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Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua, "Artist Yael Bartana taps into the Jewish-Diaspora zeitgeist," *Haaretz*, February 4, 2015.

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Artist Yael Bartana taps into the Jewish-Diaspora zeitgeist

The provocative Israeli-born video artist whose work is now on show in New York and Berlin has an uncanny ability to manipulate pictures, words and symbols while probing fundamental issues of identity.

By Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua | Feb. 6, 2015 | 12:06 AM



Yael Bartana poses as Leni Riefenstahl in her self-portrait, 'Stalag.' Photo by Petzel Gallery New York

Perhaps the boldest image in Yael Bartana's bracing new exhibit at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York (also showing concurrently in Berlin) is a self-portrait of the artist as Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl. It's a startling picture, and not because it's sweeping and grand, like her cinematic videos or her floor-to-ceiling neon sculpture beaming, "Black stars shed no light" as you enter.

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This subdued self-portrait, dimly lit and monochromatic save for a shock of hot-red lipstick, makes a statement mostly because it is dark and seductive – and displayed at a time like this, marked by solemn Holocaust commemorations, and on the heels of the Charlie Hebdo massacre and the killings at a kosher market in Paris, unity rallies, and heated debate over the fine line between political correctness and freedom of expression, bigotry and genocide, satire and censorship.

Of course, Bartana didn’t know any of this was going to happen when she began to create this work, much as she didn’t know the media would be declaring a Polish Jewish renaissance after the recent opening of the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews when, as that Warsaw museum was just breaking ground, she embarked on the filming of her video trilogy “And Europe Will Be Stunned.”

But that’s what makes Bartana arguably one of the most profound Jewish artists of her day: She has an uncanny ability to tap into the zeitgeist, exploring and manipulating pictures, words and symbols to question issues that are fundamental to these troubling times and to her – an Israeli artist living in the Diaspora, dealing with issues of Jewish identity versus assimilation, wondering where national pride ends and xenophobic hatred begins, and trying to make sense of the fervor of religious and political youth movements that have shaped modern Jewish existence, both positively and negatively.

In a sense, all those issues come to the fore in her self-portrait.

“My friends call me Yaeli Riefenstahl,” she says in her dry, self-deprecating way, on a recent trip to New York. “Can I say that? I guess I’m forming a new message by taking apart the propaganda.” And by that, she’s not just referring to her self-portrait.

Her new exhibit, on through February 14 in New York (and two weeks later in Berlin), features two videos – “Inferno,” a film shot in the grand cinematic style of biblical epics, about a Brazilian Pentecostal sect that’s attempting to rebuild the Temple of Solomon in Sao Paolo, and “True Finn,” a reality-TV type project, in which a group of ethnically diverse Finnish citizens attempt to forge a new, national identity – is all about reframing sociocultural and geopolitical dialogues.

As a result of her endeavors, Bartana is frequently misunderstood and often hailed by the very people of whom she is critical. Her video trilogy “And Europe Will Be Stunned,” for example, crashed together Polish and Zionist symbols, re-imagined early kibbutz utopianism within the confines of a stark barbed-wire compound in Poland, and pictured the leader of her fictionalized Polish Jewish renaissance movement holding rallies in a vacant stadium, urging 3 million Jews to return to Poland. Bartana also cast real-life activist Sławomir Sierakowski, founder and chief editor of *Krytyka Polityczna* magazine, in the lead, and

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invited Israeli media personality/journalist Yaron London and children's book writer and illustrator Alona Frankel, a Krakow-born Holocaust survivor, to deliver speeches in the film, further blurring the line between truth and fiction, the real and the surreal, propaganda and truth.

The sum total was a far more pessimistic view of the possibility of a Jewish revival in Poland than the current media hoopla would have you think. Ironically, Israel's cultural minister shunned the work when it was shown at the Polish pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

Last summer, Bartana found herself on the opposite side of the fence, targeted by activists supporting BDS (the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement) and who demanded that the Israeli government withdraw its sponsorship when she participated in an exhibit at a gallery in Scotland. Such is the plight of the Israeli artist who dares to show abroad and examine her status as "the other."

"When I was exploring Poland before I made 'And Europe Will Be Stunned,' I went along on the annual pilgrimage to [the icon of the Virgin Mary] 'The Black Madonna of Czestochowa,'" Bartana says. "There I was, in the midst of this Catholic procession, the very embodiment of everything these people bearing crosses and statues of Mary were against: a Jew, a lesbian, an Israeli. I thought, if they only knew."

That same feeling of estrangement informs her current exhibit.

'You can't escape guilt'

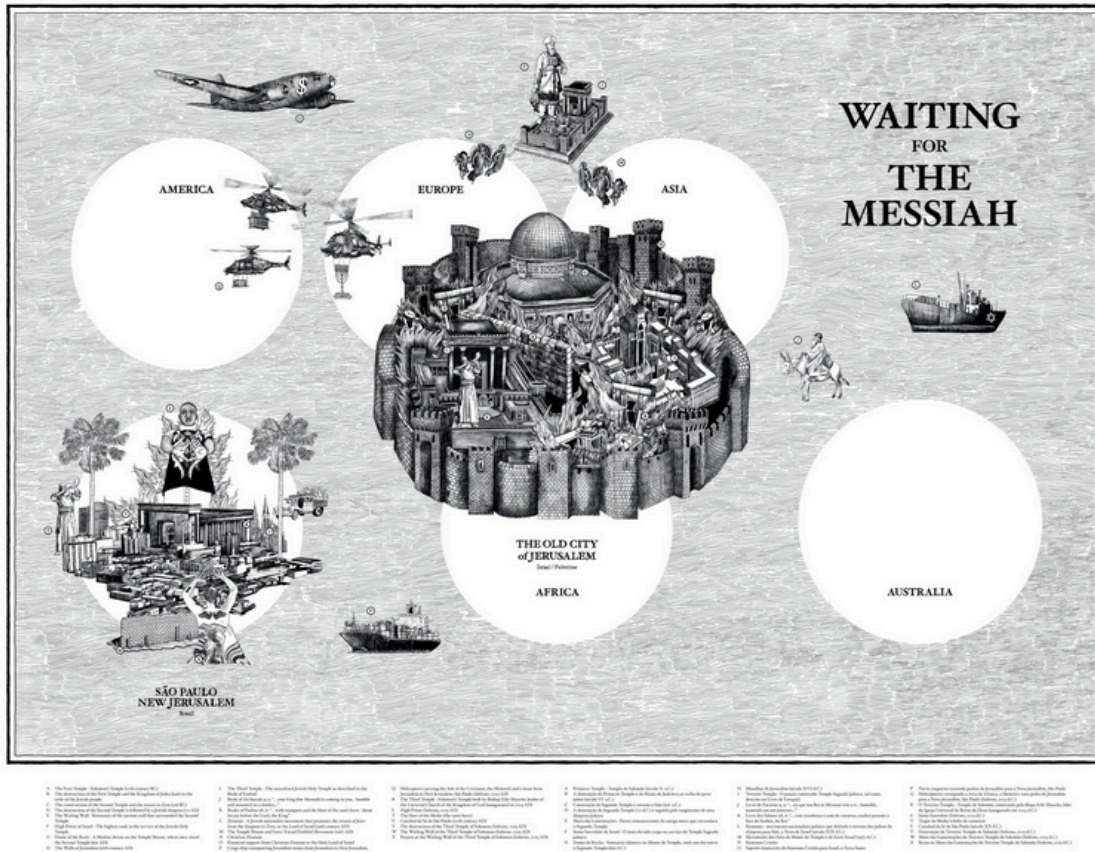
"Being a Jew living in Germany, you can't escape the Holocaust and the national guilt over it," says Bartana, 44, who's raising a son in Berlin with her German partner, and who has no direct connection to the Shoah (her family emigrated from Poland, Belarus and Lithuania in the 1920s). "The use of Nazi symbols is strictly forbidden in Germany. So for me, wearing the taboo is like returning to the crime scene, trying to find closure."

But resolution is the very antithesis of what she accomplishes. Like a true post-modernist — and a good Jew — Bartana answers her query with more questions than she asks, leaving her work open ended.

Unlike the famous Riefenstahl self-portrait on which hers is based, Bartana isn't crouching down, gazing into the lens of a Leica that's directed somewhere else. She's pointing the camera and one eye at you — shattering the illusion of the photograph, rejecting her role as the passive subject, shaking you out of your voyeuristic complacency. Do you look away? Do you stare back? Do you look within?

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"Waiting for the Messiah," Bartana's map for "New Jerusalem." Photo by Petzel Gallery/New York

"I'm also wearing an Israeli military cap," she adds. "So I'm including a piece of my past, too. I was an Israeli soldier for two years." Does the Zionist symbol negate the impact of the Nazi uniform, or are they deadlocked into an absurdist dialogue? Is her pose an act of futility, self-sabotage or a victory over past demons?

Regardless of the outcome, this is not the first time an Israeli has ventured into the taboo turf of SS role-play. "I call this portrait 'Stalag'," says Bartana, referring to the Nazi-exploitation genre of comics that sprung up in Israel during the 1950s and '60s.

These comics were popular among teenage boys of survivors, who found them to be an outlet for the pent-up angst they developed from growing up in homes where the silence surrounding their parents' horrifically violent pasts loomed large. They found a strange solace in these graphic revenge fantasies. (The Israeli government banned these pornographic page-turners as soon as the Eichmann trial got underway.)

Bartana isn't so much following in the Stalag footsteps as she is trying to wrestle with the confounding reality of being an Israeli living in Germany, where the brutal past is ever-present, but where an unspoken guilt casts a tragic pall over daily life.

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“The clash of the beauty and the atrocity is something we still cannot grasp, looking at the Nazi propaganda machine,” says Bartana. “The power of manipulation and the seduction.”

However earnest her attempt to understand the mechanism of propaganda, she also pokes fun at the salacious Stalag genre.

“Humor is a big part of my work,” she says, “though I don’t know if people see it.”

If they don’t detect irony in her self-portrait, they’d be blind not to see it in her video work and its accompanying signage in the exhibitions in New York and Berlin.

'Who is a Finn?'

“True Finn,” a hybrid of MTV’s “The Real World” and Finland’s “Extreme Escapades,” is a parody of sorts, and seems thoroughly Scandinavian until you realize that Bartana borrowed the famous discourse of “Who is a Jew?” to “Who is a Finn?”

In so doing, the film addresses weighty issues such as genocide, at its core, in between the cackles and the folkloric kitsch. (Think peasant costumes and even someone dressed up as a bear.) Bartana was commissioned to create a work of art that would explore Finnish national identity. She chose to do so by creating an experiment in communal living among eight ethnically diverse participants, examining whether sublimating their cultural identities was a prerequisite to forging a new national one.

While researching the location where her contestants would reside, she discovered the remote spot had once been home to a Roma population, leading her to source old footage of the Gypsy population in her 2013 film. She also had her contestants create a new Finnish anthem — thus the line “Black stars shed no light,” pictured in neon signage at the gallery entrance. It’s the sort of tragi-comic sensibility only a Diaspora Jew like Bartana might bring.

For “Inferno,” she literally decamped to Sao Paolo to film a facsimile of the Temple of Solomon being built by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of Christ, employing helicopters to shoot from various angles. She relied on computer generated images to complete her film because the Pentecostal sect hadn't finished erected its temple yet.

Like most of her work, Bartana used a real-life occurrence as a springboard for her hyper-real musings on religion and cultural identity. In this case, she cast Brazilian actors to play the parts of the sect’s high priests and worshippers, writing a script that examines the consequences of exporting sacred ground and religious artifact to a place, people and time that are a total departure from the original. Can you retrofit the Bible for one’s own purposes

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or does it lead to a corruption of meaning? Spoiler alert: This temple gets destroyed a third time.

It's easy to see the parallel between this Sao Paulo cult and Israel's far-right zealots, who adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible. But in her wry manner, Bartana wrestles with these predicaments with a nod and a wink, this time to Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," never pushing any particular agenda other than her desire to examine the consequences of taking religious fervor out of context.

"We tend to disregard other narratives to justify our own actions and our own set of beliefs," Bartana says. "But we must look at other narratives. If there's one message behind all my anti-propaganda, it is: Don't take anything as fact."

Tellingly, she ends "Inferno" with a scene shot in front of a replica of the Western Wall. A devout man suddenly casts off his prayer shawl, revealing giant wings, the symbol of the Israeli Air Force, tattooed on his back, as an ethnically diverse group of young men and women who look plucked from a United Colors of Benetton commercial mix, and mingle with a Christ-like figure in a priestly robe and a crown of thorns on his head, sipping from coconuts with menorah logos. In the background, a vendor hawks T-shirts of the holy temple, as a donkey strides among the crowds.

Such a scene could never occur in modern-day Israel. Men and women are segregated at the Wall. Modesty laws are strictly enforced. One can't traipse about with drink in hand as if at a cocktail party, chitchatting with biblical figures sprung back to life – but wouldn't that be fun?

"It's part Utopian, part ridiculous," says Bartana with a chuckle.

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But perhaps it’s no more ludicrous than what she discovered as she was having a fictional map of Jerusalem drawn to accompany “Inferno” at the gallery. The map, hung in the entrance area, is a playful sendup of the classic map of Jerusalem, which Bartana discovered was rendered by Heinrich Bunting, a 16th-century cartographer and protestant pastor from Hannover, Germany, not far from where she currently resides.

“He had never been to Jerusalem and based the map of the Old City on a flower of Hannover, a clover, with three petals that symbolize the holy Trinity,” she explains. “Jerusalem is the center, and three continents are pictured like flower petals.”

In other words, Bunting’s map is no more valid a representation of Jerusalem than the fake temple in Sao Paulo. Bartana’s map riffs on Bunting’s, but includes three more continents — Australia and North America, where many Holocaust survivors wound up, and Sao Paulo, aka “New Jerusalem” — as well as a fishing vessel used to illegally transport Jewish refugees to Palestine after the Holocaust, World War II fighter jets with dollar-sign logos, helicopters airlifting the menorah and temple to Brazil, and other symbols and images borrowed from her film, like the Brazilian high priest using the telltale hand signs of the cohanim, the biblical high priests.

“It’s the most Jewish work I’ve ever done,” says Bartana. “It’s been a real journey for me because I’m really quite secular. I speak Hebrew to my son and spend a lot of time there with family and make sure he knows Israel’s his home, but...”

Does Bartana even consider herself Jewish?

She pauses. “Yes, but I guess I’m still trying to find the Jewish in me. I certainly feel closer to it than I ever did,” she says. “I don’t think Finnish people wake up everyday and wonder, am I a Finn? But identity is something all Jews grapple with, whether we want to or not. “

Especially now.

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