

Family, lies and videotape: Guy Ben-Ner's meteoric rise to fame

'You want to document life, and by the very fact of being with a camera and shooting a film, you change life,' says the 44-year-old video-artist.

By Dalia Karpel | Apr. 4, 2013 | 2:40 PM



Guy Ben-Ner. Photo by Ilya Melnikov

On February 7, a week before the opening of his exhibition at Sommer Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, Guy Ben-Ner completed work on his new film, "Soundtrack." The 44-year-old artist wrote, directed, filmed, edited and produced the work himself, as he has done with nearly all his films. This is his first solo show in Israel for seven years, and he managed to cobble it together in a period that was personally trying for him. "The past five years were catastrophic on a personal level," he says, "but also the happiest. I am totally in love and I am happy with my children."

Ben-Ner has three children. In 2009 he divorced his wife, Nava, who

featured in a number of his films. The divorce took place in Berlin, where they were living at the time. She decided to return to Israel with their two children, and he too left the city he loves and returned to his native land in order to be close to the children. Since then, he has rebuilt his life with the poet and editor Yaara Shehori. They are raising their 2-year-old daughter together. Amid these upheavals, he managed to complete a complex production.

“Soundtrack” is a powerful work. Its cast includes the artist’s father, the writer Yitzhak Ben-Ner; his mother, Noa, a nurse by profession; and about 10 of his friends, among them artists Doron Rabina and Boaz Arad, and film director Avi Mograbi.

“Soundtrack” was shot in Ben-Ner and Shehori’s rented apartment in the lower-class Yad Eliyahu neighborhood of Tel Aviv. Its drama takes place in the kitchen – a favorite Ben-Ner setting. In the opening shot, Daniel Meir, a soundman with earphones, and Shehori are sitting at a table. Ben-Ner, standing next to them on a chair, drops a television on the floor; it shatters into small fragments. Shehori spills the contents of a cloth bag – dust and bits of stones – on the table, and Ben-Ner tries to collect the refuse with a small vacuum cleaner (the kind used for cars). Meir works a hand mixer. Familiar sights flash across a television screen in the room: a frightened mass of people running for their lives; the Israeli army attacking Gaza in Operation Pillar of Defense; a girl in Gaza running, seized by fear; and more.

A fire breaks out, cupboard doors fly open, dishes smash, electric appliances go wild and self-start. Total chaos. A large knife is brandished and the artist’s hand is lopped off. Only little Amalia, the daughter of Ben-Ner and Shehori, angelically beautiful, moves about in the kitchen as though nothing has happened. After all, life’s just a game. At one point, Ben-Ner’s older daughter, Elia, and his son, Amir, arrive, but the destruction continues unabated.

Ben-Ner has effectively perpetrated an act of theft by “borrowing” 11 minutes of intensive sound from Steven Spielberg’s 2005 film “War of the Worlds.” Playing on the word “dubbing,” Ben-Ner has dubbed his act of audio-stealing “budding.”

H.G. Wells’ classic novel, published in 1898 (and on which Spielberg’s film is based), recounts an invasion of the planet by Martians in tripods. On Halloween in 1938, Orson Welles, then a little-known actor and director, created a panic in the United States by breaking into a musical program on the radio with a dramatic report that aliens from Mars had landed in a small town in New Jersey. Since then, the novel has spawned a number of musicals and films.

How did you get the idea of using the soundtrack from the Spielberg film?

Ben-Ner: “I chose the Spielberg film version, because H.G. Wells makes no mention of the family unit. I was interested in why American cinema feels a need to transform every catastrophe into an event with implications for the family unit. The answer: because it involves ideologies and capitalism. Since Hitchcock, the great catastrophes in American cinema have been a projection of dysfunctional families. With Spielberg it assumes ridiculous proportions. Tom Cruise plays a divorced father whose children are



From 'Elia – A Story of an Ostrich Chick.'
Photo by Guy Ben-Ner



From 'Soundtrack'



Guy Ben-Ner. Photo by Ilya Melnikov

spending the weekend at his place for the first time. He doesn't know how to behave with them and is in a panic over the situation. But just then, invaders from Mars start to wreak havoc in the New Jersey port city where the Cruise character lives and works. As soon as he starts to become a good father, the invaders are routed."

Conclusion?

"Don't be an activist. If you just see to your small kingdom, other things will work out. I wanted to do the opposite. Instead of the family drama becoming a projection of a world war, I decided to let the family project inward, into home life, the events of the outside, and in a certain sense to turn a psychoanalytical model into a Marxist model. That was the theoretical and conceptual principle that interested me, and it worked on me so powerfully that I decided that this was the right moment to go back to working with my children."

And what did they say?

"The last film we'd done together was 'Stealing Beauty' [2007, 17:40 minutes]. We stopped making movies, because doing so overlapped with my divorce from Nava, and a feeling arose that it was also a divorce from making films together. But I knew we would have to make a film in order to get past that barrier. I did not get divorced from what I had with them before.

"Two years ago, I asked them if they would want to make another film. I told them about the 'War of the Worlds' idea and said that my film refers, in a certain way, to our life. One of the reasons I chose the Spielberg story is that through it we could exteriorize or conceptualize the dramas we ourselves experienced."

We'll get back to the children later. Why did you shoot at home again?

"In 'Soundtrack,' buildings explode and the screeching of cars is clearly audible, and all the downscaling that has to be done between outside and inside is the radicalization of what I was looking for: for the soundtrack to come from a different place and for this hyper-drama to enter the kitchen of the apartment. By the way, in contrast to the past, this time I paid the children for their work. The film took seven months to make. You film, then you have to edit and make sure the filmed images fit the sound, and then go back and shoot it again. It's more like a painting, in which you come closer and move back, come closer and move back, than directing a video work, in which you write, edit and film. In contrast to my other films, I needed additional characters, so friends also took part. Most of them were certain that the movie would turn out crappy."

Why?

"When I shoot a film, it doesn't look as though it's being done by a professional. I see and know what is going on, but everyone who has gone through the experience of filming with me has been surprised by the end result. To them, it didn't seem as if art was happening there."

Unrequited love

Also on view at the Sommer gallery is Ben-Ner's film "Drop the Monkey" (2009). The artist appears in the film as a character who seemingly splits in two and exists simultaneously in two cities, Tel Aviv and Berlin. It's an unedited work in which the scenes were shot in the order in which they appear on the screen. Shooting the film took a year and required Ben-Ner to fly back and forth between the two cities 24 times. The title is taken from the 1983 Joan Armatrading song "Drop the Pilot," which, Ben-Ner

says, consists of “metaphors of love through flying.” The choice of the title “Drop the Monkey” was associative. It’s about unrequited love.

The film, which was commissioned by the Performa Festival in New York, is about the collapsing relationship of the artist with his girlfriend at the time, an Israeli who lived in Berlin. It deals with themes such as how to strengthen a relationship – which finally falls apart, the girlfriend leaving – while the artist must also complete the film on time. The paramount question is: Which comes first, art or life?

“You want to document life,” Ben-Ner says, “and by the very fact of being with a camera and shooting a film, you change life. In the film, my girlfriend leaves me because I am making a movie about our relationship. She understands that by making a movie on a one-year contract, I am also binding her for a year, and she doesn’t like that. Fiction enters life and instead of documenting life, it changes it. That whole mix happened in real life.”

So you wrecked your relations with the girl and emerged with a film that will advance your career a little?

“She would have left me after two months, anyway. With some relationships you can predict their future. When I made the film, I suspected something would happen that would make my life miserable but make the film better.”

How could you have known that when you wrote the script to raise funds or obtain support for the project?

“The film sprang from the idea of making a work that would not be edited. I noted in the proposal that the film could not be made with present-day cameras but with a camera that uses tapes. It’s a paean to technology that will no longer exist – everything is digital now. Because the subject is a phone conversation between Berlin and Tel Aviv, the backers were asked to finance 24 return flights.

“I returned to Israel, but I have a girlfriend in Berlin and you are financing my relationship with her,’ I wrote in the proposal. They accepted the idea and thought to themselves, ‘Okay, another artist who is making a film about how he makes fun of curators.’ There’s a trend of creating art that turns curators into a joke. But that isn’t what I had in mind. Somehow, I knew that things would happen, and the film is constructed, in a sense, like an allegory about someone who is trying to enslave his art to the needs of life, and in the end finds his own life enslaved.”

Artistic freedom appeals to Ben-Ner. “I make films without a budget,” he says, “in the same way that there are writers who write books and writers who produce short stories. I feel that the moment a film goes on too long, I am stealing time.

“In movie theaters, I feel that time is being used manipulatively to get me to identify with the characters. That doesn’t interest me. Borges wrote only short stories. Why do I have to write a long story if it’s not my thing? I see very little art and not much cinema, other than the films I see in the classroom at the School of Art – Hamidrasha, where I teach two days a week.”

Masking the truth

Guy Ben-Ner was born in 1969, in Ramat Gan. “I don’t think I was born an artist,” he says. “I always painted – that was a territory where I could get compliments – but I didn’t want to be an artist. I was an athlete, and until the age of 15 I had fantasies of being a basketball player. There was a

specific moment when I realized I would not be good enough as a basketball player, and that what I knew how to do was paint. I will keep the special things about my childhood to myself. I prefer not to create an association to anything.”

Why?

“Someone wanted to make a documentary film about me shooting a film. That’s a dumb idea, because my films are themselves documentaries about how a family makes a film. It’s the same with my biography. You live in the present and touch it through stories that you devise today. The past is a structure which you portray according to a different story every time. It is there in all my films, like some kind of magnet.”

Ben-Ner attended Tel Aviv’s Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts. He says painting was the only reason he stayed in school. “Year after year they wanted to expel me, because I didn’t do anything. The teachers in the art track fought for me to be allowed to stay.” Among his teachers were the video artist Doron Solomons, who has edited several of Ben-Ner’s films, and the aforementioned Boaz Arad, who was involved in making some of them.

In “Karaoke,” his first video piece (1996), Ben-Ner unzips his fly and pulls out his penis, which is decorated with two stick-on eyes, and “sings” Connie Francis’ 1959 hit “Lipstick on Your Collar.” “It’s a performance in front of a static camera,” he says. “There isn’t much cinema there. You stand there and perform. It derives from dealing with body art with the addition of humor and psychology.”

When did you start making the kitchen films with the family?

“Because I don’t have a studio and I work at home, and the children are there, they became part of the raw material. Elia became part of the things I was dealing with. Gradually, as I made ‘Karaoke’ and ‘Rolling Pin’ and ‘Forked,’ I also sculpted a little and I saw that I was fed up with painting. It bored me. I had the feeling that it was always self-conscious.

“Video started to become the thing that connected me to day-to-day life. You turn on a camera and you can do something with your daughter. It was very liberating. Most of the things I wanted to deal with were more narrative in character, because I became more interested in literature and cinema, and also because of the situation of working from home. The first film, ‘Berkeley’s Island’ [1999, 15 minutes], stemmed from the desire to create a studio, a locus of isolation within a family.

“It was the same with ‘Moby Dick’ [2000, 12:26 minutes], adventures at sea, which originated in literature with the schema of ‘I left my family on the shore and set sail.’ It refers to my fantasy of being rid of the family. In a certain sense, you can speak truth once you put on a mask. You can say all kinds of things that you didn’t say before, if you quote or speak in rhyme.

“There’s a story about this in Buster Keaton’s biography. He worked with his father from the age of three. He was billed as ‘the human mop,’ because in their slapstick routines his father threw him from wall to wall and the boy learned how to fall properly and take it. He related that when he was 13-14, they started to quarrel. One day they went onstage after a terrible fight. They came out of that show with broken ribs and fractures of the arms and legs. When they were on the stage in the middle of a fictitious play, the truth – the desire to kill each other – was revealed. I don’t believe in the documentary genre. I believe in taking life and placing a fictitious structure on it. That is what can suddenly bring the truth out. Through the stage you can play yourself.”

Your parents appear for the first time in ‘Soundtrack.’ The scene in which they appear is a bit strange, because they look slightly lost. Why?

“There were objective conditions, with which they knew more or less what to do; but there were also interpersonal conditions. We have now arrived at a stage of openness and love in which suddenly I can enlist their help and they can enlist my help. Still, there was an embarrassing moment. My father was supposed to say something fast, in English. It was a text that no one had a chance of understanding. During two days of shooting he wasn’t able to say it, even though he practiced with tremendous devotion. He had a small part, but it was one of the most difficult in the film. In the end, we did it.”

What was your relationship with your father like when you were younger?

“For years we didn’t get along. I love him very much, and my parents and I are now in an amazing period. I adore them. In the past, we didn’t get along because of his character, my character, my mother’s character – things I wanted that were contrary to their wishes. My generation left home early. You could rent an apartment cheaply back then. The break between us was extreme, and was connected, in part, to my going abroad. We were always in touch, but it was a connection filled with quarrels and tensions.”

In Shira Stav’s Haaretz review (in Hebrew) of your father’s newly published collection of stories and novellas, she wrote, “The doleful despondency, void of compassion and without consolation, and the refusal to curry favor can perhaps account for the fact that Yitzhak Ben-Ner did not occupy the central place he deserved in Israeli literature.” What do you say to that?

“He was delighted with the review. I haven’t read a single one of his books. I don’t know why. It’s part of a wound that has started to heal in the past few years, and lately I can say wholeheartedly how much I love my parents and acknowledge the difficult years we experienced in our relations. At some point I have to sit down and try to cope with his books. It is totally something mental. It’s not that I can say, ‘Ah, I don’t like the way he writes.’ I haven’t read him. I wasn’t capable of reading him.”

Maybe as someone who feels he does not sell enough works, you will succeed in coping with the despondency of his protagonists?

“I can’t complain. In terms of love and recognition, in Israel and abroad, life has smiled broadly at me. I can’t put myself in my father’s place. I have exhibited my work in all the museums I wanted. I have had, and continue to have, exhibitions, and I have been reviewed. I am not rich in sales, but I am rich in compliments.”

Desire to escape

Ben-Ner, who graduated from Hamidrasha in 1997, has had a meteoric career. He said in an interview that his success in the United States was a matter of luck, but reviewers in the leading art journals in America maintain that he is a talented, intelligent artist. In May 2005, the art critic Blake Gopnik spent six hours in the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (now the MoMA PS1) in New York, taking the measure of 326 works by 162 of “New York’s most promising artists.”

Gopnik was very much taken by Ben-Ner’s 2003 work “Elia – A Story of an Ostrich Chick.” Writing in The Washington Post, Gopnik said the video projection was a “true dose of novelty, in form and substance.” He concluded: “Ben-Ner’s homey conceit and super-low-tech means are both

winning and winsome – and they camouflage a lot of depth. ‘Elia’ has a big payoff in complex ideas and emotions, though it’s barely more than a home movie. Even the best works elsewhere in this exhibition don’t quite live up to its high standard.”

Ben-Ner accomplished a great deal in his New York years, from 2001-2006. The move was brought on, he says, by a desire to escape from Israel for a time. “The only way to obtain a visa for the family was for me to be a student, even though we did not go with the aim that I would study,” he recalls. “In contrast to Israel, life in New York depended on me economically. I taught a little at Columbia [University] and started to earn a little money from my artworks, but there was no way to save anything. After two years, a buzz suddenly developed and my work started to be exhibited everywhere. That made it possible for me to apply for scholarships every now and then.”

He had made 2001’s “Household,” one of his most cohesive and powerful films, in Israel, before leaving for New York. The work was inspired by film director Robert Bresson’s 1956 masterpiece “A Man Escaped,” an adaptation of the diary of a French officer who escaped from a Nazi prison. “The [Bresson] film is a work of genius,” Ben-Ner says.

“The two films I made before ‘Household’ were sea adventures and were about my desire to escape,” he continues. “‘Household’ is about a feeling of being imprisoned in the children’s room. To make it required the study of cinematic language, editing and the use of the sound of objects, as one finds in Bresson. The connection, both in terms of the subject and in terms of the working technique, was strong. It was the first film I shot alone. Suddenly I grasped how much quiet exists in three to five months, in which all I do is film.”

The film tells the tortuous story of a father (Ben-Ner) who crawls under his infant son’s crib in the children’s room in order to fix something. The baby starts to cry, and his mother (Nava Ben-Ner) picks him up out of the crib. When she lowers the bars on one side, the father is trapped under the bed, behind (the) bars. He has to devise and forge the tools with which to release himself.

“That work belongs to the prison-break genre,” Ben-Ner says. “As in Bresson, who focused on objects and tools, and on the art of their manufacture to help the hero escape, the same happens in ‘Household.’ The situation imprisons the man. No one notices that he is trapped, and he undertakes a series of actions to free himself.”

Do the works in which you expose your body and perform acts such as masturbation and urinating – or in “Karaoke,” in which your penis sings – reflect a healthy body image?

“If I didn’t have a problem, the films would not deal with the body. I have a problem with the family, and that is why I make films with the members of my family. Obviously I have a problem with my body.”

Sitcom store

Ben-Ner received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Columbia University in 2003. A video projection he created was screened at MoMA in New York, and the highly regarded Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea added him to its list of represented artists. He was also chosen to represent Israel at the Venice Biennale.

During his time in New York, his work was exhibited in prestigious spaces, including MASS MoCA (the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art), the DAAD Galerie in Berlin and the Berlinische Galerie. In 2008, one

of his works was exhibited at the Liverpool Biennale and he was awarded the Sandberg Prize for Israeli Art by the Israel Museum. In the summer of 2009, he was interviewed for the magazine Flash Art by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, a leading and controversial international figure in the art world, whose work has been exhibited in every major museum, including a retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York.

In August 2012, Roberta Smith, art critic for The New York Times, reviewed Ben-Ner's 2007 work "Stealing Beauty," which was on show at the D'Amelio Gallery. In the film, Ben-Ner and his regular cast – his wife and children – insert themselves among the furniture on display in an Ikea store as though it was their private home, while discussing the concept of private property. Smith wrote, "A fiction staged within a larger fiction, Mr. Ben-Ner's video implies with particular sharpness the show's underlying idea (or object): that the world is ripe for, and better understood through, the form of thinking that is art."

"Stealing Beauty," a series of six copies, was sold to the Guggenheim Museum, among other institutions. Ben-Ner got the idea for the film at the Venice Biennale. He was looking for "a blonde tree that would look Swedish or European" for his work "Treehouse Kit" 10 (2005) minutes). "I went to Ikea to look for furniture that recalls a tree, and while wandering through the display rooms I realized that this was a free set for a sitcom. It's not that they are building a house. They are taking a set from a sitcom and selling it to you as your house."

"The first image came to me in Ikea, in which I enter and shout loudly, 'Honey, I'm home!' Just like in a million American series. I watched many hours of American family sitcoms, just as I watched nature films while working on 'Elia.'"

Ben-Ner didn't think twice before deciding to steal both the Ikea location and its soundtrack. "I don't believe that cultural assets should have copyrights," he says. "No one starts from an empty shelf. Everyone starts on the basis of the works of others, otherwise it is an impossible restriction on art."

While cruising the aisles of Ikea and recalling that he had no funding for the film, "I realized that the filming had to be done by stealth, that this was part of the film's theme. In the film, I try to explain to Nava and the children what private property is and how it should be protected. I am occupied with [Frederick] Engels' 1884 work, 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.' The family is a cultural construct that was born at the same historical moment in which private property was born. It is actually an instrument for inheritance and for transferring property, which effectively serves the state. That is the Marxist idea which underlies 'Stealing Beauty,' and it also came against a background of five hard years. I began it in the United States and continued when we moved to Germany, and some scenes were filmed in Ikea Israel."

Did the staff interfere during filming?

"If you show up dressed immodestly, they latch onto you and ask you to leave. It was a film in which it was necessary to cope with a great deal of shame, certainly for the children. There is a scene in which we are talking in bed. It was shot in eight different beds, because the Ikea staff asked us to stop. In a certain sense, you let them tell you when to cut. There is no problem of continuity in the world of Ikea and McDonald's. Ikea stores look the same everywhere."

Didn't the children get upset by the filming?

"Of course – it's hard work. Nava and I were divorced after 'Stealing

Beauty.’ The film reflected some sort of impossible situation we had arrived at, which was also a catalyst to arrive at decisions. I felt an almost ideological disgust at this thing known as a family unit. It felt like something bad – home and work together.

“I told you that I was preoccupied with Buster Keaton, and when I shot ‘Wild Boy’ [2004, 17 minutes], I was already aware of it. In fact, after I made my first two films, I was already aware that I was occupied with a model, and that was why I took an interest in slapstick and vaudeville, where families worked together without separating work from parenting.

“When you live your life, you don’t know if it would have been different if you hadn’t made films about it. Some of my films deal with that question. Would we have been divorced even without the films? Maybe. Maybe the children would have a different personality structure. I reassure myself with the thought that, even in the most normal families, most of the children need therapy. I started therapy just three years ago.”

Do you like being a father?

“More and more. I am a lot more loving with my older children now, and I enjoy being their father. I am learning. The little one is also benefiting from an older and calmer father.”

Despite his success Ben-Ner says he still has money problems, and is constantly overdrawn at the bank. In Israel he is represented by the Sommer gallery, by the Konrad Fischer Galerie in Germany, in Italy by Pinksummer (in Genoa), by London’s Gimpel Fils gallery in England, and in Chicago by Aspect Ratio, a gallery of contemporary video art.

How do you treat the term “success”?

“If you measure it in terms of doing well and ambitions, you never feel successful. You always want more than you get. That’s a drive every person has. Otherwise you are extinguished. I am successful, and it’s always possible to be more successful. I sell a lot less than video artists who are on my line of success, and I can give myself all kinds of excuses. The fact is that artists sell to private collectors, and I sell to museums, especially.

“I have made a conscious decision not to print stills from my video works, and I also rarely do video installations or video objects. That already reduces the sales. That’s my interpretation, and there is something narcissistic about it. But I think that in comparison to other video artists, my films are a lot less fetishistic – I think that one of the things that most disturbs me in video is that time becomes a fetish and the fetish makes the works sell better than narrative works with a beginning, middle and end. The humor also often makes people treat my works less seriously.”

What attitude does the art establishment in Israel take toward you?

“The Tel Aviv Museum of Art bought ‘Treehouse Kit’ through Rivka Saker [a senior director at Sotheby’s Israel] and Uzi Zucker [a private investor]. The Israel Museum bought ‘Moby Dick’ in 2004, after it was exhibited at MoMA and purchased by them. I have no museum exhibitions in the works in Israel at this time, but I don’t feel deprived. In recent years I worked mainly abroad, and, naturally, that was also where I exhibited. The show at Sommer sprang from my decision to go back to exhibiting in Israel.”

What drives your work?

“Mainly reading. I don’t read texts about art. Writing about art is a little like a McDonald’s hamburger, which is said to be made from a hundred

cows together. When I write about art I can't stand myself, either. I don't go to exhibitions. I am not an art consumer, and I am a pretty miserable film consumer. The only time I watch films is when I am doing research [or in the classroom, as mentioned before]. I would rather read."

What are you reading now?

"I am rereading the amazing 'The Name of the Rose.' I find [Umberto] Eco's idea – that jokes become dangerous – quite fascinating. Like Monty Python's 'funniest joke in the world' [sketch], with which they kill the Germans. I am reading Carl Schmitt's 'The Concept of the Political.' I read [Dostoyevsky's] 'The Brothers Karamazov' for the first time. It is truly beautiful. I read Martin Heidegger's 'Being and Time' and understood less than a quarter of it."

What are you working on now?

"I finished working on something not long ago. Do I already have to work again?"

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