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Current Shows 

Guy Ben-Ner

Gimpel Fils, [London, UK](#)

Small price-tags dangle from each item in the room, perfect totems for the dream home. Guy Ben-Ner stands at the sink, mimicking the laborious act of washing the dishes, as his two children Elia and Amir (who feature in the artist's past work) sit at the table, listening to their father drone on. Above the clatter of plates, Ben-Ner launches into a monologue elaborating on the difference between family, love, and private property, reassuring Amir that he had children because they are 'in business for the future.' Such is the rudimentary domestic bliss of Ben-Ner's video work *Stealing Beauty* (2007).

And yet the artist/director/main protagonist is suddenly obscured by a middle-aged woman's puffy, pockmarked face, peering into the video lens, followed promptly by jean-clad posteriors and a few blue and yellow tarpaulin bags. Welcome to IKEA! The destination for all your domestic fantasies, the bastion for the misguided de Stijl devotee and, in this instance, home to the Ben-Ner family - until they are caught, thrown out and have to scout out a new location to film in.

Over the last ten years we've witnessed the unveiling, on Super 8, of Ben-Ner's very own neurotic *Wunderkammer*, referencing and reinterpreting film, literature, and performance art history – from Chaplin to *Moby Dick* to *Robinson Crusoe* – in an attempt to explore his domestic cage. *Stealing Beauty* is a slight departure for the artist: rather than developing a slapstick narrative in the confines of the family home, Ben-Ner offers a parody by integrating his family into the ideal rooms of an IKEA superstore. As they go about their daily routine we are privy to a family drama: Amir, the youngest son, has been caught stealing. And so commences Ben-Ner's existential lesson, endeavouring to provide reference points for his son to make wise choices and to protect the father's current ethos: 'love holds the family together and the family stops the property from leaking out.'

Engels' *The Origin of the Family* (1884) receives ample airtime as Ben-Ner tries to clarify the difference between a marriage relationship based on love, and ownership of private property. Most of this goes over the head of Ben-Ner junior, as does the hypocrisy of the situation, which is intended entirely for the audience. The lessons of classical liberal economics are undermined by Ben-Ner's filming without permission in the public/private space of IKEA. The notion that one must work hard in order to gain property and objects of value is made to seem farcical, and we are left pondering a subtext that points to a larger concern of border definition: what or who now defines private property and one's ability to exclude?

As the lesson continues, we are presented with the father's very own sin, yet again suggesting that his moral guidance is somewhat fallacious. Ben-Ner's wife returns home to find him in the shower (thankfully the IKEA staff don't catch him at this point), and she promptly accuses him of masturbating, declaring his actions a 'total waste of fucking energy' – quite poignant in this instance.

Whilst *Stealing Beauty* is laden with timely themes and socio-political meanderings, shown at Gimpel Fils the work falls flat. Cinematic references and arch ironising are undermined by the fact that one can barely hear the audio, and the video appears washed out due to light filtering through the door and the cracks in the black sheets draped over the window. To complete the experience, the space recalls some small provincial airport, with grey carpets and randomly scattered pleather furnishings. As Ben-Ner explains to Amir, one shouldn't 'confuse profit with theft'. I was left thinking that the gallery would do well to consider *Stealing Beauty*'s lessons – the artist's energy has been wasted indeed.

Nicola Harvey

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