

Noelle Bodick, "Fire or Ice: Yael Bartana Films Screen at Petzel," *Blouin Artinfo*, January 14, 2015.

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BY NOELLE BODICK | JANUARY 14, 2015



A still from Yael Bartana's "True Finn," 2014, currently on view at Petzel Gallery.
(Courtesy of the artist, Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Sommer Contemporary, Tel Aviv)

Since Brazilian billionaire Edir Macedo couldn't bring his church's followers to Jerusalem, he brought Jerusalem to them. Inaugurated last year, the replica of the Holy City's ancient Temple of Solomon spans an entire city block in São Paulo and, at 11 stories, is twice as tall as the Jesus the Redeemer statue in Rio. Inside, 10,000 believers can be seated to listen to the evangelical message of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, founded by Macedo less than 40 years ago.

Perhaps to compensate for its short history, the church adopts objects and symbols from the ancient past of a city halfway around the world. It was built with eight million dollars' worth of limestone from Israel; outside, a garden of olive trees is modeled off the Gethsemane in Jerusalem; and inside, there is a gigantic menorah, similar to the one in front of the capital's Knesset.

"In a kind of strange, twisted way, it disturbs the whole Zionist affiliation with the Holy Land," said Israeli artist Yael Bartana, whose film "Inferno," screening at Petzel Gallery through February 21, unfolds epically across the new Brazilian colossus.

Bartana shot the 22-minute film in the summer of 2013, while the church was still being built. But even during its construction — in fact, as soon as the artist heard about it — she envisioned a fantastic, symbolic fall, later played out in the fictional film. "For me, it

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was like, wow, this is crazy. What will the future be for such a mega-production?" Bartana answers her question through "historical pre-enactment," her term for mixing history and divination.

It is a signature move for the artist, whose work often deals in alternative versions of history, flickering between reality and fiction. In the 2011 Venice Biennale trilogy that launched her to international fame, "And Europe Will Be Stunned" (2007-11), Bartana tells a story of Jewish activists rebuilding the Jewish population in Poland, a kind of backwards Zionism. As it turns out, just as there really is a temple in São Paulo, there is also a Jewish resistance chapter in Poland; the actors in the film are sometimes playing themselves. Fiction is lightly marbled with facts.

The central characters in "Inferno," on the other hand, are real actors. Flowing through the gritty streets of São Paulo, they are a stream of white linen and toothy smiles, all races, and all about 20 percent better looking than any other passersby. Women pin braids to their heads, balancing colorful fruit arrangements on top. Children jump rope made with flowers and men guide cattle and goats, ornamented and gilded. They make a gorgeous pageant of pioneers, bringing fruit and wheat offerings to the temple as if it were Shavuot, an agrarian Jewish holiday.

But, jarringly, modern-day vehicles guide the white-robed tribe: a trio of helicopters dangling an elephantine menorah, the Ark of the Covenant, and a wooden crate containing pieces of the above mentioned limestone from the Holy Land. (In fact, there is a real helicopter-landing pad at the São Paulo temple for the church's founder, with whom Bartana said she has no contact.) Inside the temple, we see the glint of fire in the worshipers' eyes before the fiery disaster at the center of the film, perhaps instigated by the head priest, a man in heavy make-up with dramatic, drawn-on eyebrows and pale eyes. In a desperate effort to escape, the worshipers fall into a perilous, widening crack in the foundation, or else are strewn across the temple floor, burned and bloodied.

"When I look at it, I read into the work the destruction of the institute of religion," Bartana said. Destruction, but also, perhaps, its resurrection as a slick commercial enterprise. In the next scene, men in tallitot pray to a single standing wall, kissing it, wedging notes into its cracks. Are we in present day Jerusalem? Is this the Western Wall? Surrounding the devout are Asian tourists snapping pictures, a display of plates for sale, and visitors sipping milk out of coconuts embellished with menorah emblems.

"I very much challenge Zionism." Bartana said. "I grew up with a set of belief systems and culture, and I try to deconstruct this history and open up other possibilities."

In the gallery's next room, Bartana moves from hellish fires to the icy landscape of Finland, the setting for her film "True Finn" (2014). As if starring on a reality TV show,

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Inferno, 2013, Alexa camera transferred onto HD, 22 minutes.

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eight contestants share quarters in a remote lodge and compete to be named the true Finnish patriot. Will it be a homophobic Roma woman? A blonde man who likes saunas? Or a Somali who says he is "chocolate on the outside and milk on the inside"? Like "*Inferno*," the cast attempt to live in social comity, designing a new flag and writing national lyrics for Finland. And like "*Inferno*," the community becomes fractured and premised on exclusion. In the end, only one of the "True Finn" contestants will run the Finnish flag up the pole.

"To wish for utopia is very optimistic; it helps to imagine a society that you wish to live in," Bartana said. "But of course it can always be read as naive. Historically, it is very dangerous because it achieves the opposite."

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