

LONGING FOR BELONGING

THE ARTISTRY OF B.H. Yael

BY CONNIE CRANE

In her 1996 documentary *Fresh Blood: A Consideration of Belonging*, Toronto filmmaker and video and installation artist b.h. Yael travels back to Israel, the land of her birth, seeking to answer a question that's haunted her since she landed in Canada at age seven: Who would I have been had I stayed? This question, with its trail of longing and sense of loss, is one to which millions of Canadian immigrants can relate.

It's a very old Canadian story, but also a new one. We're becoming once again a nation of new immigrants. For the first time in 75 years, one in five Canadian residents was born outside the country. According to the 2006 census, people from than 200 ethnic origins make Canada their home.

Yael is a face of a newer, more diverse Canada. She is also an artist who's signed up for the job of wrestling with her past. What happens when someone is wrenched from their homeland? How many generations struggle to heal a sense of dislocation? Or, as Yael asks: How long is each moment measured by absence?

The role of storyteller, interpreter, educator and peace-maker falls to artists. This is probably the most important context in which to view Yael, who is also a professor of integrated media in the faculty of art at OCAD University. The daughter of a Holocaust-survivor father and an Iraqi-Jewish mother, Yael came to Canada in 1964 following her parents' divorce and her mother's remarriage.

In a film career that spans more than two decades, Yael has consistently been drawn to polarizing topics—all that stuff you're supposed to avoid at dinner parties. There's the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yael gained notoriety at last year's Toronto International Film Festival when she and other activists and intellectuals (including Jane Fonda, Naomi Klein

and David Byrne) protested the selection of Tel Aviv for the festival's inaugural City to City program. In the protestors' view, the program was being subverted by "the Israeli propaganda machine." Citing the occupation of Palestinian territories and violence in Gaza, Yael told the CBC: "We are saying it's really inappropriate to have a spotlight on Tel Aviv."

You might expect her work on Palestine to be grim viewing, and yet the three videos that comprise her 2006 *Palestine Trilogy* are as beautiful as they are harrowing. As her camera rests on Jewish activist Jeff Halper, he says of the Deir Yassin massacre: "Let's acknowledge that this happened ... turn it into a remembrance place ... use this as a real opportunity to heal and reconstruct relationships." In reviewing *Palestine Trilogy*, the movie journal *Cinema Politica* noted: "What makes the whole experience particularly moving is that the reasonable, non-confrontational voices throughout are those of peace and social justice activists from every side—Israeli, Palestinian and international."

In addition to the tensions in her homeland, Yael explores ethnicity, religion and sexuality. But always underneath she's perusing identity, asking "Where do I belong?" In *Fresh Blood* she notes the endless adjustments. She notes how her mother's Arab Jewish family met prejudice after moving from Iraq to Israel and she notes how, while visiting Israel, her own inability to speak Hebrew made her stand out. And yet, she says, "That language, like memory, is in my body." Or, as she notes in *Fresh Blood*, memory has two parts—remembering and forgetting.

Yael, a funky multimedia artist and energetic academic, explores life from these multiply clashing frames of reference. It's fascinating to watch her propel her contemporary self into situations that recall the Jewish and Arab patriarchies of her



Video and installation artist b.h. Yael explores themes of identity, exclusion and loss. "Conversion is not only assimilation," she says. "For my mother, it seemed to be the promise of eternity. For me, each new identity excluded another."
(Photo: Mieke Van Geest)



Video stills from *Palestine Trilogy* (documentations in history, land and hope) reveal Israeli, Palestinian and international activist groups working in solidarity.

past. In *Fresh Blood*, for example, there's a sequence where Yael walks down the street. Young men hiss and make suggestive gestures at her, while Orthodox Jewish men rigidly avoid eye contact with her.

When I meet Yael at Toronto café The Starving Artist, she tells me, "The work is part of my own process of working through the issues. I'm connecting the personal to the social and political."

Yael's personal openness—making her life experiences her subject matter—serves her well as a filmmaker. But that openness also made her vulnerable in her youth. So deeply was she affected by her stepfather's extremist religion, she made the 2008 documentary *Trading the Future* in part to come to terms with the frightening apocalyptic narratives of her youth. *Trading the Future* questions the inevitability of apocalypse and its repercussions on environmental urgencies. It won the audience award at Ecofilms Rhodes International Film & Arts Festival in 2009.

Part of making sense of her earlier experience was to name herself. "I decided on this name when I first started making art. I didn't want my husband's, father's or stepfather's names. It was a decidedly feminist assertion. b. h. Yael is my formal artist name, and friends and family call me Yael, which is my given name."

As her work hints, Yael's relationship with her mother is strong yet conflicted. Particular flashpoints have been her mother's submission to the men in her life and her messianic beliefs. As she says in *Fresh Blood*, "Conversion is not only assimilation. For my mother, it seemed to be the promise of eternity. For me, each new identity excluded another."

At first, her adulthood took an outwardly conventional path that included marriage and church. "I have had three long-term relationships," says Yael, "two with men and one with a woman. My sons are from the first two."

Today, Yael says she struggles with a societal insistence on sexual identification. In her relationships and her work, she's explored, and acknowledged, "that desire and sexuality may be more complicated." She says, "How one locates oneself is a difficult question.... Queer seems to be sufficiently open to include a wide variety of identifications."

Her spirituality is similarly complex. Like Israel, Yael bears

the influence of three major religions, and her work is full of spiritual references. Yet, she says, "I think I'm too suspicious of organized religion," while noting that it was in a Christian setting that she "first encountered feminism" and social justice.

Feminism has been a touchstone ever since, and that's a bit of a sticking point for some of her students. Perusing RateMyProfessor.com, I see a familiar refrain: "Feminism is all she talks about," says one student, while another says, "brings up feminist issues far too much and this is coming from a female student."

But Yael also receives comments like this: "She could very well be the best teacher at OCAD. Tremendous at running the class and puts in more work than any university film professor. Her strong character may alienate some wishy-washy pinheads trying to coast through her class."

Whether she's talking feminism, politics or art, Yael admits, "I'm pretty forthright in my critiques." When asked about her feminist politics, she says, "You know, that's one of the things I find so surprising, how little students are informed. I was teaching a course in time-based media and had assigned an article titled 'Suffragettes Invented Performance Art.' And when I said, 'Who were the suffragettes?' they didn't know."

Here, Yael sees opportunity. Filmmaking and teaching, she says, "both have for me a kind of pedagogical purpose and intent. So there is something about using both as a tool for critical learning." She adds, "There's something about the way that feminism has been painted in a larger popular culture that some students don't see as having a claim on their lives, relationships and communities."

One of the more surprising things about Yael's work is the sense of hope she conveys. Given the subject matter, it's not a given. Yet her work bursts with life—church bells gong, belly dancers writhe, music plays, people embrace and laugh. All the while, the activists she interviews are passionate.

It's with this hopefulness that Yael stares down the kinds of fearful apocalyptic visions that terrified her younger self. As *Trading the Future* concludes, her message could apply just as well to all displaced peoples rebuilding their lives: "The struggle," says activist Valerie Langer, "is to make that a beautiful thing—not to wait for it to be over." ♦