

↓ IF ONLY IT WAS AS EASY TO BANISH HUNGER BY RUBBING THE BELLY AS IT IS TO MASTURBATE, 2009, film stills. Film commissioned by MASS MoCA, North Adams.

The artist and MASS MoCA director Joe Thompson travel through Massachusetts by plane, by car and on a tandem bike, reciting lines from famous literary works.



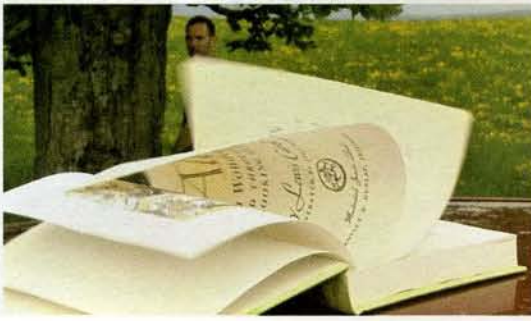
GUY BEN-NER

# *Solitary Refinement*

From a make-believe desert island in the kitchen to a domestic drama acted out in IKEA stores to a comical plane crash, an artist reinterprets his life through offbeat, cyclical narratives.

*By HG Masters*







↓ **STEALING BEAUTY**, 2007, stills from single channel video projection with sound, DVD: 17 min 40 sec.

The artist and his family conduct a series of performances without permission in IKEA stores in various countries.



**“Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,”** Leo Tolstoy famously warns at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* (1877), presaging the miseries suffered by the title heroine and those around her. For artist Guy Ben-Ner, the joys and sorrows of family life have been central subjects in his videos for more than a decade. Performing the role of father and artist simultaneously—with his wife and children as cast and crew—he has remade *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moby Dick* in the kitchen and staged a version of François Truffaut’s film *L’enfant sauvage* (“The Wild Child,” 1970) in the living room, bedroom and bathroom, and even moved the whole family into the ersatz domestic spaces of IKEA showrooms to enact archetypal domestic disputes. Ben-Ner’s activities are home movie-making and reality-television rolled together, revealing that the emotional life of parents and the guerilla tactics of conceptual artists can be married into a DIY cinema produced by the family, for the family.

Since the introduction of relatively affordable Betamax and VHS technologies in the mid-1970s, parents have turned the video camera on their children, recording birthdays, sporting events, theatrical and musical performances and vacations—the rituals that characterize child-rearing in middle-class society. A recent survey of Ben-Ner’s videos at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) revealed that underlying the fictional conceits of his work is the story of a real family with two working parents and two young children. Audiences can follow a decade in the life of the Ben-Ner clan—as they move from Tel Aviv to New York to Berlin, their two children Elia and Amir grow from

toddlers to teenagers; and, in the most recent chapter, the family breaks apart as Guy’s wife, Nava, decides to leave him.

Ben-Ner’s life became deeply intertwined with his art when Elia was born in 1994. At that time, Ben-Ner was a student at the Hamidrasha School of Art at Beit Berl College in northern Israel. After graduating in 1997, Ben-Ner had to make a difficult decision. As he put it in an interview with his art-school peer, video artist Boaz Arad, in 2000, “I had to choose between being a bad father away from home a lot and being a good father, staying at home and making concessions.” With his wife at a nine-to-five job, Ben-Ner became the family’s primary caregiver. The limitations of this arrangement led him to merge the labors of art-making and fatherhood. As he told artist Maurizio Cattelan in a recent interview, “I made my choice quite a long time ago, when I started to work with my children. The only proper way to pay them back for their labor was to allow them to enjoy the end product.”

A recurring theme in Ben-Ner’s early videos is the tedium and isolation experienced by a stay-at-home parent. Ben-Ner’s first narrative video, *Berkeley’s Island* (1999), based on Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), depicts the solitary life of a castaway. Set in the family kitchen, it opens with a scene of the artist lying on his back in a bathing suit on a meter-wide pile of sand from which a lone palm tree grows, with a steering wheel across his bare, sunburned chest.

The 15-minute video features several vignettes about life on the island, which Ben-Ner narrates in a voice-over. The plot does not follow





Defoe's exactly, though notable moments in the book are re-created, such as the castaway discovering a footprint and training a parrot (played by the family cat) to say his name. The castaway has delusions; he sees himself levitating and losing a limb—simplistic magic tricks that Ben-Ner stages using mirrors. To depict a raging gale, Ben-Ner rigs the palm tree with ropes that are pulled by someone offscreen.

These elements of artifice, recurrent throughout all Ben-Ner's subsequent video works, remind viewers that although his activities are not performances or events in themselves, they are staged to be recorded. Ben-Ner's homespun process is evident, connecting his work to a long lineage of artists that have recorded their actions rather than perform them live, from Bruce Nauman's repetitive movements in his studio, such as *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68), to Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), in which the artist has a friend shoot him in the arm with a rifle. Ben-Ner makes this connection to performance and video art clear at the end of *Berkeley's Island*, when he demonstrates one of what he calls the "practical abilities" that he gained on the island. He faces the camera and simultaneously extinguishes two large candles with a stream of urine that he splits in two by placing a bent fork over the end of his penis. In fact, this absurd concluding scene is an earlier video-performance work entitled *Untitled (Forked)* (1997), but edited into the end of *Berkeley's Island*, it explicitly conflates the castaway's solitude with the lone artist acting in the studio.

Performing before the camera, rather than a live audience, the

ensuing ambiguity of what is staged and what is real, is exploited in reality television. Pioneered by the cable television network MTV in the early 1990s with *The Real World* (1992–)—a series in which young people live together in a house for several months and have to learn to get along—reality shows captivate enormous audiences in the United States, and achieved international success in 2000 with *Survivor*. Like Ben-Ner's roughly contemporaneous *Berkeley's Island*, *Survivor* takes place in remote locations, often islands in the South Pacific. Compelled to subsist on minimal means and natural resources, contestants are divided into teams and compete over pre-scripted challenges that are often trivial or arbitrary—such as pulling old cannons across the beach or standing on a tiny wooden platform in the water for hours on end—activities that share certain attributes with performance art, including elements of absurdity, endurance and gamesmanship.

Adventure narratives—stories that pit the solitary man against an intractable nature—are recurring themes in Ben-Ner's work. His second home movie, *Moby Dick* (2000), again staged in the kitchen, is a retelling of Herman Melville's 1851 novel about Ishmael, a young man who sets to sea on a whaling ship, whose megalomaniacal, one-legged captain, Ahab, seeks vengeance against a giant white whale that ate his leg. Ben-Ner plays Ishmael, his companion Queequeg and Captain Ahab, while Elia plays both the innkeeper of the Spouter Inn, where Ishmael is recruited for the expedition, and Pip the deck boy. The father-daughter duo enacts various slapstick routines, including one involving the refrigerator doors,



↓ **TREEHOUSE KIT**, 2005, still from single-channel video projection with sound, looped, DVD: 10 min.

Playing a castaway, the artist awakens on a raft-mattress, takes apart a wooden tree and builds furniture, including a loft bed.



which recall Buster Keaton films from the silent era. The kitchen sink and countertop become the deck of the ship, with a wooden mast stuck into the sink and rigging ropes fastened to the watercooler. Ben-Ner rotates the camera rapidly to suggest the rocking of the ship during a storm and uses stop-motion animation to portray white sharks' fins circling on the green-tiled kitchen floor. Meanwhile, he intersperses this scenario with absurdist vignettes of himself performing stunts in a white-walled studio. In one, he sits on the branch of a small tree, cutting away at it until he falls onto a cardboard box below. Unlike reality television, which purports to put real life on camera while hiding the production crews, Ben-Ner's films are about the process of transforming and embellishing everyday reality through fiction.

Ben-Ner's first two videos are also about the existential significance of recording oneself as a means of asserting one's presence. At the beginning of *Berkeley's Island* there is a quote from French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: "To the child who steals and the child who masturbates, to exist is to be seen by adults, and since these secret activities take place in solitude, they do not exist." This idealist sentiment echoes the philosophy of George Berkeley, an 18th-century Irish bishop who cautioned against mistaking the outside world for one's perceptions of it. By filming how he spends his days with his daughter creating these videos, Ben-Ner asserts that although he is at home, apart from the outside world, he still exists; his work as an artist and a father is documented, serving as testament to his labors. Like keeping a diary, capturing oneself on

camera is a way of making one's thoughts and deeds visible to oneself and, eventually, others.

No matter how invisible Ben-Ner felt at the time, he remained engaged with the art world. He showed in group exhibitions at the Haifa Museum, the Israel Museum, and in a show of artists protesting the occupation of Palestinian territories at Tel Aviv's Beit Ha'am Gallery and Umm el-Fahem Museum for Contemporary Art in 2001. After presenting *Moby Dick* at Postmasters gallery in New York in 2003, Ben-Ner screened videos at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the New Society for Visual Arts (NGBK) in Berlin, and the annual mega-show "Art Focus" in Jerusalem, before representing Israel at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

Though the video that Ben-Ner presented in Venice, entitled *Treehouse Kit* (2005), takes place not in the home but a white gallery space—the interior of the Israel Pavilion—and no members of his family appear, the home and the family are nonetheless present. Again playing a shipwrecked character in a bathing suit, Ben-Ner, with a photo of Nava, Elia and Amir on his chest, awakes alone on a mattress that is covered with a wooden plank patterned to resemble a raft, underneath a large, wooden treelike structure made of disassembled furniture. Wearing a thick fake beard—the kind a long-term castaway would grow, but which some critics likened to the beards of Israeli West Bank settlers—he examines the tree and begins to take it apart. Using an Allen wrench that he finds in a drawer carved into the trunk, he reassembles the branches into a rocking chair, a folding umbrella, a table and chair and



↓ **MOBY DICK**, 2000, video stills from single channel video projection without sound, DVD: 12 min 35 sec.

The artist and his daughter Elia enact scenes from Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick* in their home kitchen.



finally a loft bed. He climbs into the bed and, after folding the family photo under leg of the bed's ladder to keep it from rocking, falls asleep. Played in a loop, the video begins again with him waking up on the raft-mattress, suggesting this scenario is a dream within a dream that repeats for eternity. The white walls of the gallery become, metaphorically, a mental space. Ben-Ner, in repeating his discovery that the tree can be reconfigured—itsself a humorous inversion as the natural object (the tree) is composed of human-made wooden furniture that in turn comes from trees—over and over, is trapped in an environment of extreme solitude without end. Just as he finishes constructing a domestic space, he falls asleep only to awaken once again as a castaway.

One noticeable shift in *Treehouse Kit* is that the staged and improvised stunts of his earlier films are gone. Alone with the camera, Ben-Ner performs his survival task almost with ease. This progression from impromptu stunts laid bare to the difficult made to look easy recalls a second generation of reality-television shows, in particular the British-produced *Man vs. Wild* (also known as *Born Survivor*, 2006–) and Canadian-produced *Survivorman* (2004–08). Both shows star a lone survival expert, supposedly acting without support from others, demonstrating the skills necessary to subsist in the wilderness. In one episode, Bear Grylls, star of *Man vs. Wild*, constructs a raft from bamboo and sails off a deserted island. Though Grylls travels with a film crew, *Survivorman* takes its premise to extremes, with its leading man Les Stroud voyaging alone and filming himself for a week in locations such as

the Kalahari Desert with only minimal supplies. Both Grylls and Stroud narrate their thoughts and various techniques, but as their ordeals wear on, their talking to the camera seems to become a necessary component of their survival, a way of maintaining sanity and focus.

Ben-Ner adopts Stroud's method in *Stealing Beauty* (2007), a series of performances conducted without permission in IKEA stores throughout various countries. The 18-minute video opens with scenes of shoppers milling through the showrooms, and Ben-Ner stepping into the frame, saying "Honey, I'm home." Taking off his shirt, he pretends to shower in the display bathroom, emerging into the bedroom in a red, striped robe. Elia and Amir come home from school and sit in the ersatz kitchen. Throughout the film, shoppers walk into the scenes, gaze confusedly at the Ben-Ners and approach the camera. These interruptions lead to numerous jumps in the settings: the dialogue in one display room suddenly cuts to another. Ben-Ner infuses archetypal family conflicts with material lifted from Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), which argues that the family unit preserves private property through the establishment of incest taboos, marriage laws and inheritance. Among the many humorous moments are Ben-Ner insisting that Elia and Amir pay him to read them a bedtime story, arguing with Nava in at least ten different beds (one for each snippet of dialogue), explaining the meaning and origins of private property to Amir and later pretending to masturbate on a couch as other shoppers stroll by. The film ends with Amir and Elia standing before a black flag





with a skull and a hammer and sickle, reading out loud a manifesto to “children of the future” (echoing *The Communist Manifesto*) that calls for the abolition of private property through rampant theft.

These truncated scenes, which the Ben-Ners staged at minimal cost by “stealing” their sets from IKEA, were made over two years. In the way that the showrooms represent a supposedly ideal living space, they are like the islands of Ben-Ner’s previous works—destinations from 21st-century bourgeois fantasies. But there are undercurrents of discord between Ben-Ner and his wife, which on the one hand echo the typical husband-wife dynamic seen in television sitcoms; in light of what viewers learned from later works at the MASS MoCA retrospective, however, they presaged a deeper personal shift. A wall of drawings brought audiences up-to-date on developments in Ben-Ner’s personal life. The black-marker sketch *Making of a Second Nature* (2009) shows the back of Ben-Ner’s balding head as he examines a note that reads, “Guy, you are obsessive & you are not getting any younger. I am leaving you, take care.” Along the top of the paper is a diagram showing how to fold the note into a hat.

Ben-Ner’s recent work is melancholic and cyclical in its narratives. A piece commissioned by the MASS MoCA retrospective, *If Only It Was as Easy to Banish Hunger by Rubbing the Belly as It Is to Masturbate* (2009), a title lifted from a famous saying by the ancient Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes, opens with a shot of a red single-engine plane cruising through a verdant valley. Voices are heard on the radio, belonging to Ben-Ner and MASS MoCA director Joe Thompson, who is piloting the aircraft. Filmed

in the cockpit as they fly over western Massachusetts, the two recite their lines stiltedly, and after Thompson explains how he chose to be a pilot instead of an artist, he drops a copy of French writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* (“The Little Prince,” 1943) from the window of the plane, making it clear that the two are citing lines from famous literary works. At one point, Thompson reads from the Ben-Ner’s divorce notice, which Ben-Ner sarcastically calls “The Price of Freedom,” and after listing the alimony charges, comments, “Some accidents are expensive,” before scrunching the paper into a ball and throwing it out the window. The artist reads from Miguel de Cervantes’ 17th-century novel *Don Quixote* before tossing it out the window as well. Ben-Ner says that he needs a fresh start, but Thompson criticizes him for not being original: “Male, 40, mid-life crisis,” telling him, “The world’s round, life’s a loop, you’re chasing your own tail.”

At once a 16-minute buddy flick with undertones of misogyny and a collage of appropriated dialogue from famous works of fiction, *If Only It Was as Easy* has a repetitive but premonitory structure. While flying, Ben-Ner films a red sedan below. Later, after the plane has crashed into a hill (the crash is staged—he and Thompson are unharmed), they are shown driving the same sedan Ben-Ner shot moments before. From the car Ben-Ner films two men (himself and Thompson) riding on a tandem bike; moments later, having accidentally crashed the car, they continue their journey on the same bike, catching books falling from the sky and continuing to recite stilted lines—Ben-Ner even catches the





scrunched-up ball of his divorce letter. The repetitive structure looks about to continue, as Thompson predicted, until they come upon a dead-end sign in the middle of a field, leading Ben-Ner to remark, “No circles here . . . I told you so.” Finality, the dead end, comes out of nowhere, just as another cycle might have been about to begin.

A hermetic structure and rhyming dialogue are featured in Ben-Ner’s newest work, a commission by the New York performance art biennial Performa, where it will premiere in November. In the film, the recently divorced artist carries out a phone conversation between two friends, one living in Berlin, the other in Tel Aviv—with Ben-Ner playing both roles. Flying back and forth between the two cities on more than 25 round-trip journeys over the course of several months, Ben-Ner films himself in one city, then flies to the other to record his response, before flying back again, over and over. As Ben-Ner explained in an email to *ArtAsiaPacific* in August, he set himself a limitation that no editing is allowed, meaning “the camera and tape need to physically travel from one city to the other for every exchange between the two protagonists.” Ben-Ner went on to admit—it is also revealed in the video—that the impetus behind the piece was that while he was living in Tel Aviv, he started dating a woman in Berlin. The grant that came with the Performa Commission financed his travel back and forth, allowing him to meet his girlfriend once a week in Berlin. However, as Ben-Ner elaborated in his email: “The problem is that my girlfriend left me not long after the shooting started, but I am obliged to go back and forth, against my will, to complete the video, since

I am under a contract—therefore reversing the original meaning of the movie. I end up submitting my life to art instead of the reverse. It’s like a small fable, I guess.”

Seeing his life through the lens of his art, and vice versa, is second nature to Ben-Ner—even his politics are influenced by it. As he said in an interview in Italy before an exhibition at Genoa’s Pinksummer gallery in early 2009: “I would propose, in the nature of my recent divorce, that Israelis should divorce from the land of Israel. Jewish people are better off homeless. We are much more productive like that.”

Ben-Ner’s productivity comes despite this latest reversal of fortune—winning a commission that ended up being more of an obligation than a blessing. His family, once the centerpiece and motivation behind his films, is absent, replaced by the cares of a single man traveling alone with his camera. Standing by the installation of *Treehouse Kit* at a press event at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art’s Helen Rubenstein Pavilion in early September, Ben-Ner told *AAP* that he still had nine more round trips to complete but was confident that the new work would be done by November. Asked what he thinks of Tolstoy’s famous opening to *Anna Karenina* about unhappy families, Ben-Ner replied: “I love Tolstoy’s premise, but I think the reality is usually less romantic; meaning, you are not the only unhappy person but also not unique in your sadness. As for my own family, I cannot tell you how unique it is. I don’t have a different one to compare it with—it seems normal to me. But if we do seem unique, I guess in many ways we are also unhappy.”