



## **Yael Bartana: Ritual**

3 March - 22 April, 2007

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### **Documenting and restaging everyday activities, Yael Bartana's films suggest how social rituals and activities promote national and cultural cohesion.**

*What is this place where I grew up? How long will this troubled nation continue to perpetuate this pattern of ignorance? – Yael Bartana*

Documenting and restaging everyday activities, Yael Bartana's films suggest how social rituals and activities promote national and cultural cohesion. Bartana is interested in the tension between collective and personal realms: how individuals act as members of groups and the possibilities that remain for critiquing and protesting prevailing ideologies. In her films she makes the everyday strange by editing, manipulating and slowing down footage in order to isolate moments of ambivalence, resistance or over-compensation that undercut simple national and cultural affiliations. In so doing, Bartana hopes to “provoke honest responses and perhaps replace the predictable, controlled reactions encouraged by the state.”

While her focus on Israel provides the work’s political and social context, its concerns of militarization and nationalism resonate in many contemporary situations. Bartana's

approach to the quotidian has been likened to "amateur anthropology," a notion borrowed from the Polish-Canadian writer Eva Hoffman. Yet while Hoffman posits the immigrant as one who sees details that others may take for granted, Bartana is by no means a detached voyeur. With a gaze sharpened by distance – she has lived primarily in the Netherlands since enrolling at Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, in 2000 – Bartana maintains a passionate interest in her home country.

Capturing the friction between public and private, the four films in this exhibition explore questions about the military's pervasive presence, group behaviour amidst political uncertainty, and the conquest, settlement and defense of land. *Kings of the Hill* (2003) depicts men driving their trucks and SUVs in the coastal hills near Tel-Aviv, watched by friends and family members. Motoring up and around the sandy dunes, their vehicles often lose traction and slide backwards. As night falls it is hard to tell whether we are witnessing harmless displays of macho prowess or something more sinister. The men's motors rev in Sisyphean futility, and seem to reflect the seemingly intractable permanence of Israel's military mentality.

*Low Relief II* (2004) combines documentation of several peace protests featuring both Israeli and Palestinian demonstrators, their military escorts and the overhead blimp that records them. Bartana has digitally adapted her footage to give it a silver, flattened quality that evokes relief sculpture. The necessary yet monotonous process of political demonstrations takes on a timeless quality, becoming, in Bartana's words, "a moving monument to the everyday reality of how it feels to live in Israel."

The two-screen projection *Wild Seeds* (2006) with its Biblical echoes of seeds growing in the desert, shows a group of young Israelis playing a game they have created. Named "Evacuation of Gilad's Colony," the game evolved from the forced withdrawal of Jewish settlers from the Occupied Territories and the violent confrontation between soldiers and settlers at Gilad's Farms in 2002. The teens themselves are third-generation Zionists who oppose Israeli's occupation of the West Bank. Two of the players act as soldiers while the others attempt to resist them. Filmed in the incongruously beautiful mountains of Prat's Settlement, one screen presents footage of the group's antics while the other translates their words and sounds into English text.

*Wild Seeds* suggests the impact that political violence and its resulting instability have on people's psyches and behaviour, a theme that carries through much of Bartana's work. Hovering between manic playfulness and black humour, a darkly comic children's game becomes the contemporary chronicle of a traumatic cultural event. Everything is strange to the eye of a stranger, and the playful pantomimes of youngsters become macabre ritualized re-enactments of forced exodus.

*Profile* (2001) focuses on compulsory military service in Israel through close-ups of a female soldier at target practice. Watching the young soldier take aim, we are encouraged to evaluate our own feelings about war, defense and personal honour. The soldier's apparent awkwardness and ambivalence evokes the tension between self-determination and

the demands of the nation-state. As Bartana states, “That soldier becomes a symbol that reflects my own feelings and emotions about the situation. I try to keep the viewer as an outsider and observer, and hope that this separation will allow them to connect to their own emotions as well.”

Yael Bartana was born in 1970 in Afula, Israel, and divides her time between Tel-Aviv and Amsterdam. She received a BFA from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts, New York, going on to the Rijksakademie in 2001. Bartana's work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions at such galleries as PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2003), Kunstverein Hamburg (2006) and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2006). In 2004, Prefix ICA in Toronto presented her work as part of the Images Festival. She has participated in group exhibitions at De Appel Centre for Contemporary Art, Amsterdam (2001); Manifesta 4, Frankfurt (2002); Witte de With, Rotterdam (2003); Tate Modern, London (2004); Liverpool Biennial (2004); 10th International Istanbul Biennial (2005); 27th São Paulo Biennial (2006); and Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (2006).

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