

ARTFORUM

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Guy Ben-Ner POSTMASTERS

Sally Mann, an artist with whom Guy Ben-Ner is frequently compared, despite the vast differences between their practices, has tried to downplay the importance of family in her work, arguing that the significance of her landscape images equals that of the subtly provocative photographs of her prepubescent children that made her famous in the early 1990s. For now, at least, Ben-Ner suffers no similar delusions. His recent show included two videos that—as is by now customary in his work—employed his family. The videos also dig deeper into the history, structure, and power relations within families and explore what it means to use your wife and kids as artistic fodder.

Stealing Beauty (all works 2007) is a cleverly conceived video shot in IKEA stores in Berlin, New York, and Tel Aviv (without the houseware behemoth's permission). It combines sitcom drama with mock theory-seminar discussions staged in showcase kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms hung with price tags and decorated with ersatz "family" photos. Other shoppers serve as unwitting extras, occasionally wandering into the shot or even bumping into the camera.

After the primary conflict has been introduced—Ben-Ner's *films* has stolen money from a neighboring boy—the players move on to discussing the origins of the term *family* (from the Roman *familia*, which meant a household, including slaves), and the ideas of private property (daughter Elia reads from Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [1884]), inheritance, theft, exchange (the children pay for bedtime stories and homework assistance), time, and value. The work concludes with Elia and the adorably lisping Amir reading a manifesto inciting "children of the world" to unite and "not accept inheritance" but "steal it."

I'd give it to you if I could but I borrowed it, which debuted last summer at Skulptur Projekte Münster, also features theft (or perhaps, given the context, appropriation) as its leitmotif. Here, Ben-Ner, Elia, and Amir enter a mock museum and borrow parts from famous bike

sculptures—Picasso's bull formed from a bicycle seat and handlebars, Duchamp's bicycle-wheel readymade, Jean Tinguely's pedal-powered drawing machine—to build a bike and re-create Rodney Graham's 2001 video *The Phonokinetoscope*, which itself recreates the famous 1943 bike ride through a Basel park taken by LSD inventor Albert Hofmann after ingesting 250 micrograms of the drug.

Ben-Ner's videos have always been ingenious in their borrowing—from Graham, in particular—and the way they smartly refashion these sources into a kind of Pixar-style art product: family-friendly viewing for a demographic much broader than that addressed by most art videos. (*I'd give it to you*, for instance, is shown on a pedal-powered monitor.) If there's a caveat to this, it is perhaps that Ben-Ner's work runs the risk of being too cute, but even this danger is slyly addressed in *Stealing Beauty*, as Elia says to Amir, "He's so cute when he says 'private property.' Say it again!" A stickier question is how all this might play out were the artist a woman. (Mann got saddled by some critics with the Bad Mother tag.) Ben-Ner doesn't have to answer this, although he does confront gender relations obliquely in *Stealing Beauty*, with Amir asking, "Can I inherit Mommy when you're done with her?" (To which Elia replies, "That's Freudian.")

—Martha Schwendener



Guy Ben-Ner, *Stealing Beauty*, 2007, still from a color video, 17 minutes 40 seconds.

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