

RANDOM THOUGHTS
On Paintings Created in Rome
1959-1964

Samuel Bak
Weston, January 2022

The seven years of living, working, and exhibiting in Rome, prior to my return to Israel, were ongoingly prolific and have produced a sizeable number of paintings, drawings, and sketches. Today my catalogue raisonné displays each one of them and I am baffled by how much this faraway time has produced. I am also fascinated by their different styles, which offered distinct possibilities of development. The new circumstances of my life in Rome gave me much artistic liberty. Believing, like most of Picasso's idolizers, that it was more important to move ahead than to arrive, I was in a state of an ongoing and fervent search. The "air du temps" had a strong hold on me and I was continuously fluctuating between the purely spontaneous and the thoughtfully structured. I searched for originality and authenticity, saw myself as an integral part of what we then called **Modernism** and the foggy meaning of this classification didn't disturb me. My way of painting has since then much changed, yet I still believe that I am quite "contemporary." This transitional period made me explore my potentials and let me better understand the nature of what had been nurturing most of my output. Italy granted my art a very revelatory period, and in my view—a very important one.

In hindsight, I can see in my old works many elements that announced what was to come. But the understanding of such a transformation was asking for time. I believe that the quality of what I then produced doesn't fall short from what I continued to create in the many years to come.

The shore from which I now depart for my visual adventures is very different from the one on which I landed when I arrived at Rome. But both are part of the same mainland, my individual person. Was it clear to me that my work would always be affected by my painful past? It slowly dawned on me that my inescapable scars of WW2 were nourishing my art. My many displacements and an eternal sense of loss, which are deeply buried in my mind, keep on asking to be evacuated. Their burden is eased by a work that evokes a very dark time. But this isn't my sole aim. My paintings try to speak of the human condition in view of its notorious extremes that the Shoah has uncovered. They speak of man's need to repair, and his blindness to the damages that he is bringing on himself. Besides, like most

artists, I like to speak of myself, and that is why I am painting the way I do.

In the winter of 58 and early 59 when in Paris, I focused on a series of imaginary arrangements of structures, often bathed in somber, Rembrandt-esque light. Then I had to put away my brushes and pack because Annalisa (my new wife) and I had to leave for Italy. I wished to get acquainted with her extended family, then proceed to Israel in order to take up my work for the theater.

Unforeseen events had postponed this plan for several years.

In Italy, the drawings, and paintings that I brought from Paris didn't pair with my new state of mind. They belonged to a former chapter, and Italy was still a foreign land. My only references of that country were the Italian neo-realist movies, and Jacob Burkhardt's ancient book on Italian Renaissance (1860).

Indeed, so much had happened to me!

I was happily married and welcomed by a family, whose complexity had to be discovered. I was surrounded by new friends. Yet all this was happening in an unfamiliar space and in a language that had to be acquired together with its rich culture. My English and French were of help, but they had their limitations. What a challenge!

And so was my forthcoming fatherhood.

The pictorial language that I brought from Paris had to be re-examined. My dark paintings suggested some glimpses of light, and I trusted that the source of this light would enlighten my life's new road.



Ancient Architecture, 1958

Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 28 3/4" (60 x 73cm)

In 1959, I returned to a classical "old-masterly" technique, achieved by a process of underpainting and glazing. Consequently, the surfaces of my canvases became smooth, and their invented images tried to appear timeless. They were painted with much care and elaboration. My everlasting need for spontaneity and promptness was reserved for my drawings.



Roofs, 1959

Ink on paper, 12 1/8 x 15 3/8" (30.5 x 39cm)

A View From Above, 1959

Gouache on paper, 20 1/8 x 25 5/8" (51 x 65cm)

From the Labyrinth, 1959

Gouache on paper, 5 x 6 1/2" (12.5 x 16.5cm)

Ruins, 1959

Gouache on paper, 10 1/8 x 13 1/4" (25.5 x 33.5cm)

Today, when I look at these sketches, they bring up what I always found in sites that were fragmented or damaged. The disintegrated, and the hardly identifiable represented for me a new kind of beauty.

Ruins have for centuries nourished the visions of artists. For Delacroix ruins were the man-made paraphernalia that was returning to nature. Furthermore, art is a continuous process of fragmentation and re-composition, destruction and reconstruction, error, and correction. A progression in the creative process that grants liberty and control. The artist can reinterpret the world, give shape to his visions, to his beliefs, and create new realities. His work makes him swing between an almost God-like delight, and a troubling sense of impotence, a state of overrated satisfaction and exaggerated disillusionment. For me, uncertainty, reassurance, and renewed doubt set up a perfect state of amazement and self-questioning. Not all artists would vouch for such a statement...



Partial View of the Great Labyrinth, 1959
Oil and gouache on paper, 19 5/8 x 25 5/8" (50 x 65cm)

Although I was aware that modernism preferred the appearance of flatness, something in me rebelled against surfaces that were painted to look impenetrable. I adopted an illusionistic technique, a method that considered the painting as a window to a three-dimensional space. Something that dematerializes in the eyes of its beholder...

MONTEROSI

Upon our arrival to Rome, Annalisa and I were offered by my father-in-law, Angelo Cantoni, a temporary habitation named Valdiano, an old farmhouse that stood on a vast stretch of agricultural land. The sturdy edifice, made of very thick walls and aged rooftiles, partly covered by creeping wisteria, had been refurbished in the mid-twenties or thirties. It was connected to the main road by a long and impressive alley of Roman pines that led to the Cassia Vecchia and the ancient village of Monterosi, 40 kilometers to the north of Rome.

Our new lodging was ample and perfect for painting. It would allow me to go on with my work and produce enough canvases to see how Rome could respond to my art. And what about Israel? It would wait. My local renown wasn't in peril, the risk wasn't great, and the new option was tempting. After a few weeks dedicated to administrative as well as social events, I bought stretchers, rolls of linen, brushes, and paints—and began to wonder...What now?

How should I proceed?

The concept of looking at my own work, and art in general, subsisted as always of three basic questions: **What** is being painted? **How** it is done? **When was** it created?

To warm up my fingers, I took up my box of watercolor. One of these rarely surviving depictions represents a corner near our living room's window, with newly acquired furniture and old carpet.



Window of a Living Room, 1959-1960

Watercolor on paper, 13 3/8 x 9 1/2"

Of course, it was important to dig much deeper than focus on stylized reporting. The favorable circumstances of my life expected “seriousness.” I had to concentrate and come up with something personal and new. Could the bunch of brand-new brushes in my hand connect me with my puzzling subconscious and tell me how to employ them? Or was everything in the head and the maturity of its choices? Creation of art has always been a struggle. The artist desires to give free shape to his inner vision, but the outer world expects his respect for the constraints of communicability. That which had been my last Parisian output didn’t titillate my vision. Suddenly I was seized by a growing longing for the actual city of Paris. Was I desiring to escape my confusion? Certain parts of Paris reminded me of my Vilna and thus my native town’s incommensurable tragedy. It was an important issue because such remembrances had a safe place in my heart.

And some of them were very dark.



Altar, 1959

Oil on linen, 36 x 24 1/8" (91 x 61cm)

The small painting, *Altar*, is one of the first I created in my new Italian studio. It was the encounter of densely applied paint, irregularly textured, with black and shiny rivulets of running and dripping paint. Perhaps I tried to evoke Paul Celan's black milk, in his famous Death Fugue.

The painting hinted at an apocalyptic vision. An ageless altar of brutalizing forces that might be practicing human sacrifice.



Shelter, 1959

Oil on canvas, 19 5/8 x 39 9/8" (50 x 100cm)

Repro: VGSJM

Shelter is a direct recall of hiding in one of Vilna's ancient basements from bombs and incinerating fires. It was one of the direst experiences of my childhood. But beyond this personal recall, it is also a self-standing emblem of this dark epoch. The composition suggests a cross. A Christian cross that is made of an upright beam that could be perceived as a smokestack, perhaps a crematorium. Does it hint at the antisemitic contribution of the Church to the inexcusable crimes of the Nazis? The painting tries to turn into an archetypal icon. I guess I should have made it in a larger format. Much larger paintings that undertook this undeniable intention were created much later, at a time in which I enjoyed a receptive audience and wasn't concerned about my appeal to the Roman public.

The eternal Rome of the fifties and sixties revealed to me a city that was full of color. Luminous ochers and browns covered most of its impressive constructions. Façades were adorned with elaborate combinations of stone and very light marble. In contrast, Paris was black. A city that floated in its permanent grayness. We were before the date that imposed coalsmoke filtering, and regular cleansing of buildings. In Paris, every edifice was covered by ageless layers of soot, and mold. *Isle Saint Louis / Île St. Louis* is produced by thickly applied paint and is monochromatic. It offers a sight that tries to evoke the familiar view of the Île St. Louis. The front is a blind and dilapidated façade. A foggy sky that extends behind a large wharf hints at the silhouette of Notre Dame. It is mutely mirrored by one of the two branches of the Seine.



Isle Saint Louis / Île St. Louis, 1959

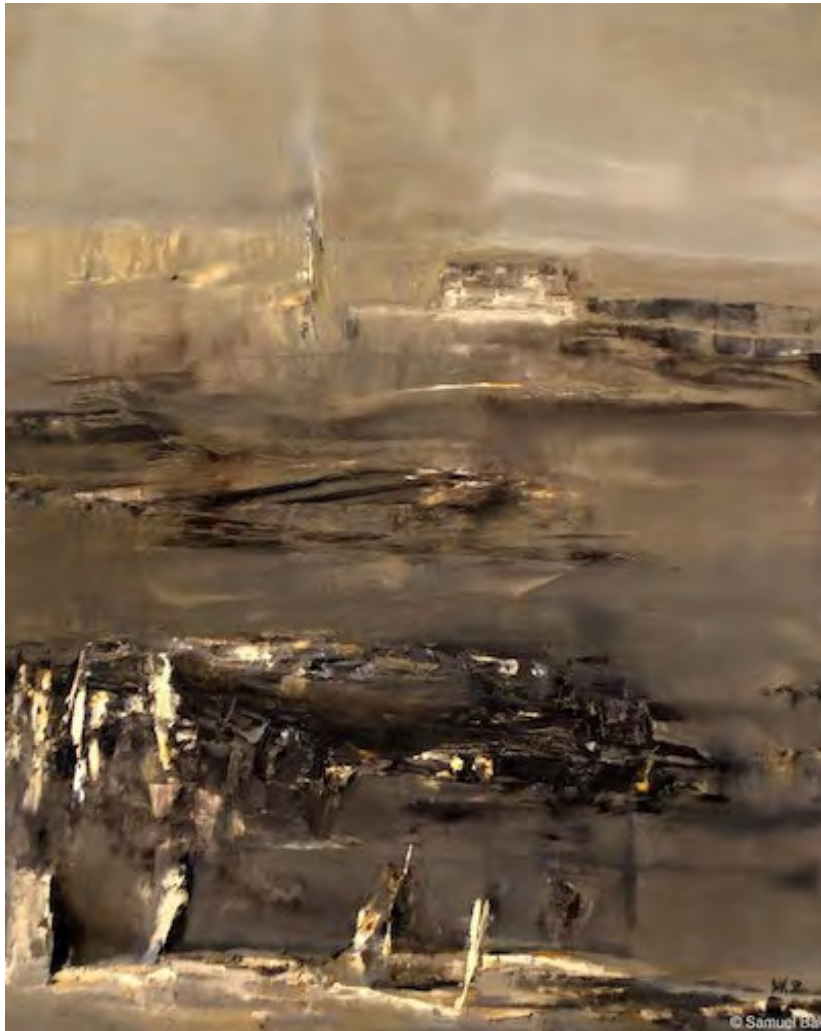
Oil on linen, 19 5/8 x 39 3/8" (50 x 100cm)

Delicate reflections of light on wet streets, and shiny walls always fascinated me. Already at thirteen they inspired some of the early watercolors I painted in Landsberg. This recurring effect, with its view of a city's traffic, created yet another semi-abstract painting. Passersby and windows are suggested by rhythmically repetitive applications of paint, made by a palette knife or densely interweaving brushstrokes. In this gray day, everything seems to be suspended between a fleeting clearing of skies, and the return of a new downpour. Some shades of yellow and carefully placed stains of red accentuate a sight that is mostly monochromatic.



Place Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1959
Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 32" (101 x 81cm)

Water is the basic element that makes LIFE possible. It also could take it away.



Fréjus, 1959

Oil on linen, 39 3/8 x 32" (100 x 81cm)

What could be more clichéd than saying that our lives are continuously exposed to danger? Alas, the Universal Flood of the Bible tried many tragic repeats. It caused major catastrophes all over the globe. In 1959, the southern town of Fréjus, France nearly succumbed to a tsunami of overpowering waves of mud and debris. Close to 500 people lost their lives.



After the Flood, 1960

Oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 58" (113 x 147 cm)

Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History (Samuel Bak Museum)

Symbolically, Paris, Rome, Berlin, or Vilna—the postwar Europe I knew—were for me landscapes that had faced a terrible flood. The waters receded, grounds emerged and told us that it was time to repair, reconstruct, and grow. WW2 was over. Independently from this painting's specific content, my interest in its creation was in the textures, rhythms, and the chancy mystery of painterly manipulations. The painting, akin to a large abstraction, with its almost tactile surface, allowed a plausible evocation of an objective reality.

Indeed, the suggestive power of familiar realities, created by paint laid on canvas, was a strong drive in my semi-abstract mode of painting. Perhaps it contributed to the success of my first exhibition at Rome's Galeria Schneider.



In the Morning, 1960

Gouache on paper, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2" (70 x 49.5cm)



Remembering Vilna, 1959

Watercolor and gouache on paper, 30 3/4 x 22 1/4" (78 x 56.5cm)



Vilna, 1960

Oil on linen, 35 1/8 x 46 1/8" (89 x 117cm)

In another painting, dedicated to the memories of my native town Vilna, I tried to evoke a street of incinerated façades. Its upper stretch is a smoke drenched sky. The center is filled with incinerated buildings, and a vague perspective of streets. We see in its lower part a large and empty space. Here one perceives two small figures. They might be Mother and me; we just emerged from our hiding in the Benedictine Convent. It was in the summer of 1944, on the very first day of our regained freedom. The horizon vaguely offered us a glimpse of light.

An ominous sense of uncertainty, danger, and loss permeated, and still permeates most of my works. It was my chance that the bubbling Rome of its postwar rebirth, and my Roman art gallery, Galeria Schneider, weren't especially attuned

to the Holocaust and was hardly exposed to its evocation. Didn't the shame of fascism suffice? Didn't they have their own counts to settle? Weren't Mussolini and Hitler dead? Didn't they pay for their crimes? Our new lives had to flourish. Basta! Let us show to the world our *Bella Figura*. One of my new friends in Rome, Anna Maria Levi, told me about her brother Primo, an established chemist, who had written a memoir about surviving Auschwitz. It had to be self-published because in 1948 no one was interested. Only the early sixties brought Primo Levi the recognition and fame that he so justly deserved.

The instinct of my Roman dealer, Robert Schneider, formerly a professor of Spanish at an American University, might have been right. Who would ask for paintings that trouble and hurt? Moreover, I was overly reserved about sharing feelings. My traumatizing past could only be insinuated *by-the-way* and it gained if it was camouflaged. The formal stylishness of my canvases helped me to understate the agony that was part of their substance.



Pointing, 1960

Oil paint and gouache on paper, 16 3/8 x 24 1/4" (41.5 x 61.5 cm)

The humans of my paintings created in the early sixties appear as incomplete beings, as fragments, or entities that only partially subsist. They have just emerged from their hiding places, from the so called *malines*. To save themselves they had to pretend inexistence. By being concealed behind urgently piled up walls, under soil, in ancient basements, in dilapidated attics, they gradually and inevitably turned in my art into the material behind which they hid. This was their disguise. The Drama of dehumanization rendered by my visual means. This content would go on nurturing many of my future paintings. Sometimes I am amazed how much the present interest for the drama of the Holocaust in my art skips this most expressive period.



Three Figures, 1960

Oil paint and gouache on paper, 16 1/2 x 24 3/8" (42 x 62cm)



Three Figures, 1961

Black pencil on paper, 12 1/4 x 22 1/8" (31 x 56cm)

Sometimes, clad or unclad figures, claim the right for their physical existence. They strive to reintegrate the space to which they consider having a natural right and must struggle against a background that tries to swallow them up. I thought that this was the universal drama of the human condition. Thus, remaining suspended between abstraction and representation of rural, neutral, or urban settings, I created scenes of fragmented figures. Everything is in a perpetual stage of metamorphosis and change.

Consequently, my paintings of still-life weren't that still. Objects posed on tables in arrangements that symbolize domestic stability and peace had been overpowered by forces of organized disintegration. Everything seems to be on the move and destined to escape or disappear. And every entity that might have the luck to return from the ordeal will be most damaged



Still Life, 1961

Oil, pastel, charcoal, and highlighting on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 3/8" (49.5 x 69.5cm)

GOYA

My memories of hiding in darkness and total silence gave birth to several paintings which were inspired by Goya's famous black paintings, which he painted on the walls of his own home and exclusively for his own pleasure. The human figures are grotesque, pathetic, tragic, mystic, and at times just ordinary. Goya was becoming deaf, and he desired to distance himself from other humans. He did it by putting them on the walls of his silent abode.

In my painting *Hiding*, I renounced suggesting the direct presence of human forms and merely merely focused on the painful scarcity of space and of light, and the feeling of crowding, tension, and fear.

It is also possible to see in the dark composition of this painting a hint of a large star of David. My future canvases, with their much more “readable” images, will go on suggesting such personal recollections. The Yellow Stars of David that collectively marked us and destined us for annihilation. Of trembling in darkness, of holding the breath and waiting for the sound of military boots to pass and disappear. Of craving for a reassuring silence of the deaf.



Hiding, 1961

Oil on linen, 45 5/8 x 34 5/8" (116 x 88cm)

I could hardly describe my fascination with Goya. His series of the horrors of war is an incomparable indictment against the range of human brutality. The great

artist made me spend many hours looking at his unique drawings, learning from them, and freely improvising on his art. I did it for my own edification. Sometimes a prisoner of Goya would end up looking like a Jew at the Western Wall...



After A Prisoner Drawing by Goya, 1963

Ink on paper, 10 1/4 x 13 3/8" (36 x 34cm)



After Goya VI, 1963
Watercolor and ink on paper, 9 5/8 x 12 1/4" (24.5 x 31cm)



After Goya IV, 1963
Watercolor and ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/4" (24 x 31cm)

Not all the paintings I created in Rome spoke directly of the past that seemed to surface in whatever I attempted to do. At times I was simply taken by the surrounding world. I tried to seize its impact and deposit it in my work. The immediacy of a quick look and its long-lasting memory. That, which most people who see landscapes through windows of trains, buses or cars would hurriedly perceive, remember, and preserve.

A place of departure and arrival. A seaside port carries a highly symbolic significance. Behind the vigorous strokes that created this panoramic view is the story of meandering lives. I painted it after a visit to Rotterdam's huge port, and its rich Museum of Art. Its collection contains the pathetic canvases of the forger of Vermeer, a certain Han van Meegeren, a 20th century painter who departed from his ingenious port of technical knowledge, but never arrived to where he hoped to arrive and be as good and as recognized as the inimitable master.



Port Town, 1961

Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 64 1/8" (130 x 163cm)

The content of *Early Arrival* is the inevitable fog of the unknown. The idea that an arrival to a new place doesn't instantly inform us about what is to happen in the days to come. A lot remains to be searched, unwrapped, and examined. The longing for more light, and the need for better focus, are part of this common experience. The imperative acceptance of adjustment to change is a prerogative of being.



Early Arrival, 1961

Oil on linen, 32 x 39 3/8" (81 x 100cm)



At the End of a Hot Day, 1961

Oil on canvas, 45 x 57 7/8" (114 x 146.5cm)

As said, the main inspiration of my Italian period alternated between a haunting past and peaceful present. It created subjects that hid themselves behind what looked like abstraction. Berthold Brecht's idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* was primordial. Abstraction enabled me visual distancing. Rome allowed me to create a large body of work that assured me a yearly gallery show, and a participation in important group shows. Among them the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, to which I was invited by Gordon Washburn, one of the leading art curators of that time.

Since my output was so prolific, I hoped that an intense "spilling of my guts" with images of poignant and hurting contexts would cede their place to more heartening ones. The clouds will dissipate, and the sun shall shine. Didn't Matisse decree that a painting was valid when it offered to its beholder something akin to a comfortable armchair? But I still wonder if I was ever made to get there...

The human face is one of the most challenging subjects. In Hebrew *Panim* comes from the word *Pnim*, which means inside, or interior. While the English denomination for face evokes a façade, the outside of a person's appearance. This strange dichotomy made me ponder and wonder. Not unlike the great Spanish master Goya, who painted his excruciating visions on the walls of his home, I filled my closets with folders upon folders that contained innumerable works on paper of faces that most of the time weren't easy to look at.



Prisoner, 1962

Oil crayon and gouache on paper, 19 5/8 x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)
Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History (Samuel Bak Museum)



In Pain, 1961

Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper, 19 x 23 3/8" (48 x 59.5cm)



Head, 1962

Ink and gouache collage on paper, 18 x 13 1/4" (45.5 x 33.5cm)



Head, 1962

Charcoal on paper, 19 x 26 inches



Scream, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 8 5/8 x 10" (22 x 25cm)



Head, 1962

Ink, crayon, and pastel on paper, 12 1/4 x 9 1/2" (31 x 24cm)



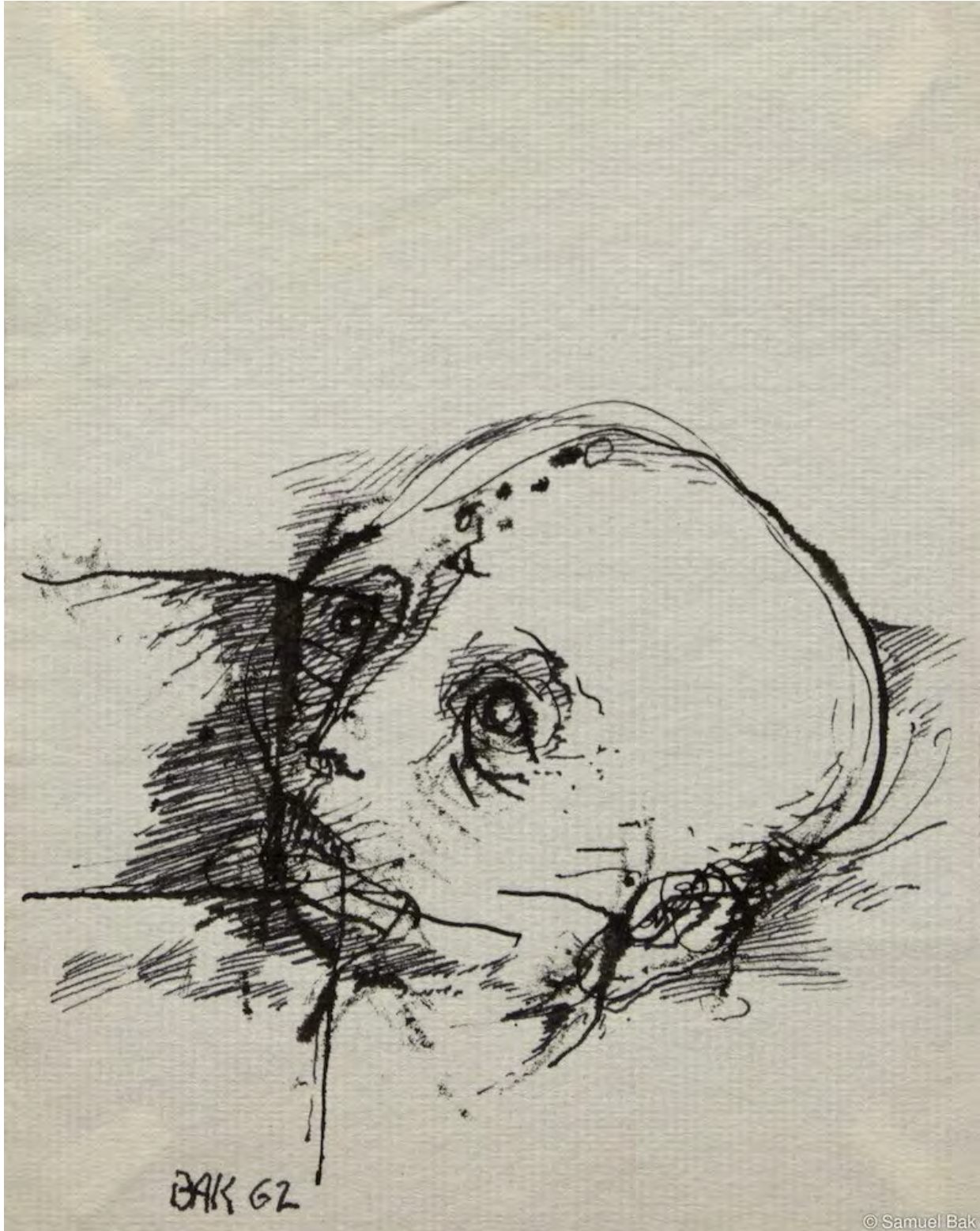
Head, 1962

Ink and watercolor on paper, 6 1/8 x 4 3/4" (15.5 x 12cm)



Head, 1962

Pencil, pastel, and crayon on paper, 14 3/8 x 10 1/4" (36.5 x 26cm)



Bullet Holes, 1962

Ink on paper, 6 1/8 x 4 3/4" (15.5 x 12cm)



Identification, 1962

Oil and linen on paper, 20 1/2 x 28" (52 x 71cm)

Ponary is a wooded area near Vilna which contains huge mass graves of over 100,000 Jewish victims of Nazism. Among them my father, my grandparents, and many close friends. In 1943, when the plans of the Nazi administration foresaw the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, hundreds of its slave laborers were sent to excavate layers upon layers of compressed cadavers, (called by the SS: *Figuren*) that had been machine gunned in huge mass graves. The slave laborers were ordered to incinerate the dead and spread their ashes among the trees of the lovely forest. The plan was meant to cancel any trace of the German Reich's criminality.

I heard that several of the prisoners that were forced to do this excruciating labor sometimes unearthed their own children or members of their families. Many were recognizable and some still wore the Yellow Stars of David, the notorious sign of Jewish identity.

Could art give a visual idea of human despair without returning to the expressiveness of a human face? I tried, but I do not know if I succeeded.



Pain, 1962

Crayon, gouache, and acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 39 3/8 x 27 3/8" (100 x 69.5cm)



The Wings of Sorrow, 1963

Oil on linen, 35 1/8 x 45 5/8" (89 x 116cm)

Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History (Samuel Bak Museum)

Here, like in other images of floods and ceding waters, the painting material alone and its loaded application, together with its tormented shapes that begin to fade, try to convey a slimy and oppressive force that hinders a rebounding into the space of freedom. The sorrow of loss can be crippling. Indefinite mourning should be overcome—or can it?

RELAXATION

Sometimes, I would pick up a pencil and for the mere pleasure of drawing realistically, depicting what my eyes saw: a piece of wood, a flower, some of the objects that lingered on the floor of my studio:



Realism Study 13, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 19 5/8 x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)



Realism Study I, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 27 1/2 x 19 5/8" (70 x 50cm)



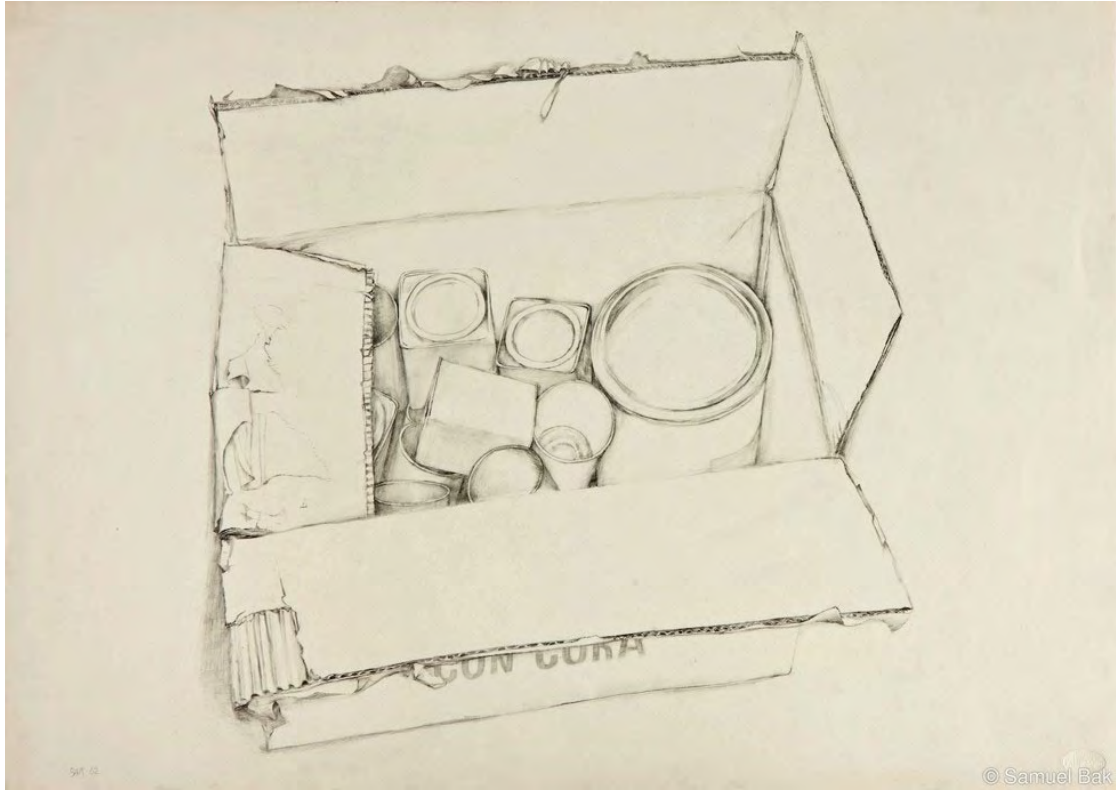
Realism Study 4, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 19 x 24 3/8" (48 x 62cm)



Realism Study 9, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 25 5/8 x 19 1/2" (65 x 49.5cm)



Realism Study 3, 1962

Black pencil on paper, 19 5/8 x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)



Far Away House, 1962

Ink on paper, 13 3/8 x 18 3/4" (34 x 47.5cm)



Time of Rest/Momento di Riposo

Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 32" (60 x 81cm)

Painted landscapes always carried in them possibilities of rearrangement and invention. Mine were triggered by the beautiful surroundings in which I lived. The changes of seasons, the change of vegetation, light, and weather, steadily affected my daily work. But this wasn't the only influence to which I submitted myself. I did not live on a one-man island. The Roman art scene was vivid and of great impact. Painters like Burri, Afro, Guttuso, Sironi and Morandi (to name but a few) were among the ones I much admired, and their exhibitions gave me a lot to chew on. But the *Zeitgeist* of that time wasn't any more local. And Rome's old provinciality was opening itself to the art of the world.



Riva, 1962

Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 28 3/4" (60 x 73cm)



Farmhouse/Casale, 1961

Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 21 5/8" (40 x 55cm)

I intensely explored the interplay of mere forms. The folding of paper, its tearing and pasting, the creation of tensions, textures, rhythms, pulsations, suggestions of depth and movement. In short, an almost musical utilization of the visual language. It produced a great number of compositions, which reassured me that I was a “painter of my time.”

In 1963, an exhibition of my collages was held in Rome at the Galeria Odysia and its catalog was introduced by the art historian Giovanni Carandente, the future director of Venice’s Biennale.



In the Rocks, 1962

Mixed media collage on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 1/2” (49.5 x 70cm)

Today, sixty years after I produced these works, I realize that nothing of their qualities or achievements got lost. A lot of what I now paint carries formal elements which are very similar to what I much later painted. The monumental tablets of law that emerged in my later art, and their brokenness, are already contained in the composition *Ominous*.



Ominous, 1962

Collage on paper 8 5/8 x 11 1/4" (22 x 28.5cm)



Landscape, 1962-1963
Collage on paper, 6 3/4 x 27 1/2" (17 x 70cm)



Shadows, 1962
Ink and wash on paper, 19 5/8x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)



Still Life Departing, 1963

Gouache on paper, 19 1/2 x 27 3/8" (49.5 x 69.5cm)

The attraction and interest for many artworks lies in what we can discover as an interplay of their negative and positive shapes. The negative ones are the spaces that are in between. Abstract shapes have infinite possibilities. They can be large or small, light or seem heavy. They can be dynamic or static, blurred or sharply defined. The artist is the conductor of this unusual orchestra. Our attention to a specific piece of art is a response to the enigma of its formal interactions. We must willingly open our eyes to their mystery.

Variations of form can create a captivating questioning. A response that enables us to connect with the artist. We become aware of it when we listen to music. In a valid work of music every note counts, and in art every brushstroke. In a painting every square inch is equally important. Perhaps that is what Bonnard meant when he said that emptiness horrified him...The "how" of this entire phenomenon can hardly be fully explained because it is mostly intuitive. My reading of Klee and Kandinsky assured me that even the wisest of words have their limitations.

Malevich and Mondrian based their compositions on their acute sense of formal balance. It resonates with certain people because there is something that is

imbedded in human brains that responds to harmony. In the fifteenth century, the overall balance of a composition was as important to Breughel as it was to Mantegna. And later to Velasquez, Monet, or Picasso. Every detail had to feel indispensable or be removed. The eyes had to be titillated and guided from one point to another.

One of my largest abstractions was acquired by the University of Haifa. It tries to speak by means of acrylic paint on burlap of how I saw myself in the early sixties of the former century. It is well-known that my life, which began in the paradise of a sheltered childhood, was suddenly exposed to hell. When the cataclysm of the war ended, I was transferred from chaos into a search of order. This view of my biography determined the content of many oncoming works. I concentrated on the creation of a world that is beyond the one which surrounds us. Yet it echoes it in a meaningful way. Thus, I completed a series of artworks that were among the most abstract I ever created.



De Profundis 1963

Oil on burlap, 63 x 51 1/8" (160 x 130cm)

University of Haifa, Israel

Between areas of genuine abstraction, or semi-abstraction, some tale-telling elements, like prison stripes and the presence of human figures regularly popped up in what I continued to paint.



Passing By, 1963

Mixed media on paper, 19 x 24 5/8" (48 x 62.5cm)

Holocaust Museum Houston, Houston, TX

My own Jewish culture intrigued me by its depictions of the mystery of the world's creation, of the interdependence between the human and the divine. Gershom Sholem and Martin Buber nurtured me with their writings on mysticism. The messengers of the upper sphere were the angels, that when they did mount or descend ladders, took on unfamiliar shapes. Series of angels accompanied me when I decided to explore my Etruscan themes, that would belong to the same order of stylized images.



Dispute, 1964

Mixed media on paper, 10 5/8 x 14 5/8" (27 x 37cm)



Angel, 1964

Watercolor and pencil on paper, 13 3/4 x 19 5/8" (35 x 50cm)



Angel, 1964

Pastel and gouache on blue paper, 9 5/8 x 12 3/4" (24.5 x 32.5cm)



Angel, 1964

Pastel on green paper, 10 x 12 3/4" (25 x 32.5cm)



Angel, 1964

Ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/4" (24 x 31cm)

Human heads that tried to represent distress, speak, shout, and sometimes scream at the angels that were announcing our civilization’s tragic predicaments, became an ongoing subject, whose pages I assiduously packed into the folders of my drawings and watercolors.



1. Head, 1964

Ink on paper, 11 5/8 x 8" (29.5 x 20cm)

2. Two Heads, 1963

Ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/8" (24 x 30.5cm)

3. Old, 1964

Oil on linen, 25 5/8 x 18 1/8" (65 x 46cm)

4. Head, 1963

Gouache on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/4" (24 x 31cm)

5. Head, 1963

Ink and watercolor on paper, 19 1/8 x 24 3/8" (48.5 x 62cm)

6. Jew III, 1963

Black ink on paper, 10 1/8 x 14" (25.5 x 35.5cm)

7. Head, 1964

Ink, black crayon and oil on paper, 9 5/8 x 12 1/4" (24.5 x 31cm)

8. Head, 1963

Mixed media on paper, 13 3/4 x 19 5/8" (35 x 50cm)

9. Head, 1963

Ink and gouache on paper, 13 3/4 x 19 1/4"

The same happened with the objects of my daily life. The still life, whether it was in English and mentioned *life*, or in the Italian *natura-morta* and underlined *death*, my much-admired Morandi, one of Italy's most celebrated modernists, inspired me to forego the orthodoxy of abstraction and be inspired by the cubists Braque, Gris, and Metzinger and add to them a touch of a deKooning.



On the Table, 1963

Watercolor on paper, 12 1/4 x 9 5/8" (31 x 24.5cm)



Still Life with Coffee Machine, 1963

Oil on linen, 31 1/2 x 25 5/8" (80 x 65cm)

My having acquired the Italian language turned me into an avid reader of its literature; Pirandello, Moravia, Lampedusa, and numberless others allowed me to get acquainted with its enthralling culture. Giorgio Bassani, one of the greatest Italian writers of the 20th century, had dedicated his large cycle of novels to the destiny of the Ferrarese Jews. In one of his writings, he compares their fate to the disappearance of the Etruscan civilization that preceded the Romans and their vast empire. I was familiar with the story of the Etruscans and their art, which echoed the Greeks.

The area where I lived was full of Etruscan tombs that packed vast cemeteries. They were made of igloo-like cavities and packed with artifacts, sculptures in stone, clay, and bronze. Many were decorated with wall-paintings produced by vegetal paints, that soon after their excavation and contact with air, would fade and almost disappear. In one of Bassani's novels he describes how a visit to a necropolis of that quasi-forgotten culture had triggered in him the need to speak of the annihilation of the vibrant community of Ferrara's Jews.



Wall paintings in an Etruscan tomb

When I visited the Etruscan Museum of Tuscania and saw some of the faded paintings that had been transferred to sturdy panels for better preservation, and then greatly faded, I was seized by the idea of reinventing them in my way. Of imagining damaged surfaces of a timeless culture. It kept me busy for several months.



Woman with Birds, 1957-1963

Oil paint and gouache on paper, 10 x 12 3/4" (25 x 32.5cm)



Etruscan Still Life, 1963

Oil on linen, 38 1/4 x 25 5/8" (97 x 65cm)



Etruscan War, 1963

Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 25 5/8" (81 x 65cm)

Sometimes I tried to imagine the blending of a Mediterranean culture with a pre-Colombian one, to see how it would look:



Figures Fighting, 1963

Gouache, acrylic, and paper on burlap, 15 x 18" (38 x 45.5cm)



Reclining Figure, 1963

Oil and cloth collage on linen, 23 3/8 x 35 5/8" (59.5 x 90cm)



Eternal Flame, 1963

Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 25 5/8" (81 x 65cm)



White Prey, 1964

Acrylic on canvas, 39 3/8 x 31 1/2" (100 x 80cm)



Red Still Life, 1964

Mixed media on paper, 19 5/8 x 13 3/4" (50 x 35cm)

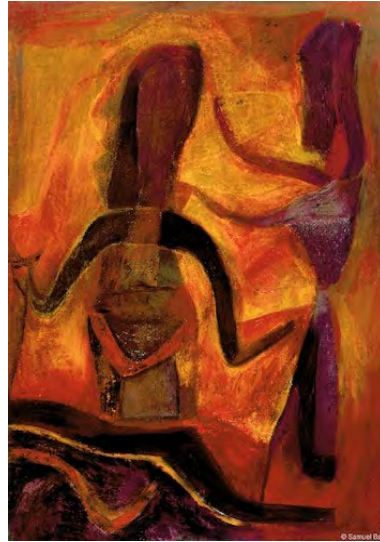


Ritual, 1964

Gouache and collage on paper, 11 3/8 x 13 3/4" (39 x 35cm)

Ritual (Priestly Figure), 1964

Oil pastel on paper, 13 3/4 x 10" (35 x 25cm)



Ritual Figure, 1963-1964

Pastel on paper, 13 3/4 x 10" (35 x 25cm)

The Prayer, 1964

Watercolor and ink on paper, 13 5/8 x 9 5/8" (34.5 x 24.5cm)



In 1964, I visited Venice to see its Biennale of Art, in which Robert Rauschenberg and the American Pop Art scene were the great winners.

Suddenly, the reference to the representation of a human reality, which transcended the visual components of composition like shape, color, and texture, became officially Kosher. It was OK to be driven by the need for a representation of one's vision of reality, and not be considered a pariah.

This had taken a certain weight off my shoulders. I had a story to tell, and this most recent legalization eased the process that I undertook. My Etruscans were quite narrative, but I had a feeling that I reached the end of this inspiration. After hundreds of works inspired by them, it was necessary to go on.



In a Frame, 1964

Mixed media collage on cardboard, 19 5/8 x 28" (50 x 71cm)

I had to take a good look into myself. This brought up the idea of looking into my mind through some interior lenses that would reach the forgotten corners of my soul and explore them. Yes, I needed an interior mirror that would show me the reflection of my soul. So, I painted it.



Control Center, 1964

Oil on linen, 19 5/8 x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)
Holocaust Museum Houston, Houston, TX



Reflections 64/Spiegelungen, 1964

Oil on linen, 40 1/8 x 48 1/8" (102 x 122cm)

From that point began my search for a new kind of subjective realism, which brought me much closer to a surrealist that I always greatly admired, Yves Tanguy. Later I immersed myself in the work of Roberto Matta, Max Ernst, and Rene Magritte. But it took me some time to crystalize the stylistic concept that evolved and defined my present work.



As Dark As It Gets, 1964

Oil on linen, 39 3/8 x 32" (100 x 81cm)



Entrée Laterale/Ingresso laterale, 1964

Oil on linen, 39 3/8 x 32" (100 x 81cm)



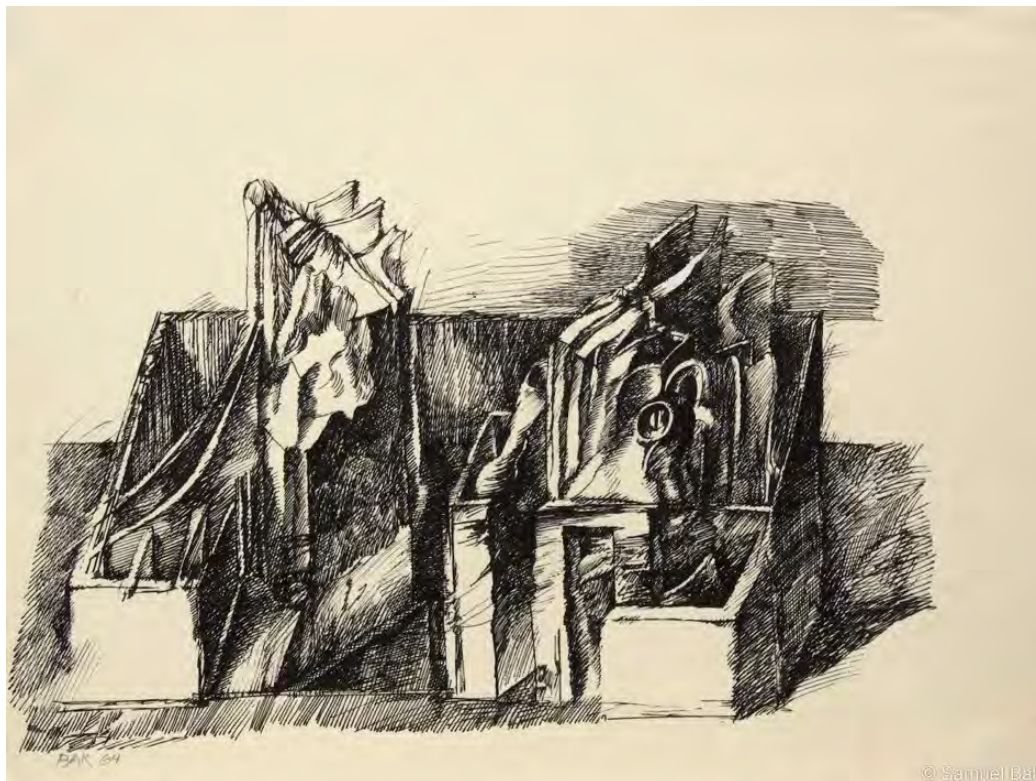
On the Inside, 1964

Oil on linen, 19 5/8 x 27 1/2" (50 x 70cm)



Reassembling, 1964

Ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 5/8" (24 x 32cm)



Forever After, 1964

Ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 5/8" (24 x 32cm)



Figures, 1965

Oil on canvas board, 21 1/2 x 17 3/4" (54.5 x 45cm)



© Samuel Bak

Evening Light, 1965
Oil on linen, 25 5/8 x 32" (65 x 81cm)



Trail of Adjustment (Confirming) (Still Life of an attempt to conform) / Natura morta di un tentativo di conformismo, 1965

Oil on linen, 19 5/8 x 24 1/8" (50x61cm)



Landscape with Broken Houses, 1965

Oil on board, 8 5/8 x 12 5/8" (22 x 32cm)

Little by little, my paintings and drawings began to move in the direction that has defined my work since 1966, but all this is material for forthcoming chapters. At the time of the crystallization of my style, when I reached the point of dealing representationally with icons and metaphors that speak of our human predicament, I realized that it would take me years to explore all it comprises and asks to be questioned. I wanted to do it in a non-style style. A lesson I received from Magritte. A style that in order to convey my most subjective vision of my world and the world that I share with the rest of humanity, is as objective and communicative as possible. If it has a certain aspect of individuality, and if the stylistic elaboration of my painting has slightly changed with the years, that is an additional and unexpected bonus.