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# Take Me To Church

Tom Teicholz Contributor 

*I'm a culture maven and arts enthusiast.*

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Installation image of the exhibition Threading the Needle at The Church, Sag Harbor, June 30 - ... [+]  
PHOTO BY GARY MAMAY. COURTESY OF THE CHURCH, SAG HARBOR

As a general rule, great or interesting art and exhibitions are not found in summer resorts, the art buying and appreciating public being transient, the season short, and the major galleries in urban

art centers (New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Hong Kong) being proprietary about their artists and their collectors. However, that may be changing as what were once one season destinations are becoming year-round bases for work-from-home.

A case in point is Sag Harbor's new artist-focused center, The Church, which I was fortunate enough to visit when I was recently back East.

Sag Harbor has a long history as a working harbor on Gardiner's Bay between Southampton and East Hampton, settled in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century where it became a major port in the whaling industry, and is mentioned in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Following the Civil War, Sag Harbor became home to a sizeable number of Black families, many of whom were whalers. Sag Harbor was also home to Long Island's first synagogue.

Once upon a time, say in the 1980s, Sag Harbor was considered less high-end and glitzy than the other Hamptons. Still, there was a famous softball game of writers and editors that took place there, and the American Hotel was a destination for a fancy meal, a late-night cognac, and even a cigar on its outdoor veranda. And the East End of Long Island has always been a draw for artists including Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Mark Rothko, Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, Robert Motherwell, to name but a few.

Today, there is no part of the Hamptons that is not high end and that has certainly become true for Sag Harbor. Used to be that the pier at the end of Sag Harbor's main street was filled with touristy restaurants and the fishing boats that were moored there. Now, there is a branch of Manhattan's Bilboquet restaurant, with a high hedge so commoners can't look in, and the boats moored there are rightfully called yachts. Most of the old stores, such as bait and tackle shops and children's toys and kite stores, have moved out

and gourmet coffee and designer clothes stores have replaced them. Superstar interior designer Katie Leede even has a small shop off Main Street. And no question, Sag Harbor is more crowded than it ever was.

The greater foot traffic and changed demographics of the visitor and permanent population make a strong case for Sag Harbor having a sustainable art center which it now has in The Church, located at 48 Madison Street.

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The Church was originally built in Greek Revival style as a Methodist Church in 1832, with its original location on High Street, some five blocks away. In 1864, the Church was moved to its present location and in keeping with its time, was refashioned in an Italianate-style with the addition of a campanile. The Church remained in use until 2007, when the congregation decided to sell the building.

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The Church was deconsecrated and over the next decade had three different owners before being purchased by artists Eric Fischl and April Gornik about four years ago. Fischl and Gornick had the building's plaster walls demolished and stripped down to its striking wood beam frame. A mezzanine floor was added as well as new stained-glass windows with Eric Fischl-made portraits of Sag Harbor creatives such as James Fenimore Cooper, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, Langston Hughes, Spalding Gray, Betty Friedan, and George Balanchine.

At the time of The Church's opening Fischl told The New York Times, "We want the Church to stand as a beacon of hope and renewal through continual exploration and reinterpretation, which is the domain of the arts."

When not high summer season, the Church offers artist residencies, as well as holding artist talks, workshops, concerts, and performances the rest of the year.



Installation image of the exhibition Threading the Needle at The Church, Sag Harbor, June 30 - ... [+] PHOTO BY GARY MAMAY. COURTESY THE CHURCH, SAG HARBOR

The current exhibition, *Threading the Needle*, is on view until September 18, 2022, and concerns artists working in or incorporating fabric or threads into their work. The artists represent a range of experience (and celebrity) and include local Sag Harbor artists alongside many iconic artists.

On the day I visited, Chief Curator Sara Cochran was kind enough to tour us through the more than 50 artworks by more than 40 local and international artists, including Magdalena Abakanowicz, Etel Adnan, El Anatsui, Tabitha Arnold, Louise Bourgeois, Diedrick Brackens, James Lee Byars, Margarita Cabrera, Nick Cave, Judy Chicago, Chuck Close, Enrico David, Louise Eastman, Angela Ellsworth, Christine Forrer, Thomas Friedman, Helena Hernmarck, Candace Hill Montgomery, Jim Hodges, Alice Hope, Mike Kelley, Laurie Lambrecht, Dinh Q. Lê, Charles LeDray, Daniel Lind-Ramos, Liza Lou, Christa Maiwald, Charles McGill, Ann Morton, Maria Nepomuceno, Ernesto Neto, Mark Olshansky, Sheila Pepe, Erin M. Riley, Faith Ringgold, James Rosenquist, Toni Ross, Tomás Saraceno, Alan Saret, Bastienne Schmidt, Alan Shields, Kiki Smith, Julianne Swartz, Hank Willis Thomas, Rosemarie Trockel, Lucy Winton.



Installation image of the exhibition Threading the Needle at The Church, Sag Harbor, June 30 - ... [+] PHOTO BY GARY MAMAY. COURTESY OF THE CHURCH, SAG HARBOR

Among the standout pieces are a tapestry by Etel Adnan whose work reminded me of Arshile Gorky, as well as a large-scale work by El Anatsui made of thousands of pieces of folded and crumpled metal bottle caps found at a Nigerian recycling station and bound with copper wire. There is a “soundsuit” by Nick Cave, a Judy Chicago drawing, a Chuck Close portrait of Philip Glass as a silk tapestry, Mark Olshansky needle point abstractions, a Kiki Smith tapestry, and a Julianne Swartz mesh weave hanging work that recalled some of Ruth Asawa’s work. There is also large-scale Sheila Pepe installation of a site-specific work that engages the Church’s rafters.

The exhibition fills the entire area, from the upstairs areas to the ground floor with works that ask, each in their own way: What is Art? Can Art be made from fabric, or discarded metal? If a thread dissects a space, does it define it, and claim it as a creative endeavor? Although to each viewer the answer may not always be “Yes,” in the aggregate this far-ranging show demonstrates the



diversity of artistic expression in ways that challenge us, educate us, and lift one’s spirit. The intelligence with which the exhibition is curated and the broad gathering of artists, some iconic, some well-known, others yet to be discovered speaks volumes about Eric Fischl and April Gornik’s own standing in the Art community as well as Sara Cochran’s intelligence, taste, and discernment.

The Hamptons and Sag Harbor continue to change and evolve in ways that sometimes seem as if its pleasures are becoming increasingly out of reach, but The Church offers the counterbalance (if not the corrective) of Art and artistic expression accessible to all that reminds us that creativity has always been integral to the Hamptons.

*The Church is located at 48 Madison Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963. Entrance is free and open to the public Wednesday-Sunday 12:00 PM-5:00 PM, and by appointment by calling 631-919-5342. Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#) or some of my other work [here](#).*



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