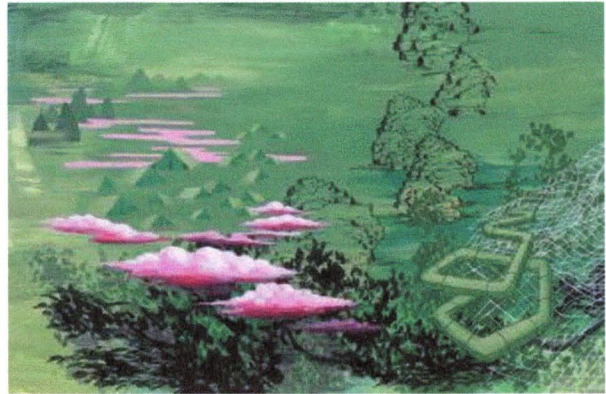


(In)finite Place

By: Jennifer Zarro, Staff
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"Sanctuary III" by Rebecca Rutstein



The latest exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art explores the idea of "place" and its complexities in Judaism.

Curator Matthew Singer notes in the essay accompanying the show that place is a weighted issue in Judaism: there is the holy place of Israel, but there is also tragic displacement and wandering in Jewish history. The idea of place is further impacted by the belief that God is everywhere, but why then are certain places - the Western Wall, the Synagogue - more important than others?

When going to exhibitions at the PMJA, it is always great to see how artists interpret an overarching theoretical idea, and how the results are both personal and universal.

When preparing for this exhibition, the three artists - Elyce Abrams, Paul Oberst, Rebecca Rutstein - were given passages from the Torah and from the Reform Movement's prayer book which included the word "place" ("makom" in Hebrew). They also had the opportunity to explore the sanctuary of Rodeph Shalom, known as a stunning and rich example of the Byzantine-Moorish style.

While the artists were not necessarily expected to incorporate into their work the readings they were given, Singer notes that "it was very gratifying to see how deeply they engaged themselves in the texts."

The work that is most obviously connected to the idea of place in this exhibition is by Paul Oberst, who makes temple forms out of fabric, wood, and wire. His work suggests the importance of the temple place, and explores the possible meanings of temples made out of different materials. His golden temple on top of a very tall sculpture is precious and protected like a temple at the top of a mountain might be, but his fabric temple, which hangs on the rear wall of the gallery, summons the desert tent tabernacles of the wandering Israelites.

Oberst has been making temple-like forms since the early 1980s, and notes that his temples are "a locus and a passage for the spirit."

Rebecca Rutstein contributed two large paintings to this show. Her pieces are landscapes essentially, and so call to mind similar explorations of place that a landscape painter might engage in. But her work is mysterious and otherworldly. Her paintings are made with bright colors, green and pink in these examples, and contain within them distant mountains, receding clouds, small tent-like structures, and vast space. On the surface of her paintings is a network of leaf-like forms, honeycomb shapes, tubes, and grids or netting that could be topographical maps of mountain ranges.

Rutstein notes that, "My idea of 'sanctuary' is being in nature...I believe that a spiritual presence is not limited to designated walls of worship, but is everywhere we go."

These fantastical landscapes seem to push the questions posed by this exhibition: what places are

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sacred, and is spirituality and holiness to be found even in the most distant places we can conjure?

One entire wall of the exhibition is taken up with eight paintings by Elyce Abrams. Her paintings are abstract but manage to suggest architectural spaces or landscapes. The format is the same in all of the works: horizontal paintings that contain strong vertical elements and bright white shapes that read like flashes of light.

The amazing thing about these paintings is that despite their similarities, each one suggests a specific setting. A painting such as "Threshold" clearly reads as architectural, with the vertical elements serving as the posts of a doorway. But the painting titled "In Our Midst" reads as nature and evokes a nocturnal landscape with reflected moonlight.

(In)finite Place: Elyce Abrams, Paul Oberst, Rebecca Rutstein will be on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, Congregation Rodeph Shalom through August 15. The gallery is located in Rodeph Shalom Synagogue at 615 North Broad Street in Philadelphia; entrance and parking are on Mt. Vernon Street. The Gallery is open Monday-Thursday 10-4; Friday 10-2; Sunday 10-noon. For more information please call: 215-627-6747.

For information on Elyce Abrams, Paul Oberst, or Rebecca Rutstein, please contact the Bridgette Mayer Gallery at 215-413-8893 or visit www.bridgettemayergallery.com.

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