

## (IN)FINITE PLACE

Elyce Abrams  
Paul Oberst  
Rebecca Rutstein

**(In)finite Place:** Elyce Abrams, Paul Oberst, Rebecca Rutstein

Place and displacement are themes central to Jewish scripture, belief, history, and contemporary experience. As revealed in site-specific works by Elyce Abrams, Paul Oberst, and Rebecca Rutstein, *(In)finite Place* explores the resonances and relevance of “place” (*makom*) in Judaism, Jewishness, and human existence.

At Judaism’s core is the idea of a single, omnipresent, omniscient, and all-powerful God. Jewish history and that of all humankind, however, is marred by tragedies so enormous and ineffable that whether God is present or absent is the subject of perpetual theological debate and personal soul-searching.

A connection to one specific place—Israel—is central to Judaism and Jewish self-understanding; indeed, *makom* is used as a name of God in the traditional expression of condolence, “The *Place* will comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Jewish experience, nonetheless, can be described as that of a people largely “out of place.” The ancient Israelite kingdom existed in various forms from the thirteenth-century BCE into the first-century CE. Although a Jewish presence in the Holy Land persisted over the following millennia, successive exiles at the hands of Babylonian and Roman conquerors forced the majority of Jews to live in a state of Diaspora—as a people without a homeland, dwelling amidst other nations that were sometimes welcoming but more often hostile. Judaism evolved from a religion centered on proscribed rites performed in a single, great Temple in Jerusalem to one practiced in strikingly varied ways in countless synagogues and - perhaps most essentially - in individual homes in every corner of the globe. The modern State of Israel was established amid conflict sixty years ago in 1948, and its borders and very existence remain contested.

Preparing for *(In)finite Place*, Abrams, Oberst, and Rutstein shared two essential experiences. They contemplated passages pertaining to place in the *Tórah* (in translation and with commentaries by the great theologian Gunther Plaut) and the Reform Movement’s recently issued prayer-book *Mishkan T’Filah* (“Tabernacle of Prayer”), and they physically explored one particular place: Congregation Rodeph Shalom’s monumental and historic synagogue.

Abrams, Oberst, and Rutstein are associated with Philadelphia’s Bridgette Mayer Gallery (founded 2001), a venue noted for its commitment to forging new communities of artists and art-admirers. While working on their individual contributions to *(In)finite Place*, the three artists were aware of one another’s interests and visions. Collectively, the three artists created a visually and conceptually charged environment. In their *(In)finite Place*, our eyes and minds may dwell on images, shapes, and words that transport us from biblical narratives and insights to the changing coordinates of our present and future. Rapidly evolving electronic communications, transportation technologies, climate and ecological change, and human geopolitical actions are sure to keep our sense of place in flux. Just as surely, our engagement with and awareness of history, heritage, culture, philosophy, and faith will shape our perspectives on the changing vistas of existence.

Matthew F. Singer, Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art





Elyce Abrams, *Threshold*, 2008, Acrylic on wood, 12 x 36"



Elyce Abrams, *In Our Midst*, 2008, Acrylic on wood, 12 x 36"



Elyce Abrams, *Presence*, 2008, Acrylic on wood, 12 x 36"



Elyce Abrams, *Endured*, 2008, Acrylic on wood, 12 x 36"

Elyce Abrams conjures expansive spaces pulsing with light—radiance that can illumine or blind with its brilliance. Light is a palpable presence in Abrams' work and a powerful symbol in Judaism. Declaring "Let there be light," the God of *Genesis* brought the first, primal element into what was previously "unformed" and "void." Light presaged the creation of cosmos and Earth in *Genesis*, just as it determines our sense of place—it makes visible our surroundings. Light is associated with knowledge (enlightenment), the Divine, and life itself—product of the "Divine spark."

## ELYCE ABRAMS

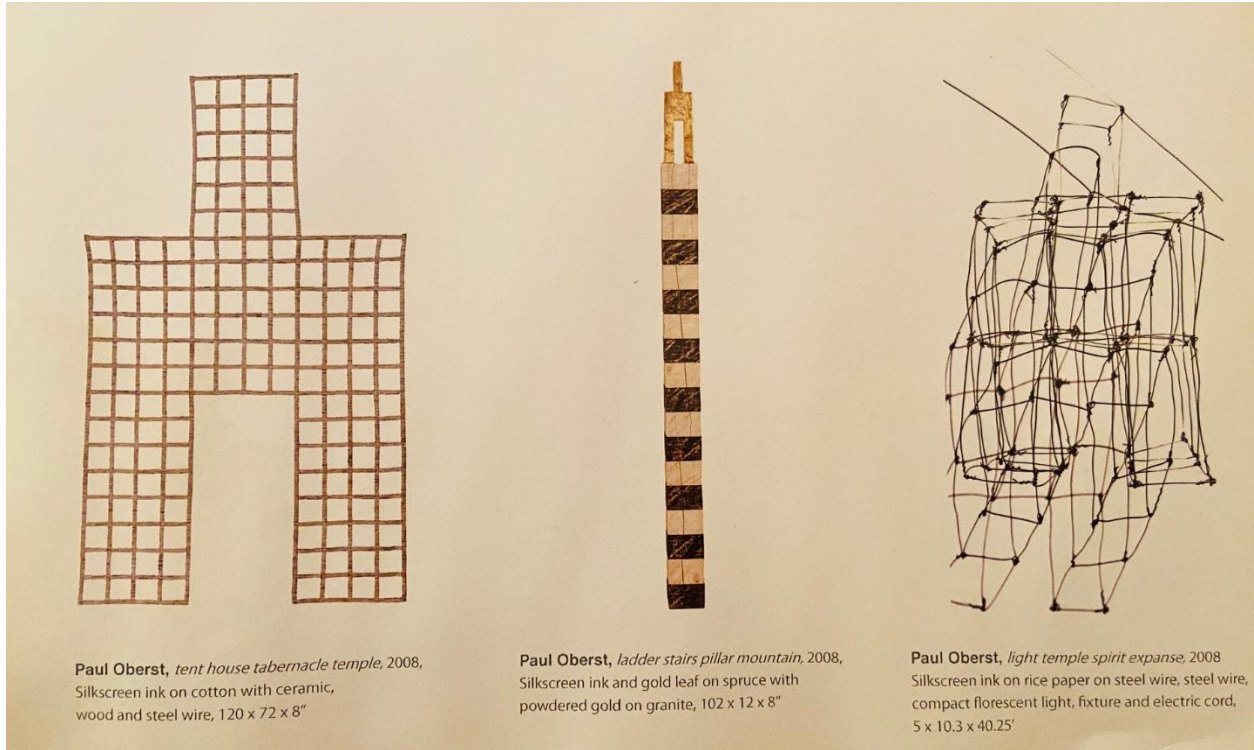
Abrams says, "In the *Torah*, Jacob dreams of a stairway from the ground to the heavens, a stairway that can exist anywhere, signifying the presence of God everywhere. Forms saturated with light indicate this comforting being. I explored this idea in my work—an outer place through which we travel, coming together and moving apart, while a presence always exists in our midst."



"These paintings represent the landscape in which we are never alone, and the sanctuary in which we gather." In Abrams' work for *(In)finite Place*, horizontal grounds bear deeply colored and graphically robust vertical elements of varied width and spacing; they allude as strongly to human-made cityscapes as to natural landscapes. Shafts, bursts, and skeins of luminescence spotlight possibilities of revelation and transcendence. These flashes of light amidst irregular grids suggest beacons guiding us to and through pathways and portals. They reverberate with the hopeful resolve of a prayer:

"May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship... May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity..."





**Paul Oberst**, *tent house tabernacle temple*, 2008,  
Silkscreen ink on cotton with ceramic,  
wood and steel wire, 120 x 72 x 8"

**Paul Oberst**, *ladder stairs pillar mountain*, 2008,  
Silkscreen ink and gold leaf on spruce with  
powdered gold on granite, 102 x 12 x 8"

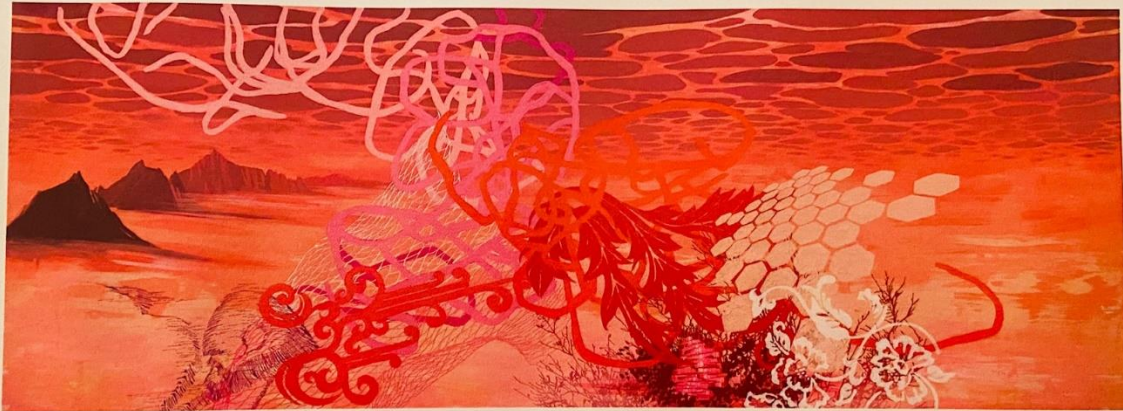
**Paul Oberst**, *light temple spirit expanse*, 2008  
Silkscreen ink on rice paper on steel wire, steel wire,  
compact florescent light, fixture and electric cord,  
5 x 10.3 x 40.25"

Paul Oberst has been carving, building, painting, and printing temple-like forms since 1981. Honed to architectonic essence and imbued with the touch of the artist's hands and visual and tactile textures built of elemental materials and layers of stamped words, they are icons seemingly alive with presence and message. In their numerical and material multiplicity, Oberst's temples evoke the variety of human religious expression and explore Oberst's own sense of the artist as shaman: a conduit for creativity. He says, "I depict a sacred space that once was, is now, and will always be. My temples are a locus and a passage for the spirit. They grow from a personal, primal connection to what I perceive as sacred and fundamental to all spirituality."

**PAUL OBERST**



"For (In)finite Place, I fabricated a tent-like portable temple—summoning the desert tabernacle of the wandering Israeli it hangs delicately, worn and stained from folding and carrying, with the vessel of ritual standing in its doorway. I create the image of a pillar connecting the heavenly golden temple to the earth and recalling Jacob's dream of the ladder. I also twisted wire to make temples to be suspended in the vaulted ceiling of the Museum's gallery—heavenly bodies, they are connected one to another like a network or electronic circuit. I expanded upon each sculpture by integrating quartets of words (in English and transliterated Hebrew) derived from the Torah but open-ended in their associations: tent, house, temple, tabernacle; stairs, ladder, pillar, mountain; light, temple, expanse, spirit."



Rebecca Rutstein, 2008, *Sanctuary IV*, Acrylic on wood, 36 x 96"

"My idea of 'sanctuary' is being in nature," Rebecca Rutstein explains. "The words of Psalm 139 resonate strongly with me, 'If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there would your hand lead me.' I believe that a spiritual presence is not limited to designated walls of worship, but is everywhere we go, if we seek it. In these paintings, I venture into vast, unfamiliar landscapes that suggest both underwater and celestial spaces." For [\(In\)finite Place](#), Rutstein created two large-scale, decidedly horizontal paintings built of overlapping and conjoined motifs.

## REBECCA RUTSTEIN



They are informed and formed by her fascination with plate tectonics, the study of how the Earth's crust folds, slides, collides, and erupts along fault lines—an ongoing process of earthly creation, destruction, and re-creation. Outcroppings of stepped rocks suggest ascension—re-imaginings of Jacob's vision of a stairway to heaven and the stone he used as a pillow. Modest structures evoke the tents of the desert-traversing Israelites of [Exodus](#), Jewish migration in the Diaspora, and faith that—wherever Jews wander—the presence of God follows them. The scale of Rutstein's paintings and their horizontality suggest expansive landscapes. But what and where are these places in which Rustein envelops us? They exist in the eternal and infinite: within them it is yesterday, today, and tomorrow; here, there, and everywhere. They echo and give shape to words found in the prayer-book [Mishkan T'filah](#):

"Where might I go to find you,  
Exalted, Hidden One?  
Yet where would I not go to find you,  
Everpresent, Eternal One?"



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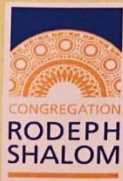
May 22 – August 15, 2008

Artists talk and reception: Thursday, May 29

Free and open to the public


Discussion with the artists: 6:30–7:30 p.m.

Reception: 7:30–8:30 p.m.



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On the front cover: A view of Congregation Rodeph Shalom's sanctuary