

The art of war, still a struggle

Two side-by-side exhibits chronicle the many offshoots of militarization, but only one achieves the gut-wrenching honesty its subject demands, writes SARAH MILROY

The theme of war can be treacherous territory for artists. If you are up to the task — with all the requisite intelligence, compassion and gravity — you can hit the cover off the ball. If not, however, all your weaknesses will be revealed. I found myself thinking about this while looking at two shows currently at The Power Plant art gallery in Toronto — Fiona Banner: *The Bastard Word* and Yael Bartana: *Ritual*.

To a degree, the difference between them is cultural. Banner is British, and lives and works in London, a long way from the killing fields where Britain's troops are now deployed. Not surprisingly, perhaps, war and militarization are themes she handles on a conceptual level. In one work, a naked woman's body is described in words, scrawled on the upended wing of a Tornado fighter jet. In another, an ABC of warplanes is presented in a series of pencil drawings, a dispassionate, irony-tinged primer for the apocalypse. Some of the drawings include wry pencil notations suggesting ornithology field notes, a play on the fact that most warplanes are named after creatures from the natural world. The effect is cool, cerebral.

In the work of Israeli artist Yael Bartana, militarization is a condition that is more viscerally understood. In part, this is due to the artist's life experience. Now living in Amsterdam, she grew up in Israel. For her, war is not an intellectual conceit or a mass-media phenomenon to be deconstructed. It is a primordial reality of humankind that she examines with a slow gaze. Comparisons between the two bodies of work are inevitable, and the contrast works to Bartana's advantage. Where Banner comes across as clever, Bartana seems wise, dominating the pairing through the clarity, sophistication and solemnity of her observations.

Banner has been well known on the international scene for a decade or more. Shortlisted for the Turner Prize a few years back, she came to prominence with a series of text paintings in which she graphically described scenes from pornographic films, inscribing her vibrant descriptive language onto the monochromatic surface of large canvases. Banner used words to

paint pictures in the mind of the viewer/reader — a new twist on representation. I remember liking them.

In the current show, curated by Power Plant director Gregory Burke, Banner is showing works that extend this line of inquiry: verbal descriptions of naked women painted onto canvas, onto the wall, onto fragments of fighter jets, and, in one instance, onto a section of excised gallery drywall. (She created this final piece in front of an audience in early March, using a live nude model as her muse.)

To my eye, though, the trick has grown tired. Her language describes the features of the woman's body, itemizing the peculiarities of her skin and hair, and the play of light across her flesh. But as you read your way around the room, you find that every nude is described in virtually the same way. The artist's perceptual apparatus seems to be stuck on autopilot.

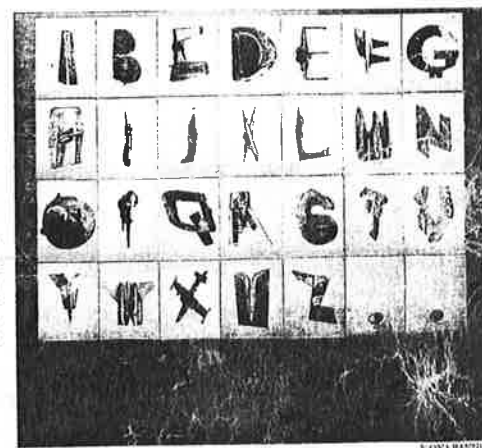
The Toronto show also foregrounds Banner's other preoccupations: fighter jets and language. But the result is somewhat less than the sum of its parts. In addition to her ABC inventory of jets, she is also showing a suite of drawings suggesting an alphabet, with each letter form comprised of a section, or whole, of a military aircraft. In the gallery's clerestory space, she has suspended *Parade*, a throng of model military aircraft, painted grey, and all pointing in different directions, to suggest, one assumes, chaos and a kind of claustrophobia.

Finally, in a smaller side gallery, Banner is showing another international roster of jets and helicopters, this time in the format of a slide show accompanied by the movie soundtracks from several landmark Hollywood war films. This is the weakest work in the show, the kind of project that any BFA undergrad would crank out to demonstrate the requisite left-wing reflexes.

Naked women and warplanes; it's a time-honoured conflation. But is she critical or complicit in this objectification? Who knows? Banner is also showing handmade white neon signs. One series presents punctuation marks (crudely fashioned by the artist's own hand); the next an entire alphabet, presumably presented as a system of signs through which we find mastery (at



A still from Yael Bartana's video *Wild Seeds* (2005): opening a back door to the raw psychological pain of growing up in a militarized state.



Fiona Banner's drawing cycle *The Bastard Word* (2006-07): Despite their stylish presentation, her ideas have a stale, preheated flavour.

least in our own minds) over the flux of reality. But what to make of all this? The motifs in Banner's work neatly rhyme, but there the story ends. Despite their stylish presentation, the ideas are trite, with a stale, preheated flavour.

Bartana's work is just the opposite. The Power Plant show, curated by gallery curator Helena Reckitt, includes several video works, each one wonderfully concise, yet offering a field day for interpretation.

Kings of the Hill (2003) consists of

images of macho drivers in their all-terrain SUVs, negotiating the hilly territory near the beach at Tel Aviv. We hear the sound of their tires spinning and their engines roaring as they attempt to scale near-impossible terrain. Sometimes they get stuck in their hilariously futile attempts, and sometimes they prevail, but either way the effect is comic, as if the vehicles are raging beasts, bucking and snorting.

Bartana suggests the kind of ob-

underpins the current military conflict in the Middle East. She takes no sides in this. It is human character that is subjected to her amused scrutiny here, not the shortcomings of one side or the other.

Low Relief II (2004) is equally condensed, consisting of imagery of Israeli and Palestinian peace demonstrators — shouting slogans, drinking from water bottles, waving banners — and the police who monitor their demonstrations. What elevates these scenes is the way in which Bartana slows them down, also running them through a program that lends to the imagery the appearance of low-relief carving, albeit with a guided, slightly solarized appearance.

Watching *Low Relief II*, one is reminded of the look of Egyptian carvings of the kind found in burial chambers, carvings that aimed to record history and hand it on to the future. Bartana takes this narrative sculptural tradition and translates it into her digital medium, making a work that is technologically of our moment but, thematically, as old as the hills.

The most powerful of Bartana's video projections here is *Wild Seeds* (2005). The work simply records a group of Israeli teenagers playing a game they've made up called *Evacuation of Glad's Colony*, which reenacts a confrontation between Israeli soldiers and settlers in the occupied territories in 2002.

Bartana shows us the teens arriving in their blue jeans and T-shirts, glowing and vibrant with young life. Lush, rolling hills unfold into the distance, suggesting a promised land of fecundity and peace. As the

game begins, a cluster of teens takes up position, banding together with their arms and legs intertwined and their hands interlocked, while opposing players attempt to pull them asunder. The audio track records the taunts, slogans and pleas, which are translated into English in an adjacent wall projection: "I can't breathe." "I can't see." "Give up the fight." "Traitor!" "Go back where you came from." "Leave her alone." "No! This is our land."

At times, Bartana slows the imagery down. At other moments, she records her subjects in conventional time. More often than not, she pushes her camera up close to their straining faces. We hear their screams and taunts, but sometimes she cuts the sound out from under us, so we experience the spectacle in silence. Are these kids having fun? This is just a game, and yet their faces can take on an agonized appearance.

This ambivalence is eloquent. Watching, you become mindful that they are at the age of conscription, that they may soon be fighting their nation's battles in earnest. This becomes more and more uncomfortable to witness, as if you have stumbled on a back door to the raw psychological pain of growing up in a militarized state.

Like a joke that goes too far, *Wild Seeds* reveals the wound beneath the surface of things. Despite the hilarity, we can see how it hurts.

Fiona Banner: *The Bastard Word* and Yael Bartana: *Ritual* continue at The Power Plant until April 22 (416-978-4949).