

GALLERY גלריה

Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua

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 neon sculpture beaming, "Black stars shed no light" as you enter.

This subdued self-portrait, 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, after the killings in Paris, International Holocaust Day, and heated debate over the line between political correctness and freedom of expression, satire and censorship.

Bartana didn't know 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 Warsaw's Museum of the History of the Polish Jews; just when that museum was breaking ground, she embarked on her video trilogy "And Europe Will Be Stunned."

But that's what makes Bartana 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.

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

"My friends call me Yaeli Riefenstahl," she says, on a recent trip to New York. "I guess I'm forming a new message by taking apart the propaganda."

Her new exhibit (on in New York through February 14) features two videos – "Inferno," shot in the style of biblical epics, about a 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 Finns attempts to forge a new, national identity – is all about reframing sociocultural and geopolitical dialogues.



Yael Bartana poses as Leni Riefenstahl in her self-portrait, "Stalag." Yael Bartana / Petzel Gallery, N.Y.



Yael Bartana, Untitled, 2014. Courtesy of the artist / Petzel

Artist Yael Bartana taps into the zeitgeist of the Jewish Diaspora

The Israeli-born video artist, now showing in New York and Berlin, manipulates words and images while asking questions about identity

As a result of her endeavors, Bartana is frequently misunderstood and often hailed by the very people of whom she is critical. Perhaps this is the plight of an 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.

"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 has no direct connection to the Shoah. "The use of Nazi symbols is strictly forbidden in Germany. So for me, wearing the taboo is like returning to the crime scene."

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

Unlike the Riefenstahl self-portrait on which hers is based, Bartana isn't crouching down. She's pointing the camera and one eye at you – rejecting her role as the passive subject, shaking you out of your voyeuristic complacency. Do you look away? Stare back?

"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." 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?

"I call this portrait 'Stalag,'" Bartana continues, referring to the Nazi exploitation genre of comics that sprung up in Israel during the 1950s and '60s.

She 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 unspoken guilt casts a tragic pall over daily life.

"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."

If people don't detect irony in the self-portrait, they'd be blind not to see it

in her video works on show 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 ask: "Who is a Finn?"

The film addresses

weighty issues such as genocide, in between the cackles and the folkloric kitsch. Bartana was commissioned to create a work exploring Finnish national identity. She created an experiment in communal living with eight ethnically diverse participants, examining whether sublimating their identities was a prerequisite to forging a national one.

For "Inferno," she decamped to Sao Paolo to film a facsimile of the Temple of Solomon being built by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of Christ. Like most of her work, Bartana used a real-life occurrence as a springboard for her musings. In this case, she cast Brazilian actors to play 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? Spoiler alert: This temple gets destroyed a third time.

It's easy to see the parallel between this Sao Paolo cult and Israel's far-right zealots. But Bartana does not push any 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 in front of a replica of the Western Wall. A devout man casts off his prayer shawl, revealing giant wings, the symbol of the Israeli Air Force, tattooed on his back. In the background, a vendor hawk T-shirts of the holy temple, as a donkey strides among the crowds.

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

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 is a playful sendup of the classic map of Jerusalem by Heinrich Bunting, a 16th-century cartographer and pastor from Hannover, Germany – not far from where Bartana 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.

Bartana: 'We tend to disregard other narratives to justify our own actions and our own set of beliefs. 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.'

Bunting's map is no more valid a representation of Jerusalem than the fake temple in Sao Paolo. Bartana's map riffs on his, but also features a fishing vessel used to illegally transport Jewish refugees to Palestine after the Holocaust, World War II fighter jets and other images borrowed from her film.

"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."

Does Bartana even consider herself Jewish?

She pauses. "Yes, but I'm still trying to find the Jewish in me. I certainly feel closer to it than I ever did... Identity is something all Jews grapple with, whether we want to or not."

Spielberg project targets Arab film buffs

Gift enables Jerusalem Cinematheque to add Arabic subtitles to Israeli, foreign movies

Nirit Anderman

It turns out, rather surprisingly, that only recently have Arab residents of Jerusalem and other local Arabic speakers been able to enjoy movies with Arabic subtitles at the city's Cinematheque. This is thanks to American Jewish film director and producer Steven Spielberg and the foundation he established with the profits from his "Schindler's List," and subsequently other Oscar-winning films including "Munich" and "Lincoln."

One of the main goals of the Righteous Persons Foundation, established in 1994, is to promote contact and understanding between Jews and non-Jews, mostly through the use of media, in order to humanize the "other."

The RPF recently donated \$50,000 to the Jerusalem Cinematheque as part of a new project called "Cinema for Everyone," whose aim is, according to the foundation's website, "to subtitle films in Arabic as a way to ensure that Israeli Arabs have access to cinema and to bring Jews and Arabs together around film" at the veteran institution.

The Cinematheque is using the funding to screen four or five films a month – both Israeli- and foreign-made – to which Arabic subtitles have been added. The Cinematheque hired an advertising and public relations firm in East Jerusalem to publicize the new project in that predominantly Arab part of the city. To that end, signs were put up in November and December in East Jerusalem, posters were plastered on buses, a special Facebook page was set up, and ads appeared in media where the Arab-speaking community would see them to inform residents of the screenings of the Arabic-subtitled films.

The response, however, was not great. A series of shootings and hit-and-run terror attacks during those months changed the atmo-

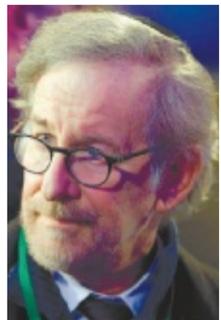


The Jerusalem Cinematheque. Eyal Warshavsky

sphere in the city, and tensions between Arabs and Jews rose to especially high levels.

"Culture and economics usually succeed in building bridges between the western and eastern sides of the city, and between the country in general and East Jerusalem," said Hatem Hawis of the Al-Arabiya advertising agency in East Jerusalem, which managed the ad campaign for "Cinema for Everyone."

"We knew in advance the response would be low, but we still set our goal to provide the residents of East Jerusalem with the possibility of having a choice," says Haneen Mgadlh, East Jerusalem project coordinator of the Jerusalem Foundation, which also participates in this effort. To convince people from the eastern part of the city to come to the west-



Steven Spielberg Reuters

ern part for cultural purposes is a real challenge, she added.

"The situation is complicated. Many told me, for example, that they didn't know Arabs could attend events at the venue, and there are of course those who are not willing to consume culture in an Israeli location. So it is impossible to expect that the change will occur overnight," Mgadlh said.

In addition to the atmosphere of tension and conflict in the city, she noted that there are a number of factors that make it hard for residents of East Jerusalem to take advantage of such a project: the lack of efficient public transportation between the eastern and western parts of the city; the difficult economic situation of residents of East Jerusalem (where, Mgadlh said, some 75 percent of all families live under the poverty line); as well as the population's cultural habits (many local Arabic speakers do not go to cultural events at all, and to cultural institutions in West Jerusalem in particular, she added).

Free screenings, too

But both the Cinematheque and the Jerusalem Foundation refuse to give up. The screenings of the subtitled films has continued and have drawn some organized groups of Arabic speakers

from all over the country, along with a few East Jerusalemites.

The Cinematheque has begun to approach local Arab organizations as well as Jewish-Arab groups (such as the community center in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Islamic Museum, Arab schools, the bilingual school in Jerusalem, and the Pashut Sharim project for joint choral events at the Hebrew University), inviting them to the screenings – for free. As a result, in recent weeks the movies have attracted mixed Arab and Jewish audiences. While in December, it seemed as if the Arabic-speaking moviegoers actually preferred to see Israeli movies; Tal Granit and Sharon Maymon's "The Farewell Party" was shown with Arabic subtitles that month. In January more groups came to see foreign films.

Noa Regev, CEO of the Cinematheque, stressed that the goal of the project is to show movies with Arabic subtitles in Jerusalem,

which is more important than success at the box office. More groups are coming, she reported, but the Cinematheque is still in the process of attracting an audience. Starting next month, for example, there will be feature films with Arabic subtitles for children and young people.

It is possible that occasionally a few East Jerusalemites come to screenings independently, but the Cinematheque has no information about them. But even if that happens, it is reasonable to assume the number is very small.

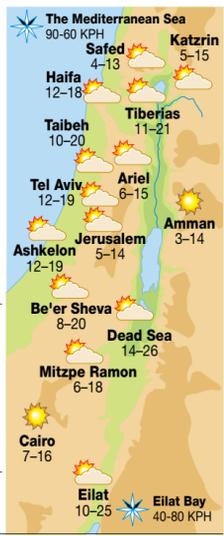
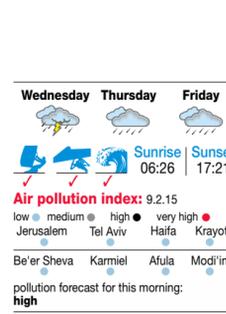
"The fear on both sides is paralyzing. In order to overcome it we must break down a lot of stereotypes and need a lot of courage," said Mgadlh.

"We must make it clear to them that this [i.e., the venue and its offerings] is theirs," she added. "That the Cinematheque is a place they can come to. We need to insist that this is their right and not to give up."

Weather

Storms ahead

This morning will be clear to partly cloudy, with the wind picking up during the course of the day. Rain will begin to fall in the evening and there will be snow on the Hermon. Tomorrow will be stormy and snow is likely on the high points in the north. The wind will die down on Thursday, but it will continue to be stormy.



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