

Profile

Yishay Garbasz

The Berlin-based artist's engagement with displacement, trauma and memory, both personal and historical, has particular resonance in the context of the present pandemic.

One responsibility of being an artist is to face up to trauma, individual or collective or both, and to process it for, if not *with*, an audience. If it wasn't before, trauma has become unavoidable during this pandemic year, and questions of who is marginalised or excluded, and by which processes, have become more urgent in societies stripped to their essentials, enabling governments to use lockdowns to push through draconian anti-protest laws or strengthen murderous border regimes. Further, the job cuts that have started at numerous art institutions may well lead to less diverse workforces and programmes.

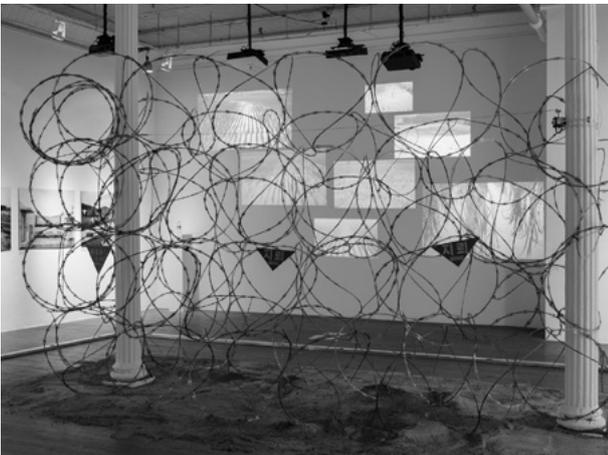
Yishay Garbasz deals with trauma by confronting it head-on, bearing witness to it and making it integral to the form as well as the content of her work. Her most recent projects partly spring from her personal experience of being rendered stateless while living in Berlin when Israel, the country of her birth, did not recognise her gender identity on her expired passport. She also had an expired British passport, which did acknowledge her transsexual status, but the discrepancy left her unable to renew either document. The issue was eventually resolved with the help of Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, which pressured the country's Interior Ministry to recognise her gender. But, post-Brexit, remaining in Berlin without German citizenship is a bigger problem. Throughout lockdown, Yishay worked on a British flag made entirely of the razor wire more recognisably used along borders or at detention camps for migrants. She also made a US flag, using 200m of wire, some of which she left unpainted so as not to over-aestheticise the 25kg work. The project brought together two of her long-term interests: the violence of international borders and institutional transphobia. In the UK, both are getting worse under an authoritarian, far-right nationalist government with a large majority supported by a craven, cowardly media and an opposition party terrified of standing up to either.

Having lived all over the world - in Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, Korea, as well as the UK, Germany, Israel and the US, where she studied with photographer Stephen Shore at Bard College - Garbasz's practice has involved plenty of travelling. Her most well-known work, *In My Mother's Footsteps*, 2000-09, recreates her mother's path from Berlin and the Netherlands in 1933 to several concentration camps, including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen between 1942 and 1945. Using a large, bulky camera that forced her to stop and spend time at each location, Garbasz observes that 'my mother lost parts of her soul in these places ... I had to go back to collect them'. Throughout the subsequent publication Garbasz quotes sparingly from her mother's memoir, forcing readers to focus on the photographs and to contemplate the millions of other people who endured untold suffering.

Garbasz completed another long-term international project, *Severed Connections: Do what I say or they will kill you*, in 2015. For over a decade, she visited internal borders designed to keep warring populations apart in



Fukushima Prefectural Ono Hospital, Ono, Fukushima Nuclear Exclusion Zone, 2013



Most Tasty Rice, 2014, installation view



installing Becoming, Busan Biennale, 2010

Korea, the West Bank and Belfast. Venturing into these areas, she made a point of photographing the walls and fences within their wider environments, in some cases highlighting how they contrasted with the natural beauty around them, and in all cases showing how they were assimilated into the everyday realities of local residents. As with *In My Mother's Footsteps*, Garbasz evoked historical violence, but here she portrayed systems of oppression that still existed. By presenting them in longshot rather than close-up, she invited her viewers to picture the landscape without these borders, reminding people of their impermanence while prompting speculation about what might happen if they were taken down for good.

Garbasz has also made two striking projects about transsexual living. *Becoming*, 2008-10, comprising over 900 images, presents the reality of transition with the artist regularly photographing herself naked to show the effects of hormones and surgery on her body (a selection of which was installed on a zoetrope for the 2010 Busan Biennale, and made into a flipbook). The following year, she presented her testicles in formaldehyde as *Eat Me Damien*. Yishay's decision to make her gender identity just one element of her practice has made it hard to categorise her: for example, despite featuring in Phaidon's book of 400 important women artists, she told *Berlin Art Link* in 2020 that 'I am not trans enough to be included in trans shows, and too trans for others'. Furthermore, she argued that Berlin's galleries and museums tended to use trans people as content rather than creators in exhibitions, using such artists at best to signal diversity but not providing a space to speak beyond their identities.

When she has addressed other issues, Garbasz has found that people cannot picture her works beyond an LGBTQ+ context. When she asked one curator (from the Sydney Biennale), who she had known for years, which galleries might show *In My Mother's Footsteps*, he told her to check where queer filmmaker Bruce LaBruce presents his films, as they might be open to 'speciality' works. It's no wonder, then, that her more recent works dealing with her identity express the frustration with such tokenistic treatment. Also made during lockdown is a cabinet with the following statement: 'In case of

Pride, Transgender Day of Remembrance or International Women's Day, break glass.' This, Garbasz told me when we talked via Skype, was to let people know that 'I do exist on the other 362 days of the year' – a feeling any minority artist will understand.

Perhaps her most resonant work in the current climate, however, is *Ritual and Reality*, completed in 2014. Once again, she put herself in harm's way, visiting the exclusion zone at Fukushima after the tsunami and nuclear disaster of 2011, photographing and filming empty spaces such as a hospital. Five short films from the project, shown at the Ronald Feldman gallery in New York, captured the eerie stillness of the space, accompanied by the blips of a Geiger counter measuring the ambient radiation. To convey the specificity of the situation, she recorded a voice-over describing her experiences and the unfolding story of the environmental catastrophe. With memories of the first global lockdown still fresh, this work reminds us not only of the abandoned space near Fukushima (which resembles a less-weathered Chernobyl) but also of the otherworldly feel of ordinarily bustling public spaces standing silently empty amid the threat of an airborne virus.

Yishay suffered epoxy poisoning while making *Ritual and Reality*, developing occupational asthma and chronic lung problems which have forced her to shift to a more studio-based practice. From here, however, she has also supported the movements that emerged during lockdown – especially Black Lives Matter and the London demonstrations against government and media attacks on trans rights – by making shirts with slogans for friends to wear at protests. The statements range from 'We bash back' to 'Stonewall was a riot', intending to highlight the insurrectionary origins of the LGBTQ+ movement (the project grew out of making a T-shirt for a friend saying 'I am loved' in mirror script). These acts of individual and collective solidarity contrast markedly with both her photo series and her razor-wire flags in that they propose a different world: one in which people and governments do not intentionally traumatise each other.

Juliet Jacques is a writer and filmmaker based in London.



Footsteps (25), from 'In My Mother's Footsteps', 2004-09

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