

# Zoë Cohen: The Shul / Church Project

The Abington Art Center

February 5 – March 24, 2016

## Artist's Statement

I am a multi-disciplinary visual artist, creating images, installations, and situations that explore origins, identities, and environments. My research-based practice bridges contemporary concerns with inquiry into a wide range of visual and cultural heritage.

*The Shul/Church Project* is an ongoing exploration of buildings that were built as Synagogues from 1900-1930, and the African-American Church congregations that now use them. My intention for this project is to depict both the past and present use of these spaces, in order to encourage curiosity and insight into the history, current reality, and potential for connection between Philadelphia Jewish and Black communities. Embedded in these works are the echoes of the White Flight of the 1950's-80's, during which urban Jews moved to the suburbs as black populations were increasing in city neighborhoods. These works acknowledge both the anti-Semitism and racism that Jewish and Black communities have struggled with, and the beauty and strength of the congregations that share the history of these buildings and neighborhoods. Future plans for the Shul / Church Project include engaging with these communities by inviting congregants from suburban synagogues and urban black churches to meet and listen to each other's' stories

The centerpiece of this project is the *Shul/Church Portraits*, an ongoing series of watercolor images of former synagogue buildings that are now Black churches. In these portraits, I present the buildings without the religious iconography or text of either their former or current congregations. They are shown as neutral spaces, yet refer to a Jewish American architectural tradition, and are recognizable as landmarks of Christian faith in the contemporary landscape of their neighborhoods.

*Our Sanctuary Laid Waste* are two larger works on paper, depicting former synagogue/church buildings in the process of being demolished. I hope for these pieces to offset the portraits of former synagogue buildings that have been effectively saved by becoming churches, to show the importance of the new use of these buildings in their preservation. The private, enclosed space of worship is blasted open in these images, both with violent implications, but also allowing an invitation to enter.

*Windows of Beth HaMedrosh HaGadol / Open Heart Church* is a series cut-paper pieces based on the framework of the exterior leaded-glass windows of the Open Heart Church building, formerly Beth HaMedrosh HaGadol in West Philadelphia. These windows face the street, and each has a striking, recognizably Jewish Star of David in the center. I am representing the windows without the star, removing the religious iconography in a similar approach as the *Shul/Church Portraits*. The use of cut paper connects these works to traditional Jewish papercut forms of Europe and North Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and echoes the fragility of the glass windows that have been preserved in the façade of this building for almost a century.

The audio piece accompanying this installation, *This is Our Story, This is Our Song*, is made by layering and collaging sound recordings taken from three pairs of related synagogues and churches in Philadelphia: Open Heart Church & Kol Tzedek Synagogue, Beloved St John Evangelical Church & Beth Shalom Congregation, and New Greater Straightway Baptist Church & Congregation Adath Jeshurun. This piece attempts to represent the current use of the former synagogue buildings, and the communities who left these buildings, by recording the sound of congregants in their buildings. The recordings intentionally include the sound of congregants assembling before the service begins, in order to capture the ambient noise of people gathering together, greeting each other, existing in community.

At its heart, this project is an attempt to offer a glimpse of the vibrant communities that have been held and shaped by these buildings, and to suggest the possibility of connection across neighborhoods, cultures, and histories.

# Zoë Cohen

Solo Series Winter 2016 | February 5 - March 24, 2015

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|---|--|---|
| <p>1. Christ Community Baptist Church / former Tikvas Israel 1224 n. 41st St, Parkside<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                  | <p>8. Millenium Baptist Church / former Shaare Zedek 52nd &amp; Columbia St, Parkside<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                    | <p>15. Cornerstone Baptist Church / former B'Nai Jeshrun 2117 N. 33rd St, Strawberry Mansion<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>              |
| <p>2. Bethany Baptist Church / former Beth Am 5749 Warrington St, West Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                     | <p>9. Pinn Memorial Baptist Church / former Har Zion Temple 2251 N. 54th St, Wynnefield<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                  | <p>16. Greater Harvest Prayer Chapel / former Zichron Jacob Talmud Torah 3012 W. Cumberland St<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>            |
| <p>3. Enon Chapel Baptist Church / former Beth Judah 5426 Sansom St, West Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                  | <p>10. Reconciliation &amp; Liberty Bible Church / former Beth Jacob 6027 Chestnut St, West Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p> | <p>Our Sanctuary Laid Waste West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center / Philadelphia Baptist Church<br/>Watercolor on Cut Paper, unframed<br/>\$700</p> |
| <p>4. Christian Love Baptist Church / former Beth Israel 1801 N 32nd St, Strawberry Mansion<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>             | <p>11. Open Heart Church / former Beth HaMedrosh HaGadol 60th &amp; Larchwood St, West Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>      | <p>Our Sanctuary Laid Waste Second Baptist Church / Anshe Emethe/ D'rsh'e Tov<br/>Watercolor on Cut Paper, unframed<br/>\$700</p>                       |
| <p>5. Faith Temple / former Aitz Chaim VeZichron Jacob 3213 W. Cumberland St, Strawberry Mansion<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>        | <p>12. Philadelphia Baptist Church / former West Philadelphia Jewish Community Center (demolished)<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>       | <p>Windows of Beth HaMedrosh HaGadol #1-3<br/>Cut Paper, unframed<br/>\$600/ea</p>  |
| <p>6. Chosen Generation Church of God in Christ / former Beth Emet 5217 Woodland Ave, West Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p> | <p>13. First Timothy Baptist Church / former Tifereth Israel 3940 Girard Ave, Parkside<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>                   | <p>This is Our Story, This is Our Song Limited Edition of 5 Audio CDs / Three sets of paired audio recordings<br/>Audio, 11 minutes<br/>\$300/ea</p>    |
| <p>7. Beloved St John Evangelistic Church / former Beth Sholom 4521 N. Broad St, North Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p>     | <p>14. New Greater Straightway Baptist Church / former Adath Jeshurun 1716 N. 7th St, North Philadelphia<br/>Watercolor on Paper, framed<br/>\$400</p> |   |