, near Vilna, was a site of massacres and mass burials, including the murder of Bak's four grandparents and, just days before the liberation of Vilna, his father.

**W**hile most of Bak's works in this exhibition have no direct Holocaust imagery, some that do are amongst the most powerful on view.

In a series of watercolors, two of which are in the exhibit, Bak has taken the well-known photo of a boy, hands raised in surrender, that was photographed in 1943 after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, as a symbol of the nameless victims of the Holocaust.

He has named him Samek, after his childhood friend who was one of the victims.

In "Samek I", the photo is placed against a large cut-out of the image, surrounded by breakage.

In "Samek 3" there are remnants — shoes, hat, Hebrew letters. Significantly, we see only the letter *yud* in full, with just part of another letter visible. It could be another *yud*, that is, spelling God, but it is hidden, so we can't make it out.

God is hidden and the world turned upside down. In "In Good Hands", two angels with wings of armor, wearing yarmulkes and sidecurls, reach out. In the background, in an allusion to Michelangelo, a third figure reaches out — but it's upside down.

**B**ak's personal symbols that re-appear in his works include pears, which evoke pre-war childhood memories for him and which he now uses as a symbol of vulnerability and transience. He calls them "parables of our human condition".

Broken china is another recurring symbol. Such everyday items as cups and saucers speak eloquently of broken worlds and shattered lives.

In a lecture he delivered in 2002 at the European Parliament, Bak spoke about what he called the "miracle" of his survival — he and his mother were among the few survivors of Vilna, which had been a large, thriving Jewish community prior to the war.

All his works, he said, are a response to this miracle. "More precisely," he continued, "these paintings are a visual statement born of an ever-growing need to deal with my experience of having come through the horrors of the Holocaust, and of having done it by age eleven."

Samuel Bak's art is his testimony of what he witnessed. It is, too, his effort to repair what was shattered, while at the same time acknowledging that it can never be made whole again.

The attempt, however, must be made, so that something new, and livable, can emerge. ☐

**Clockwise:**

Samuel Bak, "Measure of Time" (2006), oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches; Albrecht Dürer, "Melencolia I" (1514).

Credit: Block Museum; public domain



"Drawn from Memory" is on view until November 30 at The Block Museum on the Northwestern campus (40 Arts Circle Dr., Evanston). For hours and information, call 847-491-4000. "The Art of Speaking About the Unspeakable", a 37-minute video on Bak's life and work, accompanies the exhibit.