



Pam Chadick

In Pulverem Reverteris

**An Encounter with the Paintings
of Samuel Bak**

The background is simple enough; a wide expanse of rolling brown and olive landscape, some contour bands from farming and cultivation evident. Just barely under the skyline, a whiteness—perhaps the hint of snowcaps. The palest blue of sky cuts a broad, smooth stripe across the top of the space. It is under this heaven that our story, correction, his story, takes place. Three simple cane chairs, white as bone and empty, face different directions. Two are covered by conical mounds of golden brown sand; the other is draped with a man's white shirt and pants which cascade to the ground next to a pair of black shoes. Closer to us, stark against darker brown rocks, an empty enamel bowl perches on a blue-green cloth lain over the rough rocks like a corner of tablecloth. The sand piles, all about the same size and shape, poke up from a green grassy area that forms an irregular ellipse in the central part of the painting. In this area, a small puddle flows to a stream; from it, or to it, a dark red rubber hose, like an artery, leads us to the picture's edge. It divides the space in two, top to bottom. In the foreground, another white cloth, a flag of surrender, twists around the foot of the sand pile closest to us. Another piece of cloth, a red remnant, perhaps rent in mourning, is twisted or tied on the bushes in the foreground on the left side of the picture. On the other side of the red hose, a man in a long, dark coat sits with his back to us; his arms folded in front of him. He's thinking, or perhaps reading or sketching. We feel this because his hat, the same red of the hose, is cocked slightly downward. At the man's feet, a basket, covered with a white cloth; a wine bottle is silhouetted against the sand. We can't tell but it must be a Chianti or perhaps a Merlot, to go with the hose and the hat. Our subject faces two sand mounds. From the volcano top on one, like a long fuse, snakes a white rope or tube in meanders to the ground; it crosses the red hose and ends nowhere significant. The man is looking at the other mound on which is sculpted a life size golden sand head, a hairless old man's head, unsmiling. The two recognize each other; each is the artist, Samuel Bak. Though we see only the sand head and its

puzzled expression, we imagine the figure with the black coat returning the look with an equal sense of bewilderment on his face. He studies the image of himself as we, the viewers, study him.

My fascination with the Holocaust has led me to pilgrimages across the states and in Europe to experience first-hand numerous memorials, museums, and monuments to the memory of victims of the Nazi regime. Years ago, I saw Mauricio Lasansky's famous "Nazi Drawings" series at the University of Iowa. I've seen the plaster cast sculptures of George Segal, the lead inscriptions in Heidelberg, glass chimneys along the Freedom Trail in Boston, and piles of shoes and suitcases in the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. No image has been so striking in my psyche as the images Samuel Bak paints. There have been wonderful analyses of the iconography and content of Bak's body of work, many of them addressing the rich lode of Jewish sources and symbolism. Yet, as a non-Jewish viewer, and as an artist myself, I wonder what meaning I take with me after an encounter with these works? The aesthetic experience that art offers us demands more than an intellectual grasp of the content and subject of an artwork, or knowing specific facts about an artist's background and life details. Powerful art must move and inspire us emotionally, it grips our gut, and we remember our encounter with it forever. Bak's paintings have such power. Yes, they are important for their Jewishness and their documentary and historic role. But his works are powerful because they are first and foremost fine paintings, doing what the best art does. They arouse our senses and evoke an important aesthetic response. This is no accident; Bak has learned his craft well, fusing masterful technique with unforgettable metaphors in a highly individualistic style that developed over years of artistic production.

A woman in a scarf holds a child's hand. Mere brush marks define the two, scrawled and rough. It is a small picture from the Vilna Ghetto; Bak exhibited it in a rare opportunity he had to show his paintings in the last years of the war. He worked in an expressionist manner, a style the Nazis referred to as "degenerate art," a highly charged, energetic style, direct and immediate. Contemporaries painted in the same style to express the chaos and ugliness of world war, genocide, and the destruction of reason. We see Bak's world then: the naked, starving children, the street scenes, and his mother and friends. That the works survived at all is a testimony to the artist's mother; time and again, she was faced with having to travel lighter and leave behind the necessary accoutrements of life as a refugee, but she knew the value of her son's work, bundled in a cardboard carton. Bak recalls seeing film footage from the ghetto being shown at the Holocaust Museum and realizes that *he* was that solemn

young painter on the screen; he recognized the painting from years ago, a watercolor sketch he still owns.

After the war, Bak went on to study at several art schools. Israel. Paris. New York. He experimented with cubism and modern abstract painting styles, honing his techniques, learning the language of painting. His paintings looked like many other paintings from this time period. He avoided representation, especially figurative subject matter. His work was stylish but wasn't personal to him or his life story. In the 1960s he discarded abstraction for a style that required more realistic rendering, but incorporated images that verged on the surreal. This metaphysical language of painting was to be the trademark of Bak's mature style. With it, Bak has created a tremendous body of work that is highly personal and mark his lasting contribution to post-Holocaust culture in Western society. Bak's paintings include many symbols and recurrent motifs from Jewish traditions: the tablets of Moses, gravestones, Hebrew inscriptions, candles, and the Star of David. He also developed compositions based on pear imagery, a subject Bak believes signifies vulnerability. Other compositions feature trees uprooted and moved, literally, via wheeled carts, the Wandering Jew metaphor. Some of the images relate to Christian themes: a recurring motif is the image of a small boy with arms raised in a crucifixion pose. Crosses are common motifs throughout his work.

But Bak does interesting things with his motifs and symbols; he sabotages their usual meanings and makes us wonder what the real message is. He does this by forcing surprising relationships between the symbol and the world that he creates in these paintings. Broken keys can't open stone locks. Paper birds rustle in dead branches, unable to fly away. Rusty sheet metal facades of people lean against skeleton fences and doors and windows lead nowhere. Bak's is a broken world where nothing is whole but in bits and shards, propped up by unstable and weak supports. The world that Bak invites us to enter is a world created from dust, pounded into dust, and resurrected from the dust. *In Pulverem Reverteris*. Never mind that the backgrounds seem sometimes as lush as Dutch landscapes, as sweet as a romantic panorama; we are tricked into placing the details in a peaceful, intimate world. These paintings speak to us of the barbaric stripping away of humanity. No person is whole; one misses his eyes, another has ears that are covered with a cloth or his hands. Still another doesn't have a nose or mouth. Chess pieces, substitutes for human figures, are toppled and buried, participating in the game without abiding by any set of rules.

Bak's adept handling of the paint helps us feel these dry as chalk works; colors are muted, dulled, never fully saturated with the hue, but keyed to a mono-

chromatic palette. The crumbly soil and rock, the powder and dust are everywhere. The meaning of the works transcends specific references to the 20th century Holocaust. They are more universal metaphors for an excavation of Jewish and human history—the ubiquitous presence of war and its legacy—and the fragile, thin piece of clay that life really is. The dust is deep with age, from the first yawn of an ancient morning when the tablets were broken at the foot of the mountain in rage at a disobedient people. The dust covers the holy as well as the guilty; we brush it from our sleeve or blow it from the page, but it remains.

Back to our painting with the sand head. I hold Bak the artist's memoir, an ample book with this image, which forms its jacket. *Les Adieux*, from 1974. Goodbyes. Farewells. Bak's narrative tells the story interestingly enough, but this single painting tells stories he can't dare to explain adequately in words. About the loss of family, of innocence, of home. About finding meaning with a sore and wounded spirit. Painting provided a salvation of sorts for the artist who experienced life in the Jewish ghetto as a mere boy. He survived physically, but suffered years of emotional trauma, relieved by painting and drawing hundreds of works, spanning over fifty years. Healing has been a slow process. Spots of green earth only now begin to cover the raw scabs of sand. In his painting, Bak's place is in the green grass—in the present. But his attention is riveted on the sand piles of his past. He begins to know and understand that old person in the sand head, the child Bak, in Vilna, who was never young. He wonders about the past Baks, the lineage that emerges from the same earth, casually, almost by accident, crosses his, but ends abruptly, leading nowhere. Kaddish reverberates throughout this vast dry landscape under the cloudless perfect sky. Bak has shed the clothing of the here and now and dons forever the heavy Jewish garb of his ancestors. He fears the bowl, such a simple trifle, will never be filled with anything but dust.

Pam Chadick received her MFA from Rutgers University in 1991, studying under Leon Golub. She has taught the art courses and has served as the Director of the Permanent Professors Art Gallery at the United States Air Force Academy for twelve years. As a painter, Chadick is interested in the Symbolist themes of rites of passage and the life cycle, painting expressionistic figurative works that have been exhibited nationally and internationally, including Zwolf Gallery in Denver. The artist maintains a private studio in Monument.