

Yael Bartana
"The Graveyard"
 Captain Petzel
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In the epic films of Yael Bartana, nothing is ever what it seems. In her newest, *The Undertaker* (2019), the Israeli-born artist turns her attention to the second amendment, staging an armed, military-funeral-style procession through the streets of Philadelphia that culminates in the performers throwing their weapons into a mass

a new series of sculptures made to look like fossilised weapons at her exhibition "The Graveyard".

Chloe Stead: *The Undertaker* takes place in Philadelphia. Can you explain the significance of this location for film?

Yael Bartana: It actually started with a previous project, *What if Women Ruled the World?* (2017) That was a very big theatre performance project with a fictional, all-female

a new project within the context of the city. Thinking about the history of Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States were both written, I wanted to concentrate on the second amendment, the right to bear arms, which is a very present issue in the United States. I translated "bury our weapons not our soldiers" into "bury our weapons not our bodies," first making a live public performance based on that slogan and then the film.

Despite the fact that we seem to be talking about gun control on a near-constant basis, especially in the context of the US, nothing ever seems to change. Is

including dance in your film a way of trying to get at something non-verbal – something that can't be expressed in words?

In the original performance we actually had six speakers in Philadelphia

IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

grave. Throughout, Bartana "quotes" sections of the dance piece Noa Eshkol created for a 1953 Holocaust Memorial Ceremony, translating the Israeli choreographer's sparse movements into a "a monument for the living". The film is presented alongside

government and one of the statements from these women was: "bury our weapons not our soldiers." At the same time, I got invited by the Philadelphia Museum of Art to make



Above and top right: Yael Bartana, *The Undertaker*, 2019, video stills

Courtesy of Captain Petzel, Berlin; Petzel Gallery, New York; Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam; and Summer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

City Hall delivering statements about gun control and violence in the US, so in that context dialogue was very important, but in the movie I decided not to use any words. I was interested in performativity and the body. Visually there is an interesting relationship between the shape of a gun and an arm. In my mind, the idea is that if we free ourselves from guns, we can dance. In my fantasy it should be a global movement. It's not just about the US. The film is basically saying, "we could all change it if we wanted." It's just a matter of throwing these attitudes into the grave.

When did your interest in Noa Eshkol and the Chamber Dance Group begin?

I was very interested in the specific dance she created for the 1953 Holocaust Memorial Ceremony because there is something so progressive and daring in her way of thinking. First of all, the way the dancers are organised and composed reminded me a lot of the way that Nazi soldiers moved, so in the context of a Holocaust memorial, there is something so freaky about it. She also allowed her dancers to look like victims rather than heroes, which is interesting within the context of commemoration. I was extremely moved by the piece and I thought that it could be a great way to talk about violence and not be too literal about it – to create enough space for emotions and interpretations of the audience.

One of my favourite scenes from the film is when you realise for the first time that the performers are being protected by a group of real-life police officers. Not only does it reveal that the film is clearly a work of fiction, it also reveals the material reality of making such an artwork in an American city in 2019.

We rented those guns, which are film props. Each gun had red tape to show that they are dysfunctional, and on top of that, a special police person



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Yael Bartana, *Bury Our Weapons, Not Our Bodies, Mask 1, 2, and 3*, 2018
 Silkscreen on aluminium,
 51 x 63 x 3 cm

checked every single gun. We had to do it because we were in the middle of the city walking around with forty guns. I wanted to include the reality of these actions clearly within the film. I thought it was so strong and somehow ironic that the police were there to protect us, but we know that they can be very violent and that the whole system is based on racism.

In the film you stage a military funeral. What was it about that particular ceremony that resonated with you?

During my research trip to Philadelphia, I encountered a strong culture of reenactment, especially of the Revolutionary and the Civil War. Moreover, military culture in Israel is very strong; we inhale it. We're raised with the notion that all have to be soldiers. Of course, it's changing now, but I was born in the 1970s and our ability to go against this culture at the time wasn't there. I feel like it's almost part of our DNA. It's also quite interesting in the context of Eshkol's work because I feel that dance is the thing that keeps the dancers sane. The film takes place in the context of Philadelphia but there is a personal aspect to it; I experienced shooting a gun and I want somehow to kill that history.

Chloe Stead