

## Yael Bartana

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### Interviews

June 30, 2021 • Yael Bartana on messianic myth, redemption, and the “Jewish question”



**Yael Bartana, *Malka Germania*, 2021**, three-channel video and sound installation, color, sound, 38 minutes. The Messiah (Gala Moody).

*Since the early 2000s, Yael Bartana has brought the remnants of the “Jewish question” into sharp relief. “Redemption Now,” a survey at Berlin’s Jewish Museum on through October 10, includes early videos that simultaneously detail and estrange the rituals of Israeli Orthodox Jewish and settler communities. In recent years, her work has grown more formally elaborate—and provocative—in its choreographies and “pre-enactments.” Her trilogy And Europe Will Be Stunned, 2007–11, staged the dramatic genesis of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, while the Philadelphia-set The Undertaker, 2019, mixed avant-garde choreography with American Civil War–reenactment culture and street protest. For her latest work—a kind of historical drag in which a white-robed savior rides into a temporally ambiguous Berlin—Bartana employs a strategy of critical camp to address the specter of National Socialism, the pull of irredentist and messianic myths, and the challenges to a nation’s consciousness in a post-truth era.*

**ACCORDING TO JUDAISM**, the messiah will arrive on a donkey. In the making of my new video work *Malka Germania* (Hebrew for “Queen Germania”), I knew I wanted to keep this particular part of the prophecy intact while queering other aspects of the story. I knew early on that I did not want my messiah to be portrayed by a male actor with classic Jewish attributes. This would be too much on the nose for me. Instead, I started looking for an actress similar to Tilda Swinton and found her in Gala Moody. With her androgynous features and Aryan color palette, I felt she would be the right Malka for me. The work is the spitting image of National Socialist propaganda and fantasy, a paradox that might challenge the inherent expectations of the audience, creating confusion and curiosity by proposing that the redeemer is among us.

Within the specific historical-mythic structure of *Malka Germania*, the Queen’s glaring whiteness raises the question of the role of the Jew, which is something I have long dealt with in my overall practice. Especially the notion of the “useful Jew”—the incongruity of this figure driving an ideology like Evangelicalism, with its telos of redemption, but also the proto-existentialism of Franz Rosenzweig’s 1921 work *Star of Redemption*. For my staging of these topics, I’ve been called both the “Israeli Leni Riefenstahl” and a “useful Jew.”

*Malka Germania*’s reception is site-specific, in that audiences will encounter the work with their own historical baggage, personal as much as national. The scenes are set not only throughout Berlin but also in the city’s lush woodlands and lakes. There’s the familiar German trope of the forest, which has served as the backdrop to the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, to the organizations where Nazism’s young bodies and minds were conditioned, and to the horrors of the concentration camp. With the extras in the film, such as the bathers by the Wannsee, the point, for me, is not so much to insist on the clichés of the German petit bourgeoisie. Rather, what interests me about this multigenerational yet uniformly blond cast is blondness as such, colored by fiction and history. When I first came to Germany, I expected everyone to look like propaganda posters from the 1930s, which is ridiculous but tells you something about the sway this imagery still has over the Israeli imagination, its sense of sovereignty, and its politics. I was frankly disappointed that the population of Berlin didn’t match my childhood projections: this fraught fascination with a “superior” people, inextricably linked to the wretched image of the Jew and, consequently, to the discourse of anti-Semitism and the history of extermination. This constellation not only significantly informs Holocaust trauma and the politics of memory but would be deployed by the state as ideology, the unquestionable explanation for why we as Jews ought to live in Israel.

There is certainly pathos in the film, but I square, or queer, this pathos with a certain realism. In my work, realism comprises unconscious or concealed currents in society, or rather these currents’ ebb and flow, such as the rebounding German identitarian movement and its opposition. I’m thinking here of the film’s nightmarish “wet dream” sequence, in which Albert Speer’s unrealized Germania dome emerges from the pastoral Wannsee, exploding the pimple of repressed history. In my film, special effects serve the function of particularizing social and historical affects, a device through which these feelings surface and become discursive. Spectacular or not—call it Zionism on steroids—the arc I’m proposing in *Malka* doesn’t resolve into a unifying master narrative but will instead differently affect and “redeem” viewers and their respective conceptions of the German past and present. It’s a transhistorical queering of contemporary Berlin at the hands of this androgynous Aryan messiah, much like the film’s fictitious, Hebrewized Berlin intersection of Redemption and Occupation Streets: a transposition from an actual Tel Aviv junction that encapsulates the grim paradox of Israel’s founding history, or really of any territorial messianic project.

— As told to Daniel Horn