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Guy Ben-Ner Ron Mueck

Foreword

The exhibition *Real Life: Ron Mueck and Guy Ben-Ner* showcases two important voices in contemporary art whose careers the National Gallery of Canada has been following in recent years. *Real Life* opens with works by the Australian-born, London-based sculptor Ron Mueck, including three from the National Gallery's collection: the small-scale *Old Woman in Bed* (2000), the giant-sized *Head of a Baby* (2003), and the recently acquired mammoth *A Girl* (2006).

Paired with Mueck's highly acclaimed hyper-realist sculptures are video and installation works by the increasingly prominent artist Guy Ben-Ner. Israeli-born and Berlin-based, Ben-Ner has been receiving international attention since he represented his native country at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Included in *Real Life* are two recent National Gallery acquisitions, *Treehouse Kit* (2005), the installation he created for the Israeli pavilion, and *Stealing Beauty* (2007), a video set in IKEA® stores around the globe. Following Ron Mueck's outstanding solo show at the National Gallery in 2007, *Real Life* offers Canadian viewers the opportunity to investigate his production in greater detail. At the same time, it serves to introduce us to the exciting and original oeuvre of Guy Ben-Ner, which humorously but critically engages the everyday dramas of real life. Taken together, the work of these two artists creates a narrative in *Real Life* about the contradictions, challenges, and creativities of the human condition.

Curated by Jonathan Shaughnessy, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, this is the Gallery's sixth exhibition in Shawinigan Space. We are pleased to be collaborating again this year with La Cité de l'énergie, General Director Robert Trudel, and his excellent staff. *Real Life* would not have been possible without the generosity of both artists and many lenders, notably Aimee and Robert Lehrman, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, the 21C Museum Foundation, Tel Aviv Art Museum, and Magda Sawon at Postmasters Gallery. We gratefully acknowledge their contributions.

Pierre Théberge, O.C., C.Q.
Director, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Real Life by Hand Ron Mueck and Guy Ben-Ner

Real Life draws connections between two very different artists who share a common interest in a direct, hands-on approach capable of bridging the gap between experience and our reflection on it. In this, neither Ron Mueck nor Guy Ben-Ner veer far away from "real life"—in artistic process or content—as they work to diffuse the boundaries between art and the everyday. There is a surprising affinity between the meticulous fabrication of Ron Mueck's highly polished and lifelike sculptures, and Guy Ben-Ner's seemingly off-the-cuff but actually carefully constructed "home videos", which often take over a year to make, governed as they are by innumerable hours of editing and the restrictions of working with children. Similarly, Mueck may work for a year or more on a single piece, in his case because he operates mostly without assistants.

Both artists make the immediate world around them the locus of their work. Ben-Ner's family appears in all his videos, while many of Mueck's sculptures are modelled after relatives. Curator Susanna Greeves notes that he has portrayed his father and his wife's grandmother, "and drawn on his experiences of his children's births. *Mask*, his first self portrait, was inspired by his imagining how his small daughters saw him as he scolded them, his scowling face looming above." A recurring element of self-portraiture appears "quite literally, as Mueck will often use himself as a convenient reference, stripping off a sock while finishing the detail on a foot for example."

There is nothing new in seeking inspiration at home. What is notable in Mueck's case is that autobiography is beside the point. The territory the sculptor explores touches on the indescribable and the unnamable. His figures, posed between action and inertia, act as polysemic narratives of such grand human themes as birth and death, love and loss, aging and the passage of time. It is of no great benefit for the viewer's experience of the works to know anything about the artist himself.

In sharp contrast, for Guy Ben-Ner, personal context is everything. His videos position the members of his family—his son Amir, daughter Elia, and wife Nava—in an engaging, humorously-scripted realm somewhere

between fiction and reality. His narratives have clearly delineated plots from beginning to end that interrogate such archetypal human concepts as love and marriage, necessity and shelter, desire and responsibility. One recurrent trope is imagining the self in a world of isolation. Daniel Defoe's iconic story of a man cut off from civilization, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, inspired both *Berkeley's Island* (1999), in which Ben-Ner creates his own desert island in his kitchen, only to have it infiltrated by a diaper-wearing Elia; and *Tree-house Kit* (2005), an installation for the Venice Biennale consisting of a sculpture plus "instructional" video showing him building an island for one in a tree assembled from build-it-yourself furniture. In this piece, his family only appears in a photograph that he uses to shim up the bed.

Herman Melville's classic tale of Captain Ahab's pursuit of a whale, *Moby Dick* (1851) has also influenced Ben-Ner. His version (2000) is an ode to silent film that stars the artist and Elia acting out the novel in a homemade set in the kitchen and living room. An inspired and hilarious video that eloquently conveys Elia's childish imagination as the conduit between family life and adventure fantasy, *Moby Dick* expresses a tension found throughout Ben-Ner's work: the dialectic between the artistic and the domestic. Commenting on his video, the artist asks:

Is it better to go after the fantasy object and lament the family left behind, or to stay at home and lament the lost object? My movie is a kind of reversal of Ahab's thoughts ... It is a stay-at-home movie, and as such can only fantasize the sea while doing the dishes.²

Ben-Ner's stay-at-home life began in the 1990s after his first child was born and he made the decision to engage both worlds – the artistic and the domestic – simultaneously. Two "string drawings" from 1994–95 comically reveal the graphic extent of this decision: they depict a kind of torture room in the home rigged with pulleys, levers, and ropes to ensure that his physical arousal will lead directly to death. Since his earlier works, Ben-Ner has gone on to establish an aesthetic common denominator as a father working

closely with his wife and children. He found a model for his own on-screen family dynamic in early vaudeville theatre, especially in the life of Buster Keaton, whose father would throw him around the stage (the origin of the word *slapstick*). Keaton's story was one inspiration for *Wild Boy* (2004), which also pays homage to François Truffaut's 1970 film *Wild Child*. In Ben-Ner's version, Amir lives in a cave among birds, rabbits, and other animals – in the apartment kitchen in New York. The artist sets a levered cardboard trap, captures "the wild boy" in order to "civilize" him, and names him "Buster", a reborn vaudevillian character embodied by Amir with endearing enthusiasm. He plays a feral child so well, Ben-Ner says, because "he is not acting, he's really living the thing. We build woods inside the house with a hill and he has his own cave that he lives in."³ The moments of discovery and delight caught in *Wild Boy* and in videos like the charming *faux* nature documentary *Elia – A Story of an Ostrich Chick* (2003), also hark back to the bygone days of vaudeville, when a successful theatre was described as needing "an atmosphere of friendliness ... a place where nothing interferes with the rapport between audience and stage. It needs the warmth of intimacy."⁴

The conflation in vaudeville between life and art also appears in the career of Ron Mueck, who, like Keaton, was born into his skill set. As the son of toy-makers, he began making toys, models, and costumes at a young age. This led to a career, first in cinema and special effects, then in sculpting, a vocation for which he never formally trained. As well as drawing on family members and himself for his sculptures, Mueck, like Ben-Ner, turns to them in his production studio. With few outside assistants, it is less an impersonal production factory than a calm haven where his family often helps out.

Unlike Ben-Ner's production, which capitalizes on a ramshackle, unsophisticated aesthetic in its formal appearance, Mueck's unnamed sculptures belie their homegrown roots, turning for their effect on the rigorous erasure of all evidence of a human hand. This is exactly the facet of the sculptor's practice that must be maintained in order to preserve its "magic", in the view of British poet Craig Raine. "Ideally, his subjects

should be obvious and his technique enigmatic. That way ... his sculptures will simply *be*, in and for themselves, not as vehicles for ideas."⁵

The magical, lifelike quality of Mueck's sculptures is constantly remarked. And indeed, it is impossible to deny their mysterious presence, which, says curator Colin Wiggins, "leaves the possibility, lurking in the back of one's mind, that some other, sinister, process has been employed in their creation."⁶ Each begins with drawings and small plaster maquettes that are gradually scaled-up to produce a cast fibreglass or silicone rendition of the human body, ready for the application of paint, hair, and finally eyes. The resulting inanimate object is enlivened with a corporeal aura so strong that it seems to demand an open-ended dialogue between two selves: sculpture and viewer. In *Real Life*, this exchange begins in the graphic depiction of birth provided by the huge, unyieldingly defiant newborn, *A Girl* (2006), and ends with the reduced yet powerful confrontation with aging and death of *Old Woman in Bed* (2000). In between are works addressing everyday life – from the mundane to the consequential – including *Mother and Child* (2001–03), capturing the mutually inquisitive, fatigued, astonished gaze between two beings not yet separated but suddenly strangers to

let his pieces make their own statements. They do this well, very well, which explains the intense visceral reactions that they provoke.

Beyond the immediate effect, is there a deeper philosophical or personal intention in these pieces? By reconciling Mueck's finished sculptures with his artistic process – steeped from start to finish in the autobiographical – it seems possible to find in them an idea concerning the exact relationship between object and viewer, self and other, that is at the heart of each. Take, for example, the raw, bloodied portrait *A Girl*, depicted moments after leaving the womb, umbilical cord cut, and breathing the first puffs of life. Gigantic yet anatomically correct and meticulously natural (the veins on her pale skin are extraordinarily painted), *A Girl* exemplifies an outlook on life and our relationship with others: we enter into a world that precedes our existence and with which we are forced, able or not, to reconcile throughout our lives.¹⁰ The umbilical cord is the key here. The artist took much time over its faithful rendition and it is a notable, if indiscreet, item to profile. But it is this graphic moment in the birthing process – transfixed in the frozen time of sculpture – that separates the newborn from its un-individuated existence in the womb. The cutting of the cord is the only moment in life where one can identify a passage from some form of universal, pre-linguistic, existence into the individual, social, language-mediated existence that follows until one's death. The giant mask *Head of a Baby* (2003), on a pedestal and at a monumental scale unbefitting its young age, is a cleaner, more analytical presentation of the same moment. At the other extreme, the tiny, delicate *Old Woman in Bed*, her body already shrouded and gone, her closed eyes and mouth and half-covered head repudiating the job of living, encapsulates a possibly grateful return to undifferentiated oblivion. Read this way, Mueck's sculptures not only engage the viewer in an emotional voyage from birth to death, but present a pointed image of the existential problem of the human condition. Of course, such a reading implies the presence of, not only the hand, but the artist's own psyche and thoughts within the finished work.

And, indeed, the hand and mind of the artist are an ever-present component of both Ben-Ner's and Mueck's works, which, because they never step far from the familiar, project a strong sense that they speak not only for themselves, but for the artists as well. In their respective oeuvres, so different and yet so surprisingly aligned, both Ron Mueck and Guy Ben-Ner meld the personal with the primordial and universal, and tell us there is no place where an object or human can simply "be", without implication or responsibility. To embrace such an idea, their works declare, would be to divorce the realm of the imagination from any meaningful context in real life.

Jonathan Shaughnessy
Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art
National Gallery of Canada

Notes

- 1 Susanna Greeves, "Ron Mueck – A Redefinition of Realism," in Heiner Bastian, ed., *Ron Mueck* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), p. 40.
- 2 As quoted in Robert K. Wallace, "Ben-Ner's Moby Dick and Melville's Mechanism of Projection," *Leviathan* 9, no. 1 (2007): 43–44.
- 3 As quoted in Alex McDonald, "There Is a Whale in My Sink," *State of the Arts* [Australia], January/March 2006: 22–23.
- 4 Robert W. Snyder, as quoted in Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, "Houdini's Premonition: Virtuality and Vaudeville on the Internet," *Leonardo* 30, no. 5 (1997): 370.
- 5 Craig Raine, "To the Life," *Modern Painters* (Autumn 1998): 22.
- 6 Colin Wiggins, "Ron Mueck at the National Gallery," in Susanna Greeves and Colin Wiggins, *Ron Mueck* (London: National Gallery Company, 2003), p. 22.
- 7 As quoted in Gilles Godmer, *Guy Ben-Ner: Treehouse Kit* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2007), p. 19.
- 8 As quoted in Naomi Cass, "Guy Ben-Ner: Selected Video Works 1999–2004," CCP Gallery Three, 7 July–26 August 2006 [interview with Guy Ben-Ner], "Flash: Center for Contemporary Photography," no. 2 (June/September 2006): 4.
- 9 Jean Clair, "Ron Mueck," *Artpress* 317 (November 2005): 15.
- 10 Keith Hartley makes a similar point in *Ron Mueck* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2006), pp. 8–9.

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phone 212 727 3323 fax 212 229 2829

postmasters@thing.net

459 w 19 street nyc 10011 usa

www.postmastersart.com