



GUY BEN-NER
TEL AVIV

While he recently represented Israel at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, *Self Portrait as a Family Man* is Guy Ben-Ner's first comprehensive exhibition in his home country. In this retrospective at the Kalisher Center for Contemporary Art [February 16—April 17, 2006], Ben-Ner establishes himself as one of Israel's most promising artistic talents. Comprised of video works and drawings dating from 1996 to 2005, the exhibition demonstrates the long and deliberate process through which the artist has transformed his life saga into aesthetic practice. In his works, Ben-Ner employs his son and daughter, Amir and Elia, and wife, Nava, as cast members in irreverent narratives that focus on the complex relationship between the artist-genius and his bourgeois family structure.

In one of the strongest works, *Moby Dick*, 2000, Ben-Ner transforms his kitchen into the set of Herman Melville's famous novel. With the mast positioned in the sink, the marble counter acting as a bridge, and cupboards turned into the crew's sleeping quarters, Ben-Ner turns the whaling odyssey into an everyday drama that alters domestic experience. The home becomes the scene of play between father and daughter, as they hilariously act out every role in the story. It is simultaneously emblematic of a quotidian regimen and of the parental responsibilities that the artist wishes to escape.

This sense of exile at the heart of family dynamics is echoed in *Berkeley's Island*, 1999, a less resolved piece, which casts the artist as a castaway on a desert island in his own kitchen. Sitting in shorts on a mound of sand, by a palm tree and a small fire, the artist becomes a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. His plight might have been more believable if it weren't for the intrusion of his habitat, which reminds the viewer of the situation's fictional construction. For example, he uses the refrigerator's light to read a book and exploits the washing

machine's vibrations to stimulate his penis. The invasiveness of these home appliances is aggravated by the incursion of Elia, who walks in and out of the frame. Completely disregarding her father's project, she moves the camera, which leads to the following exchange: Guy: "Elia, don't move the camera, it is MY movie." Elia: "It's not YOUR movie, it's MY movie!" This dialogue reveals the conflict between the humdrum constraints of a shared domestic sphere and the artist's desire to fabricate his own separate aesthetic environment. Within the family unit, individual authorship and creativity are contested privileges, which the artist has to share, negotiate, and ultimately transform into art.

This tension appears in Ben-Ner's most recent installment of his family chronicle, *Treehouse Kit*, 2005, in which the artist returns in the guise of a slightly older, bearded castaway. A video accompanies an installation of a wooden tree made of dismantled furniture, which can be assembled to construct the necessary furnishings—a rocking chair, a table, a bed, an umbrella—for a Do-It-Yourself survival kit. *Treehouse Kit* contrasts with Ben-Ner's other works in that he has finally isolated himself from his family and staked out his position as an independent artist. Not completely forgotten, however, his family appears in a photograph, which the artist dutifully folds and uses to stabilize the leg of his uneven bed. In this final work, the spectator is left to wonder if, without his family acting as creative force and witness to the creative act, Ben-Ner can really exist at all. Is this last escape only a momentary dream? A reverie whose existence we are left to question? Does it mark the new path of an artist who revels in his own solipsism?

—Nuit Banai

ABOVE: Guy Ben-Ner, views of *Treehouse Kit*, 2005, sculpture and video installation: wood and hardware sculpture, carpet, mattress with silk-screened cover, and DVD (10 minutes), dimensions variable, tree: 15 x 15 x 13.5 feet, edition of 3 + AP [originally commissioned for the Israeli Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale; courtesy of the artist, the Kalisher Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, and Postmasters Gallery, New York]

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