A pile of teddy bears made of stone lies in a heap on the ground, many missing their limbs. A few stone heads and arms are strewn across the foreground. This painting seems simpler and more straightforward than Samuel Bak's other works, lacking the jumble of incongruent objects, words, and other imagery so common in his paintings. Yet its meaning is both poignant and horrific. The clear and tranquil blue sky is at odds with the mutilated and headless corpses of teddy bears in place of the children who once owned them. The professor in the audio guide calls them "...frozen tributes to the memory of the million and a half Jewish children murdered during the Holocaust." The childhood innocence represented by the teddy bears and the horror of the children that were lost overwhelm me. In *Under a Blue Sky* (2001), Bak's hopeful title belies the despair portrayed on the canvas. This use of irony is a device he frequently employs in his work. How to reconcile the loss symbolized with his optimism for the future of humanity?

Is it possible to find an art exhibit so moving that I could write about it without including a single photograph of the paintings themselves? I am willing to take the risk because I feel compelled to capture and share my life-altering experience. My journey starts on a cold, grey Sunday afternoon. My husband, Mark, and I desperately need a break from the coronavirus-imposed monotony of spending the past eleven months going nowhere and doing nothing much to speak of. We pick Super Bowl Sunday to visit the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art, assuming the typically quiet venue would be all the more so that afternoon as Tulsans prepare their game day favorites of pulled brisket and buffalo wings.

Our objective is to see the Museum's new Sanditen/Kaiser Holocaust Center that opened in November 2020. And it is a marvelous expansion, nearly double the size of the

previous Holocaust Center, allowing for a better flow and well-spaced, state-of-the-art displays. There are looping videos with first-hand accounts by five Holocaust survivors who made Oklahoma their home. And a riveting installation called *Kristallnacht,* created by Oklahoma City artists Tracy and Rick Bewely, replicates a portion of a ransacked Synagogue sanctuary that features a two-story hanging sculpture dripping with shards of colored glass—a poignant new addition that demands a moment of quiet contemplation. There is even a wooden bench facing the display for that very purpose. But what catches us pleasantly off guard and captures our attention is the temporary art exhibit tucked in the back room on the second floor.

From the blurb I see in the *Tulsa Jewish Review*, I expect "Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak" to feature works centered on the artist's experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust. And the thumbnail picture of his painting, *The Sheen*, leads me to believe that he is a surrealist, a style I know will appeal to Mark who is an avid fan of the Spanish painter, Salvador Dalí. Samuel Bak's artwork turns out to be so much more.

We spend an hour in that exhibition space carefully examining each canvas. An audio guide, accessible with a smartphone, greatly enhances our experience by adding depth and meaning to many of the otherwise perplexing pieces. Dr. Lawrence L. Langer—Professor of English Emeritus, Simmons College and Holocaust Educator for the nonprofit organization, Facing History and Ourselves—provides profound, clarifying explanations for twenty of the thirty-five or so works on display. Spanning Samuel Bak's prolific career of nearly eight decades, the retrospective is a stunning exploration of the musings, messages and mysteries of a wonderfully complex painter.

Only because the museum is closing at 5 pm, we leave reluctantly, hungry for more. I hastily take photographs of the works for which I do not have time to listen to the audio guide, and we dial in from the car on the way home. The allegorical painting *Adam and Eve and the Arduous Road* (2010) requires explanation; I cannot make sense of it unaided. Why is there a blanket with pears on the ground between Adam and Eve instead of apples? Moreover, why are there industrial age smokestacks in the background? Through my iPhone speaker, Professor Langer—in his heavy Boston accent—explains that Bak chose the pear to represent the forbidden fruit of knowledge. And the twin chimneys in the distance evoke the furnaces used in the concentration camps during the Holocaust—an element present in many of Bak's paintings. A broken signpost lies on the ground, while Adam and Eve look forlorn, uncertain of where to go after leaving their idyllic garden. Referring to the blanket of pears in the foreground, Professor Langer asks, "Is it there to provide nourishment or as a reminder of past transgressions?" Like so many of Bak's paintings, there are no clear answers to the many ambiguous questions the scene raises.

I also leave the exhibit curious about *The Sheen* (1995). Why are the Hebrew letters representing each of the Ten Commandments peeling off the surface of the stone tablets and slipping onto the ground in a heap? Contemplating the crumbling monument in the context of the Holocaust, I understand the ironic implications of Bak's title. As Professor Langer expounds, "When one considers that the sixth commandment reads 'do not murder' and then reflects on the doom facing European Jewry during the Holocaust, it is no wonder that the sheen has worn off and lost its luster." Explaining the fallen letters in a 2012 video interview produced by Facing History and Ourselves, Bak says that they "abandoned the tablets." He relays the following story from the *Midrash*, a book of contemporary

interpretation of ancient biblical text: Moses came down from Sinai carrying two impossibly heavy tablets of stone. The letters gave the tablets the power to float. But when Moses saw the Jews worshipping idols, the letters fell from the stone, and the heavy tablets tumbled to the ground and broke. Bak describes the word "Sheen" in the title of his painting has three meanings—the effect of the light shining on the tablets from above, the Hebrew letter *shin* which is the first letter of *Shoah*, meaning Holocaust, and the first letter of one of the names of God, *Shekhinah*. It is this enigmatic, multi-layered complexity in Bak's paintings that make them so intense and demanding.

I crave to know more about Samuel Bak. Many of his paintings in the exhibit feature pears. In addition to representing knowledge, Bak says that he is drawn to the sensual shape of the fruit which embody "something vulnerable, almost human about their form." Moreover, he incorporates many common household objects, such as bottles, pitchers, bowls, goblets, and teapots. But these are not fodder for ordinary still life paintings. His paintings also contain remnants of buildings, stone pillars, and torn books, along with fragments of human faces, chess pieces, clocks and dice. "I could use the world of the visible reality, the one that I share with everyone," Bak explains, "...and use the language that was very familiar...and with that language say something different...say those things that before I lacked the courage to say." The simple question mark is another element found in many of Bak's works. And most of the canvases incorporate landscapes, some green, lush, and inviting, while others grey and desolate, full of foreboding.

I must know: who is Samuel Bak? A quick internet search reveals that the eighty-seven-year old Bak has called Boston home for the past thirty years. And he is still painting. Represented by the Boston-based Pucker Gallery since 1969, Bak's most recent catalogue,

"Unstill Life," is from 2020, and, it features new work. In the catalogue's introduction Ann Barger Hannum describes one of Bak's paintings as "...a soul-searing canvas filled with embers of memories smoldering under the weight of history." I have to go back to the beginning.

Born in Vilna, Poland in 1933 (which became Vilnius once it was restored to Lithuania by the Soviet Union in 1939), Bak and his family were among the nearly one hundred thousand Jews forced to move from their home in the heart of the city into the ghetto in 1940. His father and four grandparents were killed during the Holocaust, while he and his mother made their way to the newly established State of Israel. After leaving Vilna they fled to the Displaced Persons Camp in Landsburg, Bavaria where they lived for nearly four years. An American officer noticed nine-year-old Samuel drawing with charcoal and gave him a set of watercolors and paper. Understandably, his paintings from that time are sad and desolate. One of them, a self-portrait called *Star of the Ghetto*, hangs in the Tolerance Center in Vilnius today. The double entendre refers to his family's pet name for him, 'Little Star,' as well as the yellow star he had to wear on his clothing in the ghetto signifying he was a Jew.

Once he moved to Israel, Bak studied at the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem before heading to Paris to continue his studies at the École des Beaux Arts. In 1966 he returned to Israel and decided that his painting had to incorporate the horror of the Holocaust metaphorically. Bak says, "My paintings speak of situations where things are not as they seem to be." Explaining that 94% of the Jews of Lithuania were murdered by the Nazis, he continues, "All of that destruction has nourished my paintings." Bak laments that human beings didn't learn from the Holocaust, citing the horrors of Darfur as an example. While

listening to him, I think of the plight of the one million Muslim Uyghurs being held in detention centers in China's western Xinjiang Province, enduring persecution—euphemistically called "reeducation"—at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party today.

A masterful storyteller, Bak creates metaphorical compositions full of surprise pairings. One of my favorites from the exhibition is *Commemoration* (2001). In this painting Bak memorializes the Jews from his birthplace, Vilna, who perished during the Holocaust. The name, Vilna, appears in Yiddish on a stone plaque in the lower right corner of the painting. A grouping of stone carvings or pillars resembles a family of candles, each weeping tears of wax and sorrow, representing all those who were lost. And the composition is surrounded by lush vegetation that seems to be encroaching on the site and threatening to overtake the space. Professor Langer comments, "It is a tribute to the power of memory and a warning that the only alternative to such memory is oblivion." I am reminded of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, and the continued search for the 300 unmarked graves of the African Americans who were slain. Finding them is vital so the victims can be remembered properly, like the Jews of Vilna. The alternative, to remain in obscurity, is unacceptable.

Most of Bak's paintings evoke the memory of the Holocaust and the imperative that we never forget. Catalogue writer Hannun explains, "...Bak portrays through his remarkable work a lifelong search for meaning amidst the aftermath of unspeakable acts of inhumanity; complex symbolic and allegorical compositions convey what it is to survive unfathomable suffering and to imagine the hope of *tikkun*—repair. His paintings illustrate both the disruption of cosmic harmony and the necessity of humankind to mend the damage." One of Bak's paintings in the exhibit, *Time Repair* (2012), even includes the

Hebrew word *tikkun*—twice—beseeching us to fix what is broken. Paired with his ubiquitous question mark, he also conveys a sense of urgency and seems to be asking us: 'when?'

I am drawn to Bak's use of vibrant colors in the painting *Inverted* (2014). Like so much of his work, the composition is a jumble of unrelated objects—a large pear made of metal and sliced horizontally, each layer in a different color stacked slightly off center; an upside down, empty wine bottle suspended in air, defying the laws of physics; a broken goblet tilted against the metal pear; a small, unblemished, green pear in the foreground, looking as though it has just fallen from a tree; and the letters of the word H-O-P-E languishing on the ground instead of hoisted above the objects. Mountains, trees and a turquoise sky with white fluffy clouds make up the inviting background. There is tension and uncertainty; something is amiss. Perhaps Bak is asking, 'Will hope ever rise again?'

But Bak eschews spelling out for us the meaning of his paintings. Instead, he challenges each of us to find meaning in his art for ourselves. In a 2002 interview he says, "I have no answer. I have no recipe for life. I think the best we can achieve is asking questions about the world in which we live...because I think accepting the world as it is... is just impossible....maybe finding the directions toward some answers is the most we can dream of."

I find myself transformed by Bak and his paintings. His canvases prod me to look more carefully and remain alert to the grim possibility that things are not as they seem, and to notice the irony in everyday life. We live in the richest country in the world with the most advanced medical facilities, yet 500,000 Americans have now lost their lives to the novel coronavirus. And it turns out that the Texas travel slogan—"It's Like A Whole Other

Country"—is painfully true when it comes to ensuring a reliable power supply and clean water for its citizens. Yet there are inspiring stories of people helping one another throughout the pandemic, across Texas, and in our own community. The outpouring of financial and volunteer support to house and feed Tulsa's homeless population during the extreme cold weather exemplifies hope vanquishing despair. And after the destruction of Greenwood in 1921, a travesty that was kept hidden for decades, the truth is being lifted up and commemorated during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial this year. What writer Corinda Pitts Marsh calls "Holocaust in the Homeland," the massacre does have similarities with its namesake: forcing blacks from their homes into detention centers; shooting at innocent people while they were running for their lives; looting and then burning down the homes of prominent Greenwood citizens; and destroying black-owned businesses. Moreover, those sworn to protect and defend were either complicit in or perpetrated the violence against the citizens of Greenwood.

And as the Tulsa community commemorates the centennial of the Holocaust that took place in its midst, ironically, a hate crime transpires while writing this essay. Two teenagers vandalize an outdoor installation at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art, causing $15,000 worth of damage to five statues. Each statue is made of wire shaped like a child and filled with stones, commemorating the Jewish children who were murdered during the Holocaust. And now each of them is bent at its base, five previously upright children lying helpless on the ground. Thus, we have come full circle. As Bak demonstrates so poignantly, life is full of contradictions: hope and despair; destruction and repair. He says, "We live in a world that cries out for repair." Ultimately, Bak's paintings are an invitation to explore what it means to be human.