

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Igniting the Spirit of Revolution Through Pop-up Art Series

By **Marissa Stern** - June 7, 2017



A selection of images featured in Zoe Cohen's "Shkoyach" at the National Museum of American Jewish History, part of "Revolutionary: A Pop-Up Street Art Exhibition." | Provided by Conrad Benner

If you walk around Old City and Society Hill from now until July 4, you may notice some art pieces that grab your attention.

Visit Philadelphia teamed with Conrad Benner, founder and editor of street art photo-blog streetsdept.com, for *Revolutionary: A Pop-Up Street Art Exhibition*.

Whether you walk through Franklin Square and notice street artist Nero's piece that reads "You Belong Here" to promote inclusivity and tolerance, or you pass the window of the Old City District offices and see Michelle Angela Ortiz's *Se Siento El Miedo* featuring a painted portrait of a man who had a trying experience with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, you're bound to notice one of the 13 works on display from the exhibition. Thirteen were chosen to represent the number of stars on the original American flag.

The images vary in mediums and subjects, but each represents an interpretation of the spirit of revolution.

"I was eager to work with Visit Philadelphia as curator for this exhibition because I think it's crucial to remember that when living in a democracy that we should never let our spirit of revolution wane," Benner wrote in an email. "We should always be looking at the world around us with critical eyes ready to do the work to make life better for ourselves and for our neighbors."

One artist featured is Zoe Cohen, whose *Shkoyach* can be found in the lobby of the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH).

When she got wind of the Revolutionary project, she was immediately interested. In a meeting with NMAJH and Benner, they came up with the idea of a projection of images, and it progressed from there.

It was an opportunity for Cohen to revisit a piece of a project she had previously done, but with a new twist.

With her Shul/Church Project that she did in West Philadelphia and now in Washington, D.C., in which she creates portraits of buildings that were once synagogues and have since become churches or served other purposes, she also painted a series of paired portraits based on historical photographs of women from the synagogue and churches that had occupied the same building.

“The process of making those images was very satisfying and compelling to me, and I had been thinking about wanting to do more of those,” Cohen said, “and so then when I was brainstorming on the NMAJH location, I thought, ‘OK, maybe I could go through the galleries and find portraits of people that I want to highlight in some way.’ I knew there was a fair amount of labor history and activist history presented in the museum and as soon as I started going through the galleries, I thought, ‘This is what I want to focus on, this is perfect.’”



She began picking out portraits of women involved with early days of labor union organizing in the early 1910s and 1930s, women who were anti-war protesters in the 1960s and '70s, and women who fought for civil rights.

As she went through the images, she noticed something missing.

“As I was compiling them, I’m looking through the images and I thought, I loved highlighting the role of Jewish women in these movements, but we didn’t do it by ourselves, right? We were part of something larger, and I feel proud of my heritage in that connection, but I also know we were doing this in partnership with women and men from lots of different backgrounds,” she said.

She decided to pair the images of the Jewish women with portraits of women involved in the same work who may not be as visible somewhere like the museum.

“I started researching, looking for similar kinds of photographs as are in the museum of women of color doing labor union strikes and anti-war [protests],” she explained. “In each pair, one image is from the museum and is either definitely or probably a Jewish woman, and the other part of the pair is an image from my research of African American, Asian and Latino women engaged in labor union activism [and other kinds of activism].”

Ultimately, she compiled a series of nine watercolor drawings of women from the photographs she found projected in a loop in the lobby of the museum.

“Zoe Cohen took inspiration from women featured in our core exhibition who advocated for civil rights throughout history,” said Josh Perelman, chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. “Her thoughtfulness in pairing Jewish women with peers from other minority communities speaks to the pursuit of freedom that lies at the heart of the museum.”

She chose the title of her piece — the Yiddish-inflected contraction of the Hebrew phrase *yasher koach* — as she was reflecting on the drawings.

“The feeling that I was having as I was making these portraits and looking at these photographs was just really profound gratitude and feeling honored,” she said, noting that she is an artist in addition to an activist and is engaged with labor unionization in higher education. “Just knowing I am part of this larger history of women doing this work and as I was looking at these portraits and sort of feeling so much pride and gratitude, I was trying to think of a way to express that, and of course one way we express that in shul is by saying *yasher koach*.”

For Benner, Cohen’s piece is one thread that connects the work of those in the past with that of today, such as the Fight for 15 protests that have been happening across the country with the goal of increasing minimum wage to \$15.

“It reminds me that labor rights aren’t some checkpoint in history that we won and can move on from, they’re rights for which we will always have to keep fighting,” he wrote. “And to remember many of the women in history who fought for our rights in such a grand and public space, I can only hope it lights a fire in people to keep passing the torch.”

Cohen echoed similar sentiments.

“To me, it feels a little bit like getting to do a little bit of a curatorial project for the museum of highlighting the parts of the museum that feel most exciting or meaningful for me and offering that as one lens to look at Jewish history through,” she said.

“That’s the part I felt very grateful to get the opportunity to do, that where I’m sort of saying there’s all these really interesting threads of Jewish history, and here’s one of them that I feel is really important ... and here’s also a way that our history intersects with the activist history of people from many different heritages.”