

Guy Ben-Ner BY HELENA WINSTON

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Israeli-born artist Guy Ben-Ner's second solo show at Postmasters is an ingenious and charming exploration of masculinity and domesticity. The show consists of two video installations: *Berkeley's Island* (1999) and the work originally commissioned for the Israeli Pavilion at the last Venice Biennale, *Treehouse Kit* (2005).

Exploring themes of alienation, both works examine the feelings of isolation and longing that can be associated with that place called "home." *Treehouse Kit* begins with a half-naked shipwreck survivor (Ben-Ner) wearing a fake beard signifying, among other things, the length of time he was presumably cast adrift. He begins to disassemble a large wooden "tree" (composed entirely of furniture pieces), removing what looks to be a tabletop, and creating a ledge for him to sit on and rest. The next "day" he disassembles more of the tree, creating a rocking chair and a sun umbrella (complete with awning made of carpet) to shade him as he rocks. Next, he assembles a table and chair, and on the last "day" he concludes his deconstruction of the tree by creating a bunk bed, a place of rest, which he marks as supplement, affixing to it a photo of what is taken to be his family. The entire tree ends up being converted into a bedroom set, materializing in the gallery as the "Before" to which we too can add the "After" of dis/assembling.

This elegant work plays on the frisson between deconstruction and reconstruction, escape and return, painful isolation and welcoming comfort. Ben-Ner's persona, a cross (according to the press release) between Robinson Crusoe and an Israeli settler, extols the inventiveness of the individual in the face of hardship. He is a nomad seeking refuge, one that he himself creates out of his own environment. At the same time, his video is an inversion of illustrator Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), in which a child imagines his bedroom to be populated with wild geographies and monsters of all kinds, from which he eventually escapes to his humdrum home. The title of *Treehouse Kit* also suggests that this kind of performative escape-and-return can be enacted by anyone, at any time. The familiar can be de- or re-familiarized at will.

ART US Guy Ben-Ner
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While *Treehouse Kit* can be interpreted as a meditation on the plight of being an Israeli living in New York, of Israeli nationhood, or of humanity at large, *Berkeley's Island* is an explicit, prolonged investigation of the isolation of being trapped in the home. The 15-minute video shows Ben-Ner as a shipwrecked castaway sitting on a dirt island with palm tree lying smack-dab in the middle of his kitchen, narrating his plight/journal in a voice-over. He lights his cigarette on the stove, plays with his reflection and performs all manner of activities (including having sex with a hole dug into the sand), all without stepping off the island. As such, the entire work is a metaphor for the constricting nature of the home. Yet, at the same time Ben-Ner has deliberately chosen to work at home to spend more time with his children. His daughter, Elia, often walks in and out of the video to talk to her dad or play in the sand. Some of the most charming moments occur when the fictional narrative is partly interrupted by Elia who is about to move the camera and must be mildly chastised by her father. Significantly, no adult woman is ever shown in the kitchen. Ben-Ner is there mostly alone, occasionally with his daughter, in this most traditionally feminine and domestic of settings.

It is these moments that indicate how people in close proximity can live in different worlds, and how fiction and reality often meet. As is implied by the fake beard in *Treehouse Kit* and those unedited moments in *Berkeley's Island*, Ben-Ner consciously chooses to reveal to the viewer the artifice of the situation, and humorously undercuts any self-pity or pathos-inflected sentiment that might otherwise take hold. Some of the more comical scenes include a solo sung by his penis (to which he has added eyes) and a cat that wanders in and out nonchalantly. Ben-Ner's highly nuanced video installations, while intelligent and elaborate, remain profoundly accessible via the familiar, the familial, and the dysfunctional.



(TOP) GUY BEN-NER, *TREEHOUSE KIT*, 2005, SCULPTURE/VIDEO INSTALLATION, WOOD & HARDWARE, CARPET, MATTRESS WITH SILKSCREENED COVER, DVD: 10 MINS., TREE: 15 x 15 x 13.5 FT.
(BOTTOM) *BERKELEY'S ISLAND*, 1999, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO, COLOR, SOUND, DVD: 15 MINS. COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK.