

Taking 'Liberty'

Former Troy church memorialized by an inflatable artwork

By **AMY HALLORAN**, Special to the Times Union

First published: Sunday, May 25, 2008

"Spectres of Liberty" is an inflatable gone wild. This is art based on the model that props up Santa Clauses and Great Pumpkins in front yards: make a shape of some lightweight plastic and use a fan to inflate it. The shape in the case of "Spectres" happens to be a building, the Liberty Street Church, an African-American Presbyterian Church that burned in downtown Troy in 1941. The representation of the building will stand for one night, on Friday, May 30, on Liberty Street in Troy between Third and Fourth Streets, starting at 8:30 in the evening. The event coincides with the monthly Troy Night Out arts walk.

The project is the work of three artists directly and indirectly drawn to the city by RPI's Electronic Arts Department. Media artist and writer Dara Greenwald is pursuing a doctorate in Electronic Arts, and Olivia Robinson finished her MFA at RPI last spring. Josh MacPhee, a longtime collaborator of Greenwald's, lives in Brooklyn but has lived in Troy. Robinson now teaches fiber arts at Syracuse University.

The three have used the Internet to communicate and, to a certain extent, work remotely on this project, even creating a Wiki -- a collection of Web pages -- to share thoughts and materials over the course of the last year.

"You can only do so much in that kind of space," Greenwald notes while being interviewed at the Troy Public Library. "New media artists advocate a spiritual collaboration but I haven't found that to be successful at all."

What has worked for the group is daily meetings in the month of May, when they've all been in the city, working. Material that's come from five minutes of in-person discussion has been richer, the trio has found, than all the work they did while apart.

The three started working together last summer, doing test runs of potential structures, and beginning to develop theoretical explorations of the church and its pastor, Henry Highland Garnet, whose words will be projected onto the inflated church's walls.

"Henry Highland Garnet was actually very famous internationally," notes Greenwald, opening a discussion of their research. "He was known around the world for his orations and publications. So it actually wasn't hard to find all the basic information about him on the Internet, even though it's hard to find out about him walking down the street in Troy. We also went to the Rensselaer (County) Historical Society, which has a curriculum about the Underground Railroad in Troy."

Robinson got a stack of books by or about Garnet from Syracuse University, which has an African-American Studies Library, as well as many titles in their general collections. "It's been interesting looking through those books," MacPhee says, "and seeing that Garnet's writings seem like they were really pretty influential to the thinking of the Black Liberation Movement. Yet when I learned about this stuff I don't remember ever seeing his name. He's this ghost that floats all over our knowledge about the movement of Black Liberation in this country but he's never fully present."

Words from an 1843 address Garnet made to the slaves of the United States will be featured in the sculpture. This particular writing represents a pivotal shift in abolitionism, which had focused on asking masters to release slaves while encouraging slaves to be obedient; Garnet's words urged slaves to resist, rebel and runaway.

This building made of air is a curious foil, at the very least, to the land of puffy creatures that populate roofs and lawns. But it might also be much more than that, a moment of public remembering that points an arrow to a very intriguing time, a time when Troy was on the map of abolitionism.

"You have this structure and hopefully," Robinson says, "people feel the invitation to go inside."

"Our monument is temporary," says MacPhee. "It's made of air."

"It's ephemeral," Greenwald adds.

Whatever your perspective, aesthetic or historic, the ghost of this building will be a wonder to witness.

Amy Halloran is a freelance writer living in Troy.

'Spectres of Liberty'

What: A site-specific art project by Dara Greenwald, Josh MacPhee and Olivia Robinson.

When: Beginning at 8:30 p.m. Friday, May 30.

Where: Liberty Street, between Third and Fourth streets, Troy

Info: <http://spectresofliberty.com/site/about>

Note: "Spectres" coincides with the monthly Troy Night Out, also taking place Friday, from 5-9 p.m. at venues throughout Troy. For more info, visit <http://www.troynightout.org/>.

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