

Commissioned by the Beth Sholom Synagogue Preservation Foundation, David Hartt's exhibition *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)* marks the first time that an artist has activated Beth Sholom's Frank Lloyd Wright-designed National Historic Landmark in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Comprising contrasting media—from orchids and tapestries to hi-resolution video screens and quadraphonic sound—the exhibition explores histories of Jewish and Black diasporas in the United States and considers how the American cultural landscape is shaped by ethnic, economic, and religious migration. Hartt is interested in synthetic ideas of culture, in which “the voice, agency, geography, and temporality of others collude to produce a more compelling version of the world.”

Throughout much of his practice, which includes photography, video, sculpture, and installation, Hartt investigates the interplay between ideology, the built environment, and the communities that shape and are shaped by these concepts. Typically, Hartt begins a project by identifying a particular idea (for example, sovereignty or late capitalism) and subsequently locates a site through which he can complicate and spatialize the idea. This commission began with a specific building, reversing the artist's usual approach. Rather than focus on the architecture, however, Hartt was drawn instead to the broader history of Beth Sholom Congregation and its relationship to the urban development of greater Philadelphia.

Founded in 1919, Beth Sholom Congregation's first building was located at the intersection of North Broad Street and West Courtland Street in north Philadelphia's Logan neighborhood. In the early 1950s, reflecting a nationwide trend of postwar suburbanization, the Congregation began to relocate to Elkins Park and commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design an “American synagogue” that aligned the Jewish experience with broader aspects of American culture and democratic ideals. The Logan building was sold and has since become the home of Beloved St. John Evangelistic Church, a congregation serving what is now a predominantly African- American community. The relationship between these two congregations led Hartt to consider the constant movement of Black and Jewish communities as a result of political, economic, and social currents.

Music plays a significant role in Hartt's work, animating both his films and the physical environment of his installations. For this commission, Hartt has selected the music of 19th-century American composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk as a cipher for the cultural histories at play in the exhibition. Born in New Orleans in 1829 to a Jewish father and a Creole mother, Gottschalk studied performance in Paris and was a contemporary of Frédéric Chopin. His internationally recognized compositions were the first to incorporate African- American and Afro-Caribbean vernacular song within a classical idiom—a hybrid approach that anticipated ragtime and jazz by more than 50 years. The parenthetical title of the exhibition, *Le Mancenillier (the manchineel)*, is the name of a

sweet but poisonous tropical plant that also titles an early Creole-influenced work by Gottschalk. Hartt considers the plant to be anti-colonial in that an arrow dipped in the sap of the manchineel is said to have killed Ponce de Leon, the conquistador who led the first European expedition to what is now Florida.

In an effort to address the contemporary moment and assert the productive movement of cultures, Hartt invited Ethiopian pianist Girma Yifrashewa to reinterpret the work of Gottschalk as the score for the exhibition. Classically trained in Bulgaria and based in Addis Ababa, Yifrashewa is an advocate of classical music in Africa whose own compositions are similarly hybrid, blending Ethiopian and European musical sources. Hartt also invited Philadelphia-based Haitian baritone Jean Bernard Cerin to organize a series of live musical activations featuring Jewish, Caribbean, and African-American compositions from the 19th and early 20th centuries. These events—many of which will feature a pianist and a vocalist—will be broadcast throughout the synagogue via an elaborate microphone that is mounted to a laser-cut brass stand designed by Hartt. Both Yifrashewa's recordings of Gottschalk and the live activations will create an ambient environment throughout the synagogue's interior.

Drawing on the visual idiom of the 19th-century landscape painter Martin Johnson Heade, whose paintings of orchids and hummingbirds bore a subtle affinity with the abolitionist movement, Hartt shot digital video and photography in New Orleans and Haiti, reinvestigating the vernacular presence of Caribbean culture in Gottschalk's music. The images are used in one of two large-scale Jacquard-woven tapestries, both of which subtly change the geometry and sonic properties of the rooms. Large freestanding video monitors act as portals that superimpose distant landscapes onto the space, oscillating between two cultures and locations.

For Hartt, these historically-inflected works sidestep anachronism by adopting a "post-human" sensibility through the use of a drone-operated camera. The unblinking perspective adopts the aesthetics of surveillance technology. Formally, moreover, Hartt is indebted to conceptual artist Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), a film made with an automated camera that moved in multiple directions while recording a remote landscape in Northern Quebec.

Hartt has created additional site-responsive elements that complement the building's interior as well as the peculiarities of its structure. A selection of live tropical plants have replaced the Congregation's customary artificial plantings throughout the building, and an arrangement of orchids captures leaking rainwater in the main sanctuary. Additionally, imagery of orchids made in the artist's studio is incorporated into the film-based works and one of the large tapestries. Hartt

understands this flower as a diasporic plant, since its unconventional roots attach themselves non-parasitically to various pre-existing organic frameworks.

The Histories (Le Mancenillier) is the first in a cycle of works by Hartt that borrows its title from the Greek historian Herodotus' foundational history of Western culture. Replete with allegorical descriptions of regime changes, trade routes, and daily life during the 5th century BC, Herodotus' text provides a model onto which Hartt transposes the United States and the Caribbean in the 19th century. In the artist's words, his work demonstrates "the criss-crossed fault lines of empire, post-colonial contraction, and revolution that continue to haunt the physical and psychic infrastructure of today." By layering the tropics within Beth Sholom, *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)* contends with ideas about culture, migration, and the environment, and it reflects on the site's capacity to hold a generous, porous, and speculative concept of community.

Cole Akers Curator

David Hartt (b. 1967, Montréal) lives and works in Philadelphia where he is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. He has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA from the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Ottawa.

Hartt's recent solo exhibitions include *in the forest* at the Graham Foundation in Chicago and *Negative Space* at Galerie Thomas Schulte in Berlin. His work has been included in several recent group exhibitions including *Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015* at The Museum of Modern Art, *America Is Hard to See* at the Whitney Museum of American Art and *Shine a light/Surgir de l'ombre: Canadian Biennial* at the National Gallery of Canada.

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*