

# David Hartt brings the tropics to Frank Lloyd Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue

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Orchids sprout their spindly stems skywards in search of water on rainy days. Leaves bunch in boxes, fighting one another for space in the light, vibrant pink. Not so distantly, a piano can be heard. This is the scene at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Beth Sholom Synagogue in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania.

It is a scene reminiscent of the lush floral paintings of Martin Johnson Heade, a citation noted by David Hartt, the artist behind this installation, *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)*, on view at the synagogue through December 19. (Other references include the classical historian Herodotus, the Creole-Jewish composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and the Canadian experimental filmmaker Michael Snow). Heade was born not 25 miles from where the synagogue stands today, however, he traveled widely, visiting Jamaica, Brazil, Colombia, and other locales to create sensitive paintings of misty miniature worlds, all orchids and bugs and hummingbirds—a migratory creature with symbolic “affinity to abolitionist movement,” according to Hartt. Heade was himself a prominent abolitionist.



Most visitors to the synagogue enter through the rear, where they encounter this large monitor. (Michael Vahrenwald)

Hartt too traveled for this work, filming scenes of waving foliage in Haiti and Louisiana for videos on display on two 98-inch monitors. The orchids, however, were filmed in his Philadelphia studio; a seed can travel far, after all. Movement, displacement, diaspora, and homebuilding figure and reconfigure themselves in *The Histories*. Hartt was inspired by discovering that the Beth Sholom congregation's original home in Philadelphia's Logan neighborhood now serves as the home of a Black evangelical congregation. During the mass suburbanization that took hold of America after the Second World War, which coincided with the so-called "Synagogue Boom," the congregation moved, enlisting Wright to build their new home, which would be completed just after his death in 1959. With its shocking pyramid form, designed to be in Wright's words "luminous Mount Sinai," it's the only synagogue Wright ever built.

Curated by the Glass House's Cole Akers, *The Histories (Le Mancenillier)*, overtakes the Wright's bold structure without overwhelming it. Entering through the back, as most people do, you'll encounter a large flat screen on black scaffolding, about human height, though much larger than any human being. On it, plants move and flow, including orchids and fronds. An occasional white X flashes across the screen, a reference to Snow, whose structuralist films considered the presence of the camera and materiality of that more analog medium. Video is not as tangible a thing as celluloid film, and so here the X seems to

index the physicality of the screens (another monitor be found, oriented vertically, across the synagogue). These TVs are more sculptures than frames. While at times the view in the videos is fixed, trained watchfully on fronds swaying in brackish water, other times they float and flutter with videos taken by choreographed drones and flipped upside-down.

In planters where artificial plants once sat, Hartt has inserted live tropical flora lit with pink grow lights to keep them alive in the subterranean settings. In the main sanctuary, a jaw-dropping theatrical space with a glass roof soaring 110 feet above, orchids have been placed throughout: on the floor, over chairs, and on large tables straddling whole swaths of seats. The roof, impressive as it might be, leaks. When Hartt first encountered the synagogue, there were buckets and kiddie pools placed throughout to collect rainwater and snowmelt. The orchids serve as a more expressive and a no less functional replacement.



A multitude of forms—including music and this photographic tapestry—are combined in Hartt's installation, which also invites performers in throughout its run. (Photo Michael Vahrenwald)

What is the medium of a building, of architectural experience? In conversations with Hartt, he said that he had been thinking about Wright's notion of "total design"—of not just creating the architecture of a building, but the architecture of living, down to the smallest details. The exhibition's two tapestries perhaps evince the clearest example of this. Classic design objects and textiles make physical the most immaterial of things. Light hitting a camera sensor, the semiconductors revealing the facts of themselves as pixels, become most obvious in the fabric forest and lens flare hanging in one room.

*The Histories* is not just objects. Music is central to the exhibition, with renditions of Gottschalk's music, as recorded by Ethiopian pianist Girma Yifrashe, playing in the main sanctuary, not only creating a new sonic texture, but building on the exhibition's story of hybridization, travel, and transmission. Gottschalk had a mixed-race and mixed-faith background and synthesized European and African-American musical traditions, spending much of his life outside the United States. As Gottschalk serves as a "cipher" for Hartt, music serves as an anchor for the exhibition. Hartt invited Yifrashe, who trained in Bulgaria, to score the exhibition with Gottschalk's music. In addition, performers were invited in throughout the exhibition's run and a piano and mixer on display serve as a sort of sculptural intervention that constantly hint at latent performative possibilities.



Tropical flowers collect rainwater in the Pennsylvania synagogue. (Michael Vahrenwald)

Hartt describes his artistic process as "peripatetic," both intellectually and formally, but also spatially. At home in transit, Hartt traces shifting vectors of time and space that despite their motion, become the stabilizing forces that create communities. But these flights are fraught. Drone footage and landscape travel paintings can show new sights and celebrate the richness of life, but they can also serve to surveil or as colonial capture. The conditions that create diaspora are often stories of painful displacement, which might serve in some ways as unifying forces for this primarily white Jewish congregation and the Black church that replaced their former home, but the synagogue also stands as an index to the white flight suburbanization that took place in the 20th century. History, this exhibition's subject, is a

story of entanglements and estrangements that echo into the hybrid present. The installation's parenthetical title, *Le Mancenillier*, wryly acknowledges this messiness. It refers to both a song by Gottschalk, and to the Caribbean manchineel tree, which produces a fruit that the Christopher Columbus referred to as the death apple: it is enticingly sweet, and deadly.

*David Hartt: The Histories (Le Mancenillier)*

Through December 19

Beth Sholom Synagogue

Elkins Park, Pennsylvania