

ART IN AMERICA

MAY 2008

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Guy Ben-Ner: *Stealing Beauty*, 2007, single-channel DVD, approx. 17½ minutes; at Postmasters.



Guy Ben-Ner at Postmasters

Most of the earlier videos by Israeli-born artist Guy Ben-Ner, such as *Moby Dick* (2000) and *Wild Boy* (2004), were filmed in his kitchen, usually with his two children and wife in starring roles. For this new work, *Stealing Beauty* (2007), instead of enacting literary dramas in their domestic space, the Ben-Ners took their domestic life into the public sphere.

Clandestinely filmed at various Ikea stores around Berlin, Tel Aviv and New York, where the artist is based, *Stealing Beauty* consists of a series of vignettes cleverly edited from multiple shoots. A single scene might feature several different living rooms or kitchens, even as the narrative continues without missing a

beat. The family goes about its business in the midst of the Ikea hubbub. Price tags hang from the furniture, light fixtures, pillows and drinking glasses that the family uses; in-store announcements can be heard; and unwitting shoppers wander in and out of the scenes. (The opening of Ben-Ner's show coincided with local news coverage of New York comedian Mark Malkoff living at an Ikea store for a week, arranged in advance and with permission, while his apartment in Queens was being fumigated.)

The video begins with Ben-Ner coming "home," stripping and stepping into a display shower, where his wife allegedly catches him masturbating. As he emerges from the shower in a bathrobe and she sits at a desk typing on a prop computer, they discuss their young son's newfound pen-

chant for stealing. After the two kids arrive home from school, the narrative unfolds further. Mom leaves for a weekend trip, Dad and the kids sit around the table talking, the kids do homework, a

bedtime story is read. Later the parents crawl into bed in their jammies while arguing about what to do about their son, the scene jumping among store displays featuring striped sheets then red sheets, espresso wood and then wicker headboards. Later, Ben-Ner abruptly awakens and ambles into the living room, along with a female shopper, plops down on the sofa and turns on the TV. As a family with a shopping cart full of kids passes by, Ben-Ner's subtle arm movements, scratchy microphone noises and a porn-film soundtrack insinuate that Ben-Ner is (again) "masturbating."

The guerilla filming style itself is also on display. Shoppers stop and stare curiously into the camera lens. At times someone off-camera gives stage directions, which are the only subtitled text on the often obfuscated audio track, its poor quality attributable to the microphones worn by the Ben-Ners, which picked up ambient noise. Other sounds were later added for effect. We hear running water in the kitchen and bathroom scenes even though, not being hooked up to actual plumbing, nothing comes out of the faucets. As Ben-Ner and his son do the dishes, the clanking of plates can be heard as they mime the action of placing them on the metal dish rack or accidentally dropping one on the floor.

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The Ben-Ners are a sincere family. Their conversations revolve around private property, ownership of people and things, monogamy, and the family as an economic unit. The kids learn the value of work and of material goods when, for example, they have to pony up some coins to get Dad to read them a bedtime story. In what could be a tongue-in-cheek socialist joke, Ben-Ner makes a sweeping gesture around their borrowed domain and says, "some day this will all be yours." The work concludes with the kids reading their manifesto proclaiming, among other things, "don't accept your inheritance, steal it."

Stealing, of sorts, comes up again in *I'd give it to you if I could but I borrowed it* (2007), a pedal-powered video displayed on monitors attached to a pair of stationary bikes in the back gallery. Here Ben-Ner and his kids pilfer parts from artworks from a fictional museum they are visiting. They furtively cobble together a bicycle from Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, the handlebars and seat of Picasso's *Bull's Head* and some parts from Tinguely's *Cyclograveur*, and then tool around town in the manner of Rodney Graham's *Phonokinetscope* (2001). They even drop acid and stuporously gaze at their spinning tires and a public sculpture, just as Graham does.

In both works Ben-Ner seems to say that stealing, at least in the service of art, is okay. Whether borrowing the domestic settings of Ikea, or appropriating art to make other art, Ben-Ner crafts work that is uniquely his own.

—Stephanie Cash

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