

Guy Ben-Ner's videos mix high and low, combining Marx and the Marx Brothers, Melville and kitchen sitcoms. While the Tel Aviv-based artist often takes script ideas from literary classics, the props and sets for his videos come from everyday life. He has staged videos in his apartment, in New York's Riverside Park, and even in an Ikea store. And his two children have starred in many of his deliberately low-tech-looking faux home movies over the past decade. *Moby Dick* (2000), shot in his home, featured his young daughter as swabby playing opposite the artist as Ahab.

But for his most recent piece, *Second Nature* (2008), Ben-Ner turned to big-screen professionals. He hired seasoned animal actors—with films such as *The Matrix* among their credits—to perform in a ten-minute take on Aesop's fable "The Fox and The Crow." The tale involves a cunning fox who wrests a piece of cheese from the beak of a crow by flattering it into singing. The story, however, is beside the point, or is just one of several points being made. Like all of Ben-Ner's videos—eight of which will be on view in a midcareer exhibition opening the 23rd of this month at MASS MoCA in North Adams—*Second Nature* exposes the basic conventions underlying illusionistic storytelling, and it's funny to boot.

The video opens with a steady shot of two animal trainers, a soft-spoken Frenchman and a brusque American woman, trying to coax a crow to sit still on a barren tree in the middle of a field. It then cuts to the artist, with camera equipment piled around him and a huge boom mic held too close by an assistant, reciting in rhyme a general principle of fables—that agitating for change leads to misfortune. "Even if you change your habits, your nature will not alter," says the artist.

"Guy is always playing with ideas of the wild versus civilization," says MASS MoCA curator Susan Cross. "There's a tie there between making the animals work within this structured situation and having that double back on the trainers" when Ben-Ner tries to train them in turn.

As *Second Nature* progresses, the two trainers continue to struggle with the animals and banter with the rhyming Ben-Ner. The trainers eventually get their own dramatic moment, reading lines from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. They look as enthusiastic about their roles as the animals themselves do: method acting it's not. Only in the final minute of the video does the story itself take over: the fox runs alone in the field and looks beseechingly at the crow in the tree, who eventually squawks and drops the cheese. Fable rendered, at last.

"There's an entry into Guy's work for everyone," says Cross. "Making the mode of production transparent to the viewers brings people in." Indeed, Ben-Ner's videos are mercifully solicitous of audiences: they are funny, engaging, and never overlong. They also have few pretensions: no swelling music or perfectly framed shots on color-saturated film stock. "I like the roughness of video. I don't like film, it's just expensive," he says.

The accessibility of the homemade look and the off-kilter humor help rope in viewers for the artist's more erudite points. He simultaneously embraces and ridicules various social systems throughout his videos. The fable, for instance, is an ancient genre, and, in his rhymes, Ben-Ner the actor restates traditional caste concepts of one's proper place in life.

He clearly does not fully believe in them—but does in part.

"I wanted to think again about some kind of art form that is trying to teach the reader or viewer in a way, and if there's any art form trying to teach, it's fables," says Ben-Ner. "It's difficult for me to tell something without doing it tongue in cheek. On the other hand, if I cannot say anything or communicate anything valuable in art then it's not worth anything."

MASS MoCA has commissioned a new work for its show, which the artist says is about the cliché of a midlife crisis—including plenty of slapstick and double takes along the way, and references extending from *Alice in Wonderland* to Dante's *Inferno*. Ben-Ner himself, who recently turned 40, has been trying to push his work further away from what might be seen as the family-comedy rut. "But you cannot escape yourself," he says, sounding as if he is quoting Aesop. ■

Thinking

Guy Ben-Ner
achieves high impact
with low-tech,
fractured storytelling
of everything from
Aesop to *Moby-Dick*

BY CARLY BERWICK

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Outside the Fox



***Second Nature*, 2008, a video about making a film of a fable, features the artist-director himself, Guy Ben-Ner (top left in the green shirt), as well as a fox who coaxes a crow to drop a wedge of cheese.**