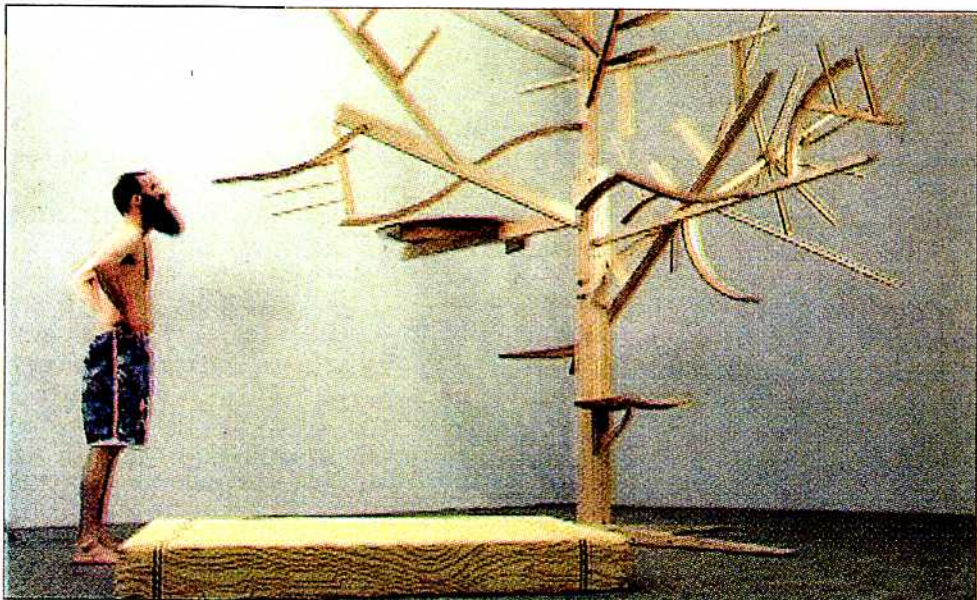


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CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, TEL AVIV

Guy Ben-Ner is the castaway in his video installation "Treehouse Kit" in Venice.

Art

Some Disassembly Required

Second in a series about the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale.

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VENICE — At 9 on the morning of the pre-pre-preview of the Venice Biennale, the world's oldest and most prestigious survey of contemporary art, a Washington Post critic was the first journalist to arrive at the Israeli Pavilion. Just a few weeks before, I had raved about New York-based Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner, so it made sense to make a beeline to the pavilion he was now holding down in Ven-

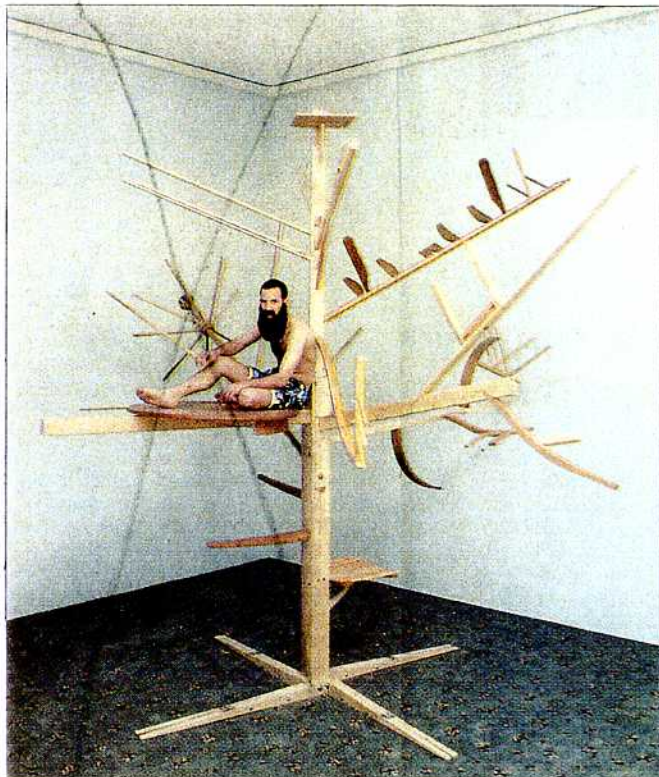
ice.

Ben-Ner is Israel's official representative at the festival, which includes both curated group shows and pavilions dedicated to individual countries. In Venice, Ben-Ner's work was getting its most important outing ever, and it was worth seeing if the artist had met the challenge.

The morning rush was worth it. Ben-Ner's latest art is something new, but it still has his trademark wit and quirkiness, and quiet modesty.

The Venice piece, a polished installation mixing sculpture and projected vid-

See ART, C2, Col. 3



CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, TEL AVIV

In Ben-Ner's "Treehouse Kit" video installation, the meaning of the piece branches off in several directions, depending on the viewer.

Guy Ben-Ner's Island in the Biennale Stream

ART, From C1

eo, is called "Treehouse Kit." It is built around a Robinson Crusoe theme: In the video, Ben-Ner plays a castaway washed up on a desert island, stripped to his shorts and with the regulation chest-length beard. Like any other desert-island dweller, he has to use the things he finds there to build himself a life. Except that in this latest retelling of the tale, the "wilderness" Ben-Ner encounters looks a lot like contemporary art, which he has to tame and turn into domestic science.

One of the clichéd moves of recent sculpture is to take bits of the everyday and strangeify them into art. In "Treehouse Kit" Ben-Ner does precisely the opposite.

The island's single "tree" looks like some kind of cubist sculpture, full of unnatural disjunctions. Its branches, bolted at mad angles onto its trunk, recall fragments of furniture — sort of like the famous bull's head built by Picasso from a bicycle seat and handlebars. (Visitors can contemplate the tree itself, very nicely carpentered, around the corner from where the video is being screened.)

The stranded Ben-Ner sees the potential in this unlikely bit of flora. With the help of a handy set of Allen wrenches — think of a castaway finding conveniently sharp shards of glass washed up on the beach — he slowly takes apart the artistic tree, and reassembles it into banal products such as Ikea sells.

One bunch of blond-wood branches unbolts and is put back together to become a rocker. Others become a standard-issue table, chair and patio umbrella. By the end of the video, the artist has "felled" the tree's trunk — with a few good twists of the largest wrench — and built himself a little platform bed. Ikea Island has provided everything a modern man could want, and made life duller in the process. Wild nature — and art — have been tamed.

Or at least that's one first-impression reading, though there's clearly much more to the piece than that. Ben-Ner's video was shot in the pavilion itself: Its "tree" is shown in the middle of the pavilion's empty, very modern white-cube space, which acts as the story's vacant wilderness. So when you stand in that same empty place to view the video,

you identify with the person shown adrift in it, and are that much more inclined to read the piece for parallels to what you know.

An Israeli viewer might spot the work's strong ties to the artist's own Israeli roots. Israel is a culture of fanatical DIYers, but it's also a nation whose whole history and culture is built around ideas of doing it yourself (even if, as Ben-Ner pointed out at his preview, the "scratch" Israelis tend to think they're building from ignores the cultures that were already in Palestine when they arrived, and even though they started out with tools and tricks provided by the modern Western world). For Israelis, Ben-Ner's long but well-combed beard immediately evokes the famous beard of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, as well as the beards still worn by Israel's settlers and some ultra-Orthodox Jews.

For viewers who may not respond to the Israeli angle, there's also an art-world reference. The piece points to a practice sometimes called "instruction-set art," in which a hands-off conceptual artist such as Sol Lewitt tells other people how to build the work he plans to

put his name on.

Ben-Ner studied the instructional videos that come packaged with domestic appliances in order to achieve the crisp, straight-ahead style of his footage. It gives his piece the kind of just-the-facts-ma'am manner used to document "serious" experimental art over the past 40 years.

Finally, there's also a Venice reference in this island tale, though Ben-Ner says he hadn't thought of it until he'd worked in the city for more than a month. An artist chosen for the Biennale leaves friends and family behind, both psychologically and in reality. (Ben-Ner says he's never been away from his two young children for so long; this is also his first video in a while not to include them as crucial members of the cast.) When things are working right, shows like the Venice Biennale cast artists back onto their own resources and force them to develop new ways of thinking and doing things.

To see a video clip from "Treehouse Kit," and for further details on Ben-Ner and his works, visit www.cca.org.il/guy-ben-ner.