

SHELTER: RE-IMAGINING THE KETUBAH

A Collaboration by Chicago Artist Judith Joseph and Barcelona-based Artist Brooke Borg

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ABSTRACT

Shelter is a collaborative, interactive installation work based on the concept of the ketubah as a contract that helps us create emotional shelter. It is the synthesis of the work of two artists working in separate countries, whose ideas completed each other's work. Chicago-area artist Judith Joseph's work on a room-sized, tent-like ketubah made of painted silk was brought to fruition by Barcelona-based artist Brooke Borg's broad, interactive interpretation of the ketubah as a relationship negotiation. Conversely, Borg's realization of her *Contractes Familiars* was facilitated when Joseph shared the process by which she arrives at the imagery in her customized ketubot.

I. INTRODUCTION

Brooke Borg and I brought our history, experience and background to the *Shelter* project and found a fruitful synergy in collaboration. It is a culmination of all our prior work, and it is worthwhile to examine the creative paths that brought us to a juncture on our respective journeys.

II. PORTFOLIO: JUDITH JOSEPH

My roots as a ketubah artist began with my upbringing. I was raised in a home that my father describes as "non-observant Orthodox." In other words, we knew all the rules and we observed the ones we felt like doing. My parents sent me to Hebrew school, but it was really in my Hebrew language classes at my public high school in the suburbs of Milwaukee that I learned to read and speak Hebrew with some fluency. In terms of identity, my home life was completely steeped in Jewish history, culture, and holidays with extended family, with casual ritual observance.

As for art, my passion for drawing began at around age five. My mother, who took art history courses at UW-Milwaukee as an adult student, supplied me with good quality art supplies and classes. She would come home from her art history classes and regurgitate the entire lecture like a mother robin feeding her chick, using her Jansen textbook to illustrate her points about flying buttresses and Flemish madonnas (1). For me, cold Saturday afternoons during our long Wisconsin winters were spent with origami paper, cray-pas, watercolors, pen and ink: often with the incongruous backdrop of old black-and-white westerns on TV.

I became aware of the ketubah (illuminated Jewish marriage contract) as a folk art form while I was still in my teens. Significantly, I became aware of this art form while browsing a book store for a gift for my parents' wedding anniversary. I was attracted to the colorful cover of David Davidovitch's *The Ketubah: Jewish Marriage Contracts Through The Ages* (2). Thanks to my mother's art history classes, I was already well familiar with, and totally charmed by, illuminated manuscripts such as the *Tres Riches Heures of the Duc Du Berry*. I loved the

miniature medieval illustrations with their quirky, often bizarre imagery, that ranged from exquisite depictions of nature and fairy-tale landscapes to oddly gesturing figures telling tales I had to guess about. I had never seen Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, and I was completely smitten with the ketubah.

I purchased the book for my parents, and mentioned my discovery of the ketubah as an art form to Rabbi Frederick Wenger, who was a young associate rabbi at Temple Emanu-El, where I was involved in a temple youth group. Fred was about to be married, and coaxed me into making his ketubah, with his help on the textual matters. As fate would have it, *The First Jewish Catalogue* was published that same year, and I learned Hebrew calligraphy and text-writing from its fine how-to articles by Jay Greenspan and David Moss (2). That same summer, I made two ketubot as wedding gifts.

I attended Washington University and UW-Madison and studied Spanish, French, comparative literature and European Cultural History. I didn't become an art major until my junior year. I continued to make ketubot (plural of ketubah) for commissions while I earned my B.S.-Art at UW-Madison. In the mid 1970's, lyrical abstraction was the trend in painting. I never showed any of my art professors my ketubot, because I feared they would be considered retrogressive and parochial. I had a good technical training in art at UW, but my identity and passions in art were closeted.

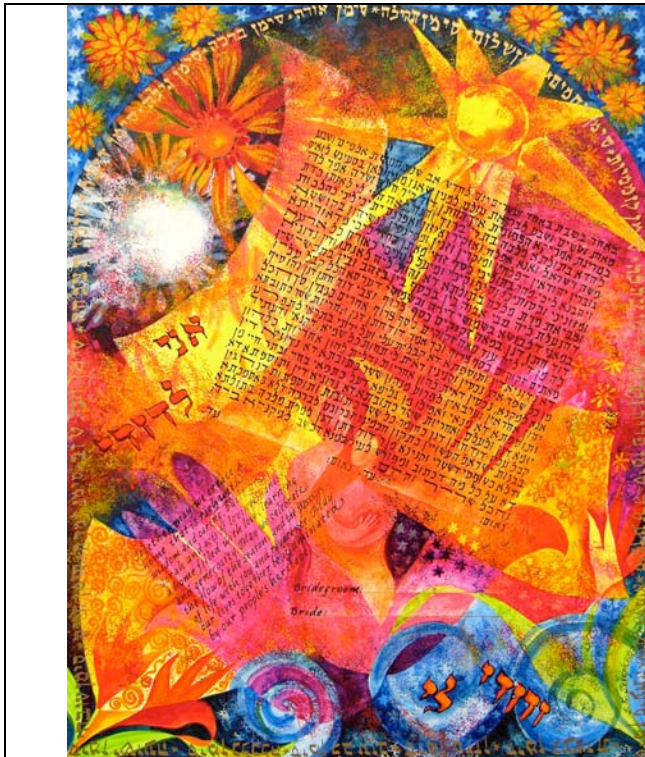
Upon graduation, I realized that making ketubot was something I could pursue as an art career, in addition to my activities as an exhibiting painter. The rebirth of the ketubah as a decorative art form began with David Moss and Jay Greenspan in 1973, and by 1975, I was making ketubot professionally. It was a natural fit for me; my study of languages, history and literature extended my love of letters beyond their forms to literary inspiration. Thus, I was able to engage the symbolic and narrative dimensions of manuscript illumination through layered metaphors, multiple meanings and wordplay.

My ketubah portfolio is varied, as I am responsive to the ideas and desires of my clients. All of my ketubot thus far, some 400 of them, are original, distinctly individual, commissioned works. Some of my works look traditional, such as this work from 2006, which is modeled on a Venetian ketubah (fig. 1):

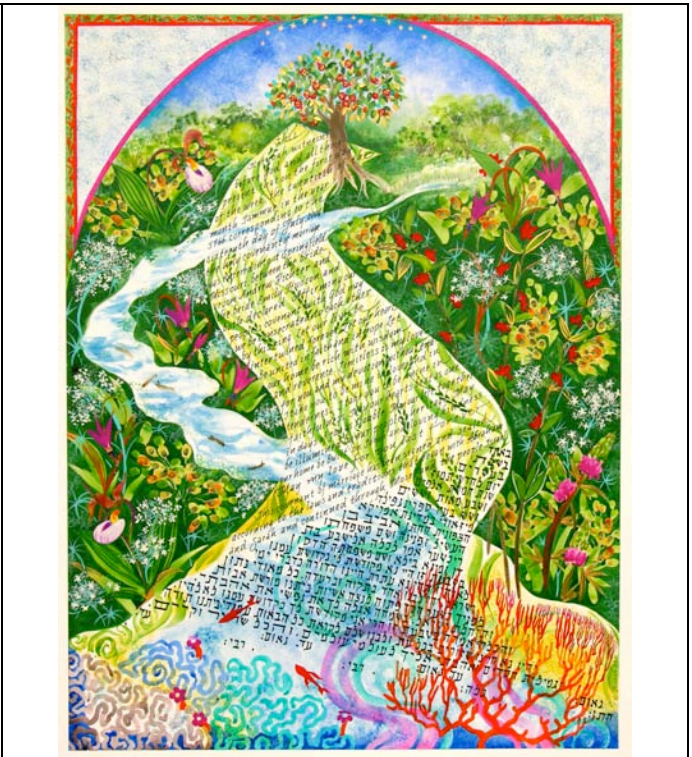


1. *Venetian Style Ketubah*, Judith Joseph, egg tempera and India ink on rag board, 18" X 24" 2006

Over the years, I have experimented with the form and content of the ketubah. I began breaking up the blocks of text and setting them at angles to make the text a dynamic element in the design (figures 2,3).



2. *Double Hamsa Ketubah*, Judith Joseph, egg tempera and India ink on rag board, 18" X 24", 2007



3. *Prairie Ketubah*, Judith Joseph, egg tempera and India ink on rag board, 18" X 24", 2006

Working with egg tempera, which I make from fresh egg yolks and dry pigments in the Renaissance manner, allows me to achieve extreme detail in my painting and layer colors using glazes and opaque techniques. Egg tempera paint ages well (3) and is ideal for work that is intended to last as an heirloom for future generations (fig. 4.)



4. *Spring Moon Ketubah*, Judith Joseph, egg tempera on rag board, 18" X 24", 2008

Like the ketubah, egg tempera is a once-popular medium that fell out of favor for centuries, only to be revived in the United States in the 20th-century (4). I learned the technique from an artist friend.

As a calligrapher, I see the Hebrew letters as little dancers. My style as a ketubah artist has influenced my paintings, with joyful color, use of silhouettes and text, obsessive detail and narrative content, as seen in *Midnight Garden* from 2007 (fig. 5). This work is a shadow-box: the white lettering and garden imagery is fired-enamel on glass that sits an inch ahead of two levels of egg tempera cut-out panels.



5. *Midnight Garden*, Judith Joseph, mixed-media shadow box, 12" X 12", 2007. Translation of Hebrew text by Solomon Ibn Gabirol: *Morning and evening I seek You, spreading out my hands, lifting up my face in prayer. I sigh for You with a thirsting heart; I am like the pauper begging at my doorstep.* (5)

Although it is my goal as a ketubah artist to tell the story of the couple who are getting married, even if it is on a subliminal level, through color and atmosphere, sometimes the images get under my creative skin. *Blue Trees* (fig. 6), a ketubah from 2006, resonated for me as a touchstone image.



6. *Blue Trees Ketubah*, Judith Joseph, egg tempera and India ink on rag board, 18" X 24", 2006
The *Blue Trees Ketubah* gave rise to *Shulamit And Saleema* (fig. 7) a painting in acrylic, which was created for a show of Jewish and Muslim artists in Chicago called *Tolerance Of Belief*.

Shulamit is a feminine Hebrew name which means “peace” and *Saleema* means the same in Arabic. Here, the trees of the forest form a sort of chuppah, sheltering the figures.



7. *Shulamit And Saleema*, Judith Joseph, acrylic on canvas, 30” X 40”, 2008.

Another painting in this vein is *In The Forest*, (fig. 8), part of a series of peacock paintings I did in 2007–08.



8. *In The Forest*, Judith Joseph, acrylic on canvas, 30” X 40”, 2007.

Although, as I have said, I am not a ritually observant Jew, I am a devoted student of Judaism. The peacocks in *In The Forest* grew out of a year of study of Jewish and Muslim life in medieval Spain, culminating in a visit to the Alhambra in Granada and the Great Mosque of Cordoba. For me, the peacocks shimmer with wonder and purity, like the poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol or Yehudah Halevy. I used the gardens of the Alhambra as a setting for my version of Edward Hicks' famous painting, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. The concept was inspired by the prophecy of Isaiah 11:6: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, etc."(6) My *Peaceable Kingdom* recalls the creative cross-pollination of Jewish and Muslim poets, who engaged in poetry competitions in the fragrant gardens of the Moorish court, and expresses my hope for peace today. (fig. 9)



9. *Peaceable Kingdom*, Judith Joseph, acrylic and sand on canvas, 30" X 40", 2008.

In 2008, I began painting on silk (fig. 10). I fell in love with the brilliant color of the dyes, the variety of techniques and the movement and sensuality of silk.



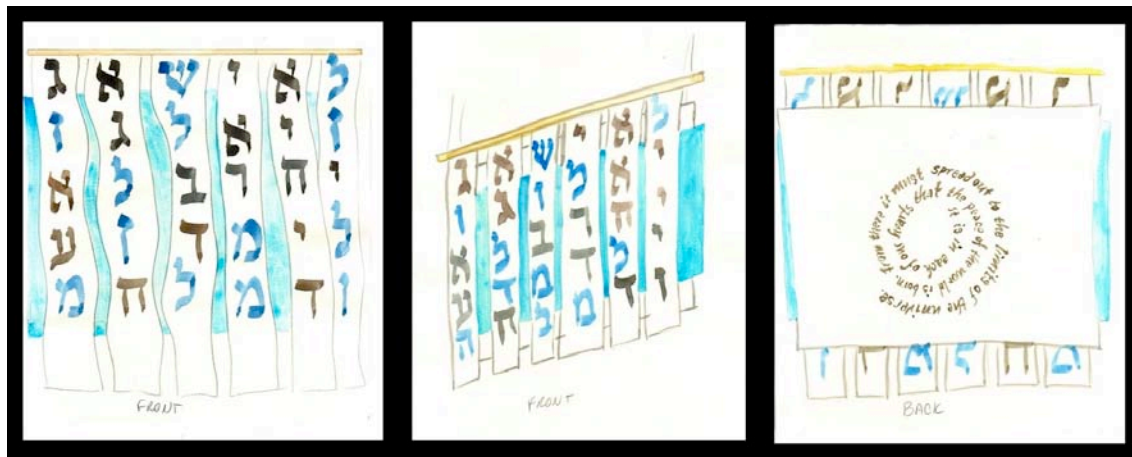
10. Silk Scarf, Judith Joseph, 14" X 72", 2007

Naturally, as a Judaic artist with an interest in weddings, this led me to begin making chuppot (marriage canopies) for weddings (fig. 11).



11. Hand-painted silk chuppah, Judith Joseph, 6' X 8', collection Congregation Hakafa, 2008

I began thinking about using painted silk to create an environment that was more than a chuppah. I wanted to create a room-sized ketubah installation that one could walk into and move through. Along these lines, I designed a work for the *Tolerance Of Belief* invitational exhibit at Black Walnut Gallery in Chicago that incorporated Hebrew and English text on silk panels (fig. 12).



12. *Peace Streamers*, Sketch, Judith Joseph, proposal of painted silk banners, 2008.

The idea was that the movement and airiness of the silk would create an emotional feeling of peace, in keeping with the theme of the work and the quotations from Isaiah about beating swords into plowshares, among others (7). The gallery environment for the show did not allow for the piece to be displayed as designed, so in the end I created only the Isaiah panels with Hebrew text.

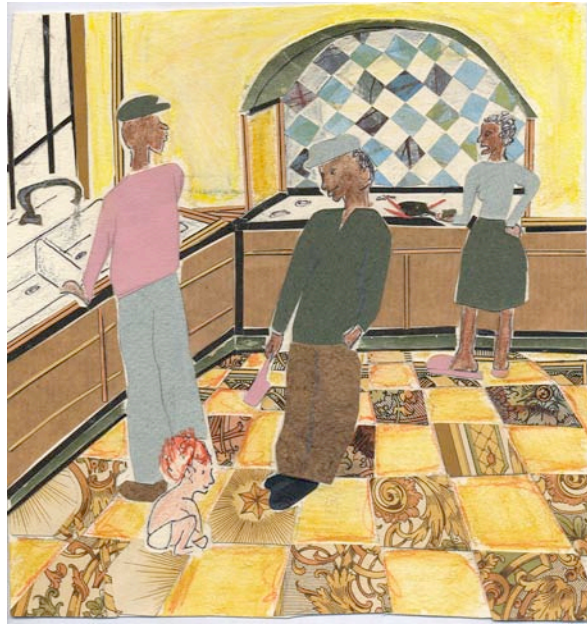
III. PORTFOLIO: BROOKE BORG

Just as I was wrestling with the idea of a room-sized ketubah, in August, 2008 I received an email from Brooke Borg, who I did not know. Here is what she wrote:

“Hello Judith, My name is Brooke Borg and I am a Barcelona-based artist from New York. I [am doing] some research for a project that is in full swing called *Ketubah- Contractes Familiars* (Catalan for family contracts). The project aims to establish written contracts between family members and then illustrate the documents as ketubot to be cherished and displayed despite the personal and difficult material they may reveal... I was perusing Google to find Ketubah artists to speak to and came across your website. What impresses me most about your Ketubot is the strength and whimsy that I believe you refer to in your artist statement, saying that your work is like ‘children’s book illustrations that have wandered into a grown-up place.’

‘Before I continue, I would just like to give you some background on myself: I grew up in a Conservative Jewish household the youngest of five children. We are all very different, I being the only artist, and ever since I was very young the nuances and ambiguities of family life have interested me. Also, religious and folk art have often made their way into my supports. Although I am mostly a plastic artist (painting), I decided to develop this social project as a way to integrate visual art, religious values and symbolism and family issues.’

‘The reason I am writing to you is that the project is extremely ambitious and I have little to no experience with illustration or works on paper (except for collage work), (fig. 13). By June, I have to produce 20 ketubot all personal to the text I will be writing and I would like to interview you about your process and what it means to you to make these works of text and illustrative art.’



13. *Trinity*, Brooke Borg, collage, 20cm X 21cm

I am occasionally contacted by people who want to illustrate their own ketubah and want advice, but Borg's email was different. I was intrigued by her notion of a ketubah as a contract written to resolve problematic relationships within the family. This struck me like a thunderbolt: all these years, I had been making ketubot, but I had never considered them outside the traditional function of marriage contracts.

One must consider that the original, Aramaic ketubah was written around 2000 years ago in response to the Babylonian exile. It was created in response to a destabilized society, where divorces were becoming common. Husbands were throwing their wives and children out of the house, and the women had no property or security. To remedy this, the ketubah was drafted. It is essentially a prenuptial agreement: it has a long list of the obligations that a man has towards his wife, including material support, clothing, food, and shelter. In the event of a divorce, she receives a specific monetary settlement to ensure her dignity and security. In exchange, there is one sentence where the woman pledges to be a good Jewish wife. It is written in the third person and signed by witnesses. It is a valid document in the Beth Din, the Jewish court of law (8). Today, there are alternative modern versions of ketubot in Hebrew and English, including Reform, Egalitarian, inter-marriage, same-sex, and the Conservative movement, which has added the Lieberman clause to ensure that a *get* is granted in the event of a civil divorce (9).

Artistically, historic examples of the ketubah form "almost an anthology of the artistic taste of the lands in which Jews have resided." (10)

I investigated Borg's website in order to better understand her *Ketubah: Contractes Familiars project*. On her website, she explained her obsession with her own nuclear family. She was raised in a high-powered household by two type "A" personalities: her father, "an explosive and playful criminal defender with infinite energy and ambition, limited time, dreamy/scary secrets and a movie-star smile" and her mother, who she describes as "a gorgeous, perfectionist gynecologist with tiny hands and feet and an absurd way of speaking that only sincere people can really get away with." To round out the family circle, the family had domestic help from the Caribbean: a nanny and a handyman, both of whom were loving caregivers and offered young Borg a completely different slice of life than the Conservative Jewish Long Island milieu. Borg's website included oil paintings she had done depicting human touch and relationships (figures 14, 15).



14. *Big Boy, Lil Man*, Brooke Borg, oil on canvas, 1m X 1m



15. *Clara At Play*, Brooke Borg, oil on canvas

Borg's website had a page explaining her *Ketubah: Contractes Familiars* project. She invited people to participate by filling out a questionnaire about a difficult family relationship in one of the four following categories: 1. Deceased relative; 2. Estranged sibling; 3. Parent-child; 4. Relative with an emotional disorder. As she put it, "These are the four relationships that have defined my life on an emotional level."

Borg, the lawyer's daughter, asked people to email her their filled-out questionnaires and drafted contracts that were customized for the people involved. In her artist's statement she added, "Imagine if we, as family members, had the opportunity (or the gall) to commit ourselves to, and demand certain treatment from, our siblings, parents or deceased loved ones?" Some of the lines are heart-breaking, such as these stipulations from the contract between an adult and an emotionally ill relative:

"The younger party promises to have patience and not to abandon the elder when she does the following: spends all her salary to the point of debt; abandons personal hygiene and goes out in public; refuses to talk or make eye contact, talks to herself in public, makes plans for dinner and then eats beforehand so that her companion must eat alone, asks Party 1 to get into bed with her and then wakes her up in the middle of the night screaming that she cannot sleep." (11)

In another contract, in accordance with a younger sister's wishes, her older brother "will express himself more often in the same patient manner he explained to her why Bruce Springsteen was a good musician when she was only 13." (12)

IV. COLLABORATION

I was entranced by the sensitivity and eccentricity of the contracts, and I decided to speak with Borg. I felt somewhat proprietary about the techniques I have devised for transforming the story and emotions of a marrying couple into images. At the same time, I recognized that Borg had unique insights that could spark and inspire me to bring my ketubah installation piece to a higher level. I was also mindful of a recent collaboration I participated in with three artists, which I had found to be creatively invigorating.

Our first conversation lasted about an hour, and I stated my intentions right at the beginning. Borg was agreeable to my *quid pro quo*, and with that out of the way, a truly amazing conversation ensued. We shared a trust that allowed us to be generous with our ideas, and once we took the plunge and decided to fully trust each other, we did not look back. It's been a little like a marriage, in the sense that it's been a leap of faith.

Following our first conversation, we began a steady exchange of emails, usually every few days. I consulted Borg with many sketches and ideas I had for my ketubah installation, and she gave me insightful critiques. From her end, Borg realized that the main obstacle to her coming up with imagery for her ketubot was her fear, and not knowing where to begin. After viewing her online portfolio, I assured her that her hesitancy to illustrate her ketubot was unfounded, because she had a sophisticated skill set of drawing and painting, despite having been an art history and not a studio arts major, which makes her work all the more impressive. From our discussions, she gained the confidence she needed to develop powerful, evocative imagery (figures 16,17, 18).



16. *Deceased Parent Ketubah*, Brooke Borg, 65cm X 90cm, 2008



17. *Brothers Ketubah*, Brooke Borg, 65cm X 90cm, 2008



18. *Disorder Ketubah*, Brooke Borg, 65cm X 90cm, 2008

In addition to the illustrated ketubot, Borg has made a film, with professional English-speaking (American and Swedish) actors and a crew from Barcelona television (TV3) and radio (Catalunya Radio), which depicts brother-sister argument and the resolution of a relationship ketubah. In this way, the “performance” of a bride and groom signing their ketubah before the wedding guests is mirrored in the performance of the characters coming to terms with their differences.

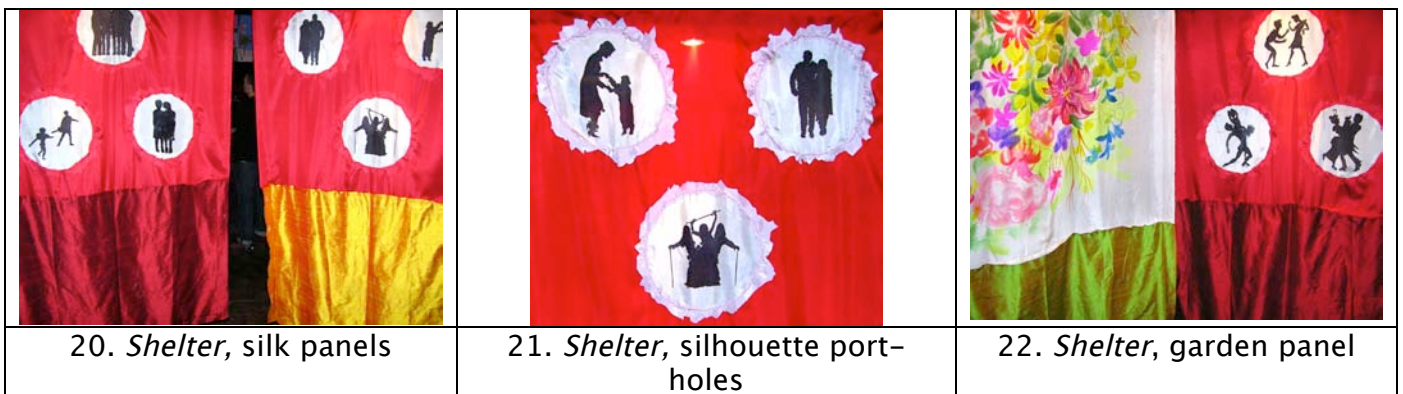
V. SHELTER

Considering Borg’s interpretation of the ketubah as an expression of the realities of relationships, with all their attendant hopes, disappointments, fantasies and nurturing, I began to think about how this could be expressed by a structure. The quintessential Jewish wedding structure is the chuppah, which is a canopy that is open on the sides. I decided that my piece, which I titled *Shelter*, should express the emotional shelter we all seek while also showing the emotional paradoxes we experience. Thus, I inverted the structure of the traditional chuppah and made my *Shelter* open on the top and closed on the sides. I felt that relationships include spirituality and should be open at the top (fig. 19).



19. *Shelter*, Judith Joseph and Brooke Borg, installation, 8' X 8' X 10' H, 2009

Shelter is a hexagon, like the center of the star of David. The sides are panels made from richly colored silk, expressing the joyous sensuality of love (fig. 20). Four of the panels have port-holes painted with silhouettes of figures in relationships (fig. 21). Some are stylized dancers from some drawings I made, and others are actual silhouettes from my family album. One panel was inspired by a flower bed I photographed at the Chicago Botanic Garden, to lend the *Shelter* the atmosphere of paradise (fig. 22).



Opposite the garden piece is a white silk panel (white like a bridal veil), which I designated the portal (fig. 23). It is embellished with ketubot from my portfolio and Borg's, which have been digitally printed on silk and sewn on. In addition, there are silk prints of photos from my family album (fig. 24). Overlaying the images are words embroidered in red floss: *Brother Brother, Sister, My Heaven, Then, Now, I Promise, Together, Apart, Forgive, Remember*.. The embroideries read like valentine hearts from an existential candy factory.



23. *Shelter*, portal panel



24. *Shelter*, portal panel (detail)

The portal for *Shelter* is some of the most personal art I have made. For decades, it has been my mission to interview couples and tell the story of their love, their families, their enshrined places. I feel that Borg's fascinating obsession with the minutiae of her family relationships gave me permission to use my own family as material. Creating the portal, thus, opened a door to my memories and my heart.

It is important for me that, aside from its wooden structural elements and lighting, *Shelter* is made entirely of silk. Silk is created by a willful act of the silkworm, which spins it to create a tiny structure, a shelter. I think of the silkworms as the first collaborators in my work, and their laborious work echoes my artistic labor, and the work of building relationships.

Shelter is suspended from the ceiling, floating about 14" from the floor. In the center of it, on the floor, rests a large red velvet pillow, with a pile of anthracite coal on it (figures 25, 26). The coal is the hearth; it can provide heat, and light, and it is also messy and dirty, which is like relationships. Coal can be thought of as pre-diamond, or a diamond in the rough, with all the echoes of courtship. The velvet is sexy and inviting, yet the coal is hard and sharp-faceted.



VI. INSTALLATION/INTERACTION

Shelter was first displayed at the Chicago Fringe Artists Networking Night on January 31, 2009, a one-night event of visual art installations, theater, music and dance that was sponsored by the Red Tape Theatre. As it was a theatrical setting, I was able to tightly control the lighting and situation of the installation. I built interior lighting into the piece so that, when seen from afar, the *Shelter* would glow like a Chinese lantern (fig. 27).



27. *Shelter*, installation at CFANN

English translations of Brooke's contracts, printed on yellow legal paper, were placed on a stand next to the *Shelter* for people to read or simply sift through. I wanted people to engage with the piece and it occurred to me to add a clipboard with the following instruction, with slips of yellow paper and a pen: "What is your troubled relationship? How do you wish it could be resolved? Write your wish on a piece of paper and place it in the coal."

Throughout the evening, people inscribed their intimate thoughts. It was interesting to see how they folded the paper: sometimes casually, sometimes with many tight folds, before they placed it in the coal. During the evening, as the coal filled with notes, they sneaked back to unwrap and read what others had written. It brought them into the *Shelter*, which was an oddly peaceful and private-feeling space amidst the tumult of 200 people in a large room filled with art and performances. Placing the notes in the coal felt like pebbles on a tombstone, or notes in the cracks of the Kotel (figures 28, 29).



28. *Shelter*, participants reading notes



29. *Shelter*, participants reading notes

Some of the notes read as follows:

"[I wish] I find peace with Mom before she goes."

"Ex-boyfriend is in show I'm currently working on. He used me for sex after we broke up and then got me pregnant."

"I wish I could forgive myself."

"The man I live with doesn't allow love into his life... I wish he could accept love... I want to marry him and spend the rest of my life with him."

"I would rather not be alive. Maybe a scaly salmon."

"Troubled with parents. I wish they would be less controlling[sic] and trusted my desicons [sic]."

"L.C., K.L. B.L., R.S., J.D., H.L., H.S., S., Letters of Women I've Been With."

"I wish I could surgically attach myself to the people I love."

"I wish we didn't fight so much..."

The ketubah, the creative touchstone for my art, was the common cultural link that caused a Jewish artist working in Spain to connect with me for a valuable collaboration. Brooke Borg reshaped the ketubah conceptually, which helped me to transform it spatially; together, we introduced new ways of socially interacting with the ketubah.

Shelter is featured in an article in the May, 2009 issue of *North Shore Magazine*. It is included in a group exhibit called *The Healing Power Of Art* that will be shown at The Art Center, Highland Park, May 21- June 12, 2009, and at the *New Visions Gallery* of the Marshfield Clinic in Marshfield, Wisconsin, June 21- August 1, 2009. It is our hope that, in the future, *Shelter* will be exhibited with Borg's film and installation, and that we continue our creative work as a team.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Brooke Borg, inspirationally and editorially.

Ted Joseph, for keeping the promises he made in our ketubah.

Ethan Joseph, for help with the lighting design for *Shelter*.

Paul Schoening, the last retail coal dealer in Chicago, Illinois.

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