

As some of us know from bitter experience, it's no easy trick to get any work done at home while looking after children. Guy Ben-Ner, though, manages it with ease. Similarly to William Wegman, who only began making his famed photographs of his Weimaraner dogs because they howled when he pointed the camera elsewhere, New York-based Israeli artist Ben-Ner turns a domestic problem to his advantage: he's nurtured a blossoming career by starring his two young kids, Elia and Amir, in superficially comic but serious-minded films shot in his own flat.

The first notable fruit of his 'housework' was *Moby Dick* (2000), made just before Ben-Ner, who represents Israel in this year's Venice Biennale, embarked on his MFA at Columbia and shown at MoMA Queens in 2004. Here he enlisted his daughter, then six, in a picaresque camcorder compression of Melville's 1851 whale-chasing epic, set almost entirely in Ben-Ner's kitchen.

A ship's mast leans creakily out of the sink; animated shark fins circle around on the wet kitchen floor. The artist and his daughter play virtually all the parts, Ben-Ner taking a memorable turn as the obsessed whaler Ahab and sporting a smooth, white false leg featuring a pull-out drawer (in apparent homage to Dali's 1936 *Venus de Milo with Drawers*). With interjected black dialogue boards, and with no soundtrack but the dubbed-on clatter of a cine-projector, *Moby Dick* also nods to silent-movie stylistics: Elia wears a Chaplinesque moustache and there are slapstick moments aplenty, some featuring Ben-Ner alone in his bare studio and making clear that, like Bruce Nauman, he's inspired by the limitations of working in confined spaces. But amidst these clamorous formal tributes, the central theme of Melville's novel – the irresistible human desire to master nature and the fear that one might do wrong

by seeking to do so – rings out loud and clear, given an unlikely emphatic spin by Ben-Ner's use of his own children. Indeed, it does so throughout his work.

For a few fleeting frames of *Moby Dick*, baby Amir is seen swinging in a Moses basket. By the time of *Wild Boy* (2004), he was ready for a leading role. This film begins with Amir sitting in a pool on an Arcadian hill (although, in keeping with Ben-Ner's none-more-cheap production standards, it actually appears to be an offcut of green carpet, draped over a constructed hump and inset with a large water-filled bucket. After playing happily with some rabbits, he's 'discovered' by Ben-Ner, who takes him to civilization (the next room), shears his hair, names him 'Buster', dresses him in a white shirt and black trousers like himself, and sets about teaching him to read and solve problems. Speedy, inventive and wordless, *Wild Boy* is richly polyvalent.



Emerging Artists Man About the House

Guy Ben-Ner's home videos
by Martin Herbert

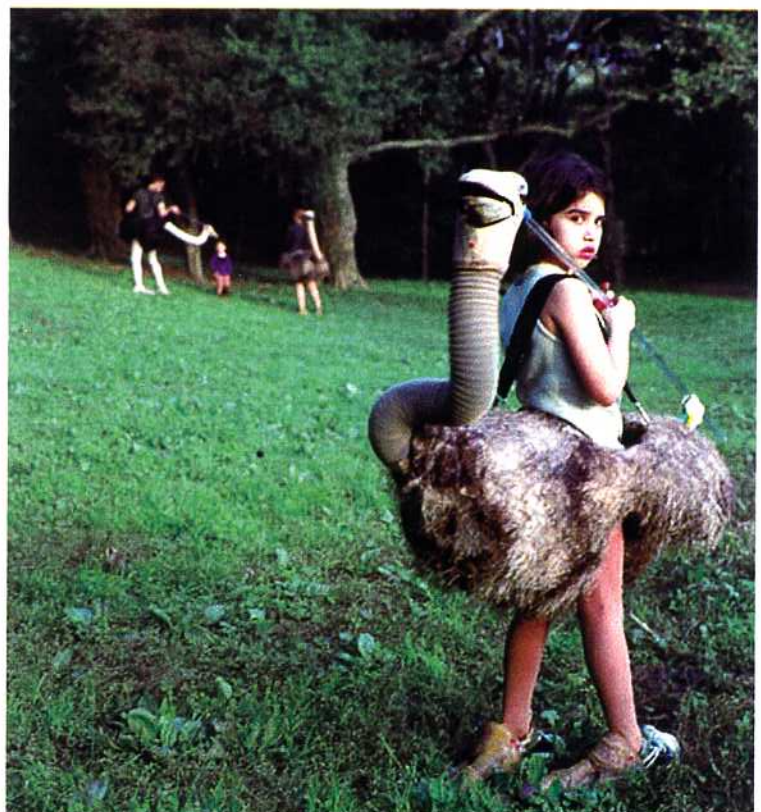
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Referencing Chaplin's illegitimate-child comedy, *The Kid* (1921), and the identically dressed father-and-son double act of Buster and Joe Keaton, it allegorises cinema itself: a feral youth tamed by the introduction of dialogue, colour and other innovations. It also inspires consideration of the parental desire to perpetuate tiny replicas of oneself, the dampening of the child's spirit in education, and – germane to the immigrant status of Ben-Ner and his family – the acclimatization of one's offspring to the world one has brought them into. (Heritage is not overtly expressed in *Wild Boy*, though notably the opening credits are in Hebrew.) Despite frequent moments of comic relief and obsessively detailed referentiality (such as when Ben-Ner amazes Amir with a flip-book of photographs that, in motion, plays the Lumière brothers' pioneering 1895 film *Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat*), there are undertones here of painful compromise and

of the responsibilities that life brings with it as we grow older.

If anything, this is even more apparent in *Elia – a story of an ostrich chick* (2003), a faux wildlife documentary which again spotlights Ben-Ner's daughter, now aged eight. It features his family, including his wife, in an obscure quadrant of Central Park, wearing elaborate ostrich costumes whose heads are attached to plastic-piping necks and are twisted to face away from the wearers. Thus, although Ben-Ner's family were filmed walking forward through the trees, when the artist later reversed the film, the birds appeared to be going forward, the wearers backward. A glib Discovery Channel-like voiceover narrates Elia's growing independence from her father, described as 'the old male', whom she pecks before getting lost in the park. While its primary inspiration appears to come from parenthood's shifts of emphasis, *Elia...* again enfold a migra-

tory subtext – which this time originates in classical myth, as stated in Ben-Ner's accompanying text: 'If for Hermes, walking Apollo's stolen cows backwards was a way to lead Apollo in the wrong direction – the footprints leading the opposite way – in a reversed movie the footprints are actually being "swallowed back" by the walking feet that left them there. They disappear. (A good way for any immigrant to erase the traces that would lead you back to where he came from.)' Anyone who sees Ben-Ner as overly concerned with filmic conventions might want to pay attention to such asides and recognize how fluently he braids autobiography and cultural history, how well he skirts dogmatism and blunt instrumentality. 'Our comedies are not to be laughed at,' said Samuel Goldwyn a long time ago; if Guy Ben-Ner continues to turn that oxymoron to his own advantage, his career looks set to last at least as long as his children live at home.



Opposite page
Stills from *Moby Dick*,
2000, video, 11 mins

Above
Stills from *Wild Boy*,
2004, video, 17 mins

Right
Still from *Elia - a story of
an ostrich chick*, 2003,
video, 22 min 30 secs
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