

'Divine Intervention' Transforms Christ Church in Sag Harbor

By Michelle Trauring (<https://sagharborexpress.com/author/michelletrauring/>) - June 4, 2019



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Sisters Teri Hackett and Reverend Karen Campbell at the opening of "Divine Intervention" at Christ Episcopal Church on Saturday, June 1, in Sag Harbor. Lori Hawkins photos

On Valentine's Day, Teri Hackett took a trip to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Harlem, and found herself completely moved — not by love, but by art.

Using the cathedral's sacred space as a canvas, 43 artists had illuminated the intersection between spiritual and social identity, surrounding the altar, choir, crossing and nave with installations that explored notions of dignity, inclusion and exclusion, and the ways in which they form personhood and community cohesion.

Hackett immediately called her sister, Reverend Karen Ann Campbell, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Sag Harbor.

"Karen, we've gotta do this," Hackett recalled whispering hurriedly from inside the cathedral.

And to her delight, Campbell agreed.
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"Jib Net." Photo by Nancy French Achenbach.

In less than four months, the duo gathered 34 New York- and East End-based artists to transform the 19th-century church into a contemporary art space for the show, "Divine Intervention." Last weekend, an opening reception marked the first exhibition of its kind inside the sanctuary, welcoming a blend of installations, paintings, photography, sculpture and artist books.

"There's an interesting story behind the title," Hackett said. "I call Karen my 'new sister' because we met in 2010. My mother gave birth to her when she was young and Karen was adopted. She found me in 2010 and so we have been just completely connected at the hip ever since, and that's the 'Divine Intervention.'"

Together, they conceived the show, with Hackett acting as curator by selecting the artists and reviewing their work, ultimately choosing Lisa Hein and Bob Seng, who specialize in site-specific installations, to anchor the show.

When they first visited the Sag Harbor church, Hein and Seng were struck not only by the architecture — particularly the exterior — but also the village's maritime history, and an idea quickly formed.

"The church has very steep roofs, so you can see a lot of the roof, but at the same time, it's really triangular. So we thought, 'This looks like sails,'" Hein said. "If we put an additional jib out on the front of the steeple, then it would make you think the rest of the roof are also sails, so it would suddenly be a fully rigged ship."

They called the project "Jib Net," and applied for permits to erect it outside the church. A week before the opening, Hein learned they would face an uphill battle to get the installation approved.

"We knew we wouldn't have time to make it after the hearing, so we just went ahead and made it. And it cost a lot of money," she said. "So now we had this 40-foot-high net, cut in the shape of a jib. So we thought, 'What are we gonna do?' Don't worry, there's a happy ending here."



They moved the net indoors, fixing it to the peak of the ceiling and letting it run nearly the length of the sanctuary, resting at about shoulder height. Inside, it takes on a new life — one as a keel, rather than a jib.

"Instead, you feel like you're underwater, as if you were swimming alongside the hull of a ship," she explained. "Because it's grey netting, you almost don't notice it, and then all of a sudden when you're next to it, you see how huge it is. It's almost invisible, but it's huge.



"Jib Net" inside the Christ Episcopal Church. Lori Hawkins photo

"The site is what inspired it, but in a way, this net coming down like a blade could have some relation to the title, 'Divine Intervention,' because it comes down from way on high to your level," she continued. "It sort of slices down and if you think of the Old Testament, it could be a blade of judgment. In a way, it almost divides the church into one side of the aisle and the other."

Work by more than two-dozen artists join "Jib Net" in the sanctuary, including a pair of "Photo Narratives" by Bonnie Rychlak, only amplified by the Tiffany window they flank, she said.

"They're images that I've taken from various places," the part-time Springs resident said. "I take the photographs — they're black and white — and then I enlarge them and cut them up, and then mount them on mirror and hand-color them. These are set into a white wooden box and the front is then covered in pebbled glass.

"It creates this diffusion of light that is just so extraordinary," she continued. "They can be beautiful; they can be ghostly. They play with the glass window, which is just so incredible. I can't get over it. I've never shown in a church, and certainly not next to a Tiffany window."

Half of the art sale proceeds will benefit the Community Café, a ministry to serve Sag Harbor-area locals who are hungry, lonely or both — alleviating some of the food insecurity in the community, where a reported 7.9% of residents have no guarantee of their next meal.



"Given the times that we live in, I'm finding it to be a big community event, in support of something that is so necessary — spiritually and practically — by feeding people," Rychlak said. "Personally, I feel it's really helped me feel like there's something beyond what we read about in the paper every day. It's been healing for me, and it's an opportunity for artists to have some sort of spiritual connection. I'm not religious, but I certainly feel, in this darkness, we need to feel some connection."

For artist Janet Goleas, the exhibition has given her an opportunity to slow down — while contemplating the artwork on view, engaging with the church architecture itself, and making her own piece for the show: an art book of the Jane Austen classic, "Pride and Prejudice."

"I hope people don't get mad at me for defiling a book of such significance," she said with a laugh.

While the identity of the book is intact, the cover is collaged and manipulated, as is every single page of the old, stained volume she stumbled across at a used book sale — joining a collection of unique artist books by Angela Britzman, Barbara Friedman, Elisabeth Condon, Stephen White and Jodi Panas at the show.

"I love it when the East End does something a little out of the ordinary and kicks the ball out of the park," she said. "I think everyone's going to really enjoy this. They'll still have services there — it hasn't disrupted the pews — and it's a wonderful tribute to the sanctity of that space. It's really nice and brave, I would say, for Teri to embark on this. It's such a beautiful environment and it's transformed."

"Divine Intervention," a summer group exhibition, will remain on view through Monday, September 2, at Christ Episcopal Church, located at 5 Hampton Street in Sag Harbor.

Participating artists include: Bastienne Schmidt and Almond Zigmund, Lisa Hein and Bob Seng, Drew Shiflett, Carole Seborovski, April Gornik, Reynold Ruffins, Maureen McQuillan, Karen Arm, Amanda Church, Leah Guadagnoli, Theresa Hackett, Leo Holder, Dennis Hollingsworth, Erica-Lynn Huberty, Mary Jones, Christa Maiwald, Ray Manikowski, Diane Mayo, Nell Painter, Marilla Palmer, Liza Phillips, Bonnie Rychlak, Anne Seelbach, Alison Slon, John Torreano, Michelle Weinberg, Angela Britzman, Barbara Friedman, Elisabeth Condon, Janet Goleas, Stephen White and Jodi Panas.

Public viewing hours are Saturdays from 3 to 5 p.m., Sundays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., or by appointment. For more information, call (631) 725-0128 or visit christchurchshny.org.

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