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ART

Guy Ben-Ner: Spies at Site Gallery

March 28, 2011

Playing out Moby Dick in the kitchen and living domestic life in Ikea; art in the service of life

At first glance some of [Guy Ben-Ner's](#) videos might be mistaken for elaborate home movies as the parental auteur casts his family in a series of **blockbusters on a shoe-string**. The cinematic epic *Moby Dick* is scaled down for a handy-cam screen and is set in the humble family kitchen. With economic efficiency the cabinets become cabins, the laundry basket becomes a lifeboat and freezer door swings like a boom. Showing early promise **Ben-Ner's young daughter plays the entire crew of the ship**, operating somewhere between play and performance as she and her father mug their way through various slapstick set pieces. So far so cute, but there's a biting wit at work here too.

In another domestic piece, *Stealing Beauty* Ben-Ner casts his family again, but this time in the **identikit anonymity of an Ikea store**. Treating each new aspirational display as if it were their home, the family shower, sleep, wash-up and argue while a discreet camera films them from afar. **A certain level of absurdity** is ever present as passingshoppers are distracted by the unfolding drama. But more than a Dom Joly stunt, these scenes are only the logical extension of Ikea's marketing model – their products are displayed like stage sets willing you to see yourself as the lead actor in the domestic drama which is in actual fact cheaply reproduced all over the world. As Guy Ben-Ner and his family riff on **the ethics of private property**, we are constantly reminded that **everything they touch has a price tag**, even, it appears, the bedtime story that the children pay their father to read.

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Trying to kill two birds
with just one stone,

Post-divorce, Ben-Ner's films become less centred on the family with *Drop the Monkey* showcasing a whip-smart virtuoso performance. Shot over the period of one year and documenting 25 trips between Tel Aviv and Berlin the film plays out a conversation between Guy in Israel and Guy in Germany. The words are a witty ping pong match of rhyming couplets, while the cinematography maintains a live and dynamic feel thanks to the tape never leaving the camera throughout the whole twelve months with any editing done entirely 'in camera'. The project was originally conceived as a way of getting the commissioning gallery to pay for multiple trips to Berlin where Ben-Ner's then girlfriend lived – using art in the service of life – but when the relationship broke down part way through filming this dynamic was turned on its head with the artist committed to multiple lonely trips back to Germany.

Site Gallery has also commissioned a new work from Guy Ben-Ner for the exhibition. *Spies* is far simpler in structure than the other work on display, a slow zoom out from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism logo accompanied by a voiceover dialogue which weaves together quotes from *Waiting for Godot*, *End Game* and *Gulliver's Travels*. This slow-burn piece references the bible story of the twelve spies Moses sent out to inspect the land of Israel, but explores the relationship between tourists and spies with the viewer becoming both as they watch and try to make sense of the scene. Once again themes of occupation, appropriation and possession return to the fore, which should be no surprise since Guy Ben-Ner hails from the contested land of Israel.

Guy Ben-Ner; *Spies* continues until 14 May 2011 at Site Gallery, Sheffield.

Watch a video interview with the artist before the show opened.

See a trailer for *Stealing Beauty* (domestic life played out in Ikea stores!)

Review by Sarah Cockburn