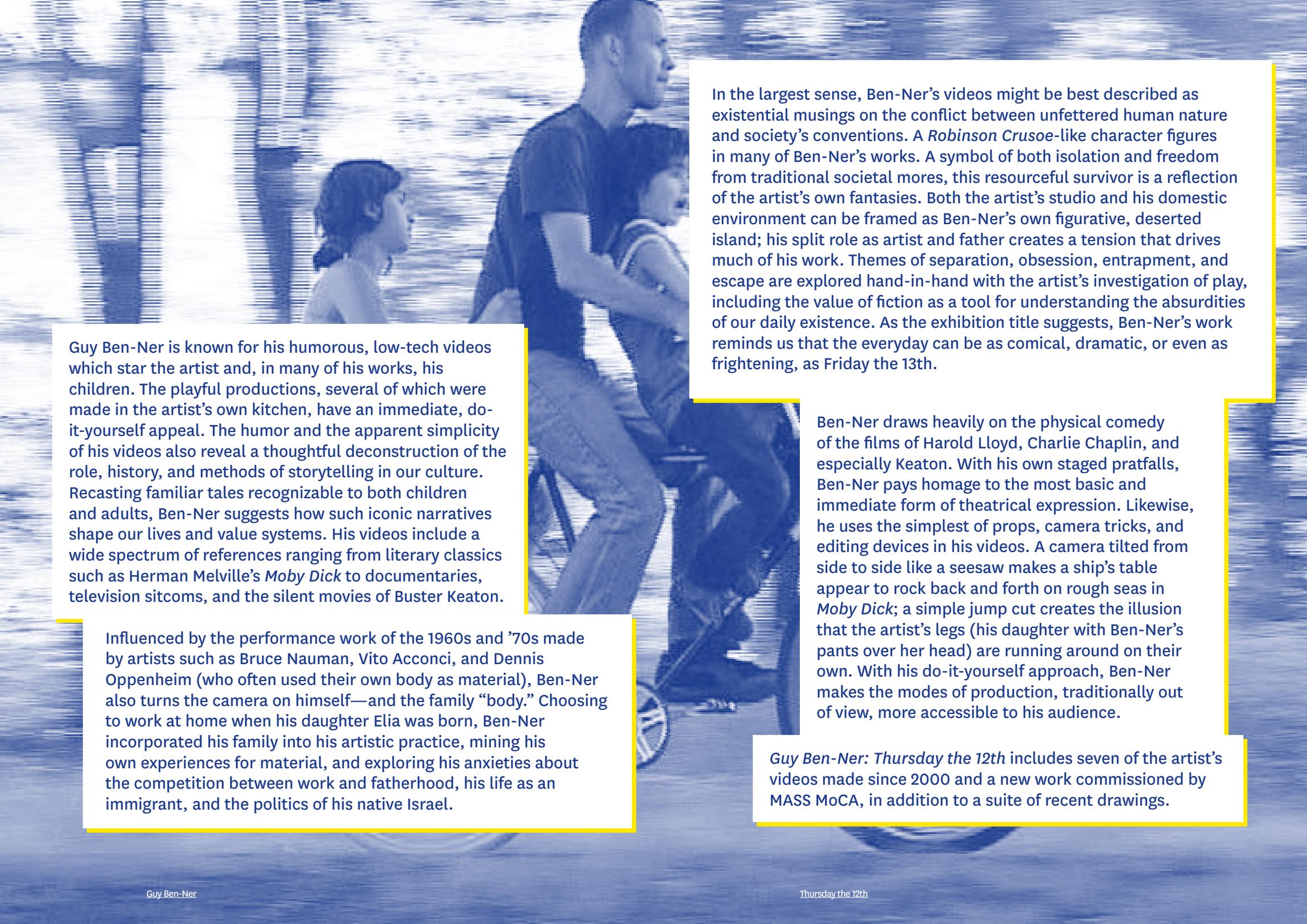




# Guy Ben-Ner

# Thursday the 12th

MASS MoCA



Guy Ben-Ner is known for his humorous, low-tech videos which star the artist and, in many of his works, his children. The playful productions, several of which were made in the artist's own kitchen, have an immediate, do-it-yourself appeal. The humor and the apparent simplicity of his videos also reveal a thoughtful deconstruction of the role, history, and methods of storytelling in our culture. Recasting familiar tales recognizable to both children and adults, Ben-Ner suggests how such iconic narratives shape our lives and value systems. His videos include a wide spectrum of references ranging from literary classics such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to documentaries, television sitcoms, and the silent movies of Buster Keaton.

Influenced by the performance work of the 1960s and '70s made by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Dennis Oppenheim (who often used their own body as material), Ben-Ner also turns the camera on himself—and the family “body.” Choosing to work at home when his daughter Elia was born, Ben-Ner incorporated his family into his artistic practice, mining his own experiences for material, and exploring his anxieties about the competition between work and fatherhood, his life as an immigrant, and the politics of his native Israel.

In the largest sense, Ben-Ner's videos might be best described as existential musings on the conflict between unfettered human nature and society's conventions. A *Robinson Crusoe*-like character figures in many of Ben-Ner's works. A symbol of both isolation and freedom from traditional societal mores, this resourceful survivor is a reflection of the artist's own fantasies. Both the artist's studio and his domestic environment can be framed as Ben-Ner's own figurative, deserted island; his split role as artist and father creates a tension that drives much of his work. Themes of separation, obsession, entrapment, and escape are explored hand-in-hand with the artist's investigation of play, including the value of fiction as a tool for understanding the absurdities of our daily existence. As the exhibition title suggests, Ben-Ner's work reminds us that the everyday can be as comical, dramatic, or even as frightening, as Friday the 13th.

Ben-Ner draws heavily on the physical comedy of the films of Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, and especially Keaton. With his own staged pratfalls, Ben-Ner pays homage to the most basic and immediate form of theatrical expression. Likewise, he uses the simplest of props, camera tricks, and editing devices in his videos. A camera tilted from side to side like a seesaw makes a ship's table appear to rock back and forth on rough seas in *Moby Dick*; a simple jump cut creates the illusion that the artist's legs (his daughter with Ben-Ner's pants over her head) are running around on their own. With his do-it-yourself approach, Ben-Ner makes the modes of production, traditionally out of view, more accessible to his audience.

*Guy Ben-Ner: Thursday the 12th* includes seven of the artist's videos made since 2000 and a new work commissioned by MASS MoCA, in addition to a suite of recent drawings.

## I'd give it to you if I could but I borrowed it 2006–2007



To watch *I'd give it to you if I could but I borrowed it* viewers must pedal the stationary bicycle on which a monitor is attached. Peddling faster speeds up the video; peddling backward reverses it. In the video, Ben-Ner and his two children are seen visiting an art museum. With the guard out of sight, the threesome craft a bicycle out of parts taken from several iconic modern sculptures, including Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Bull* (1942), Jean Tinguely's *Cyclograveur* (1960) and a work by Joseph Beuys. Perhaps Ben-Ner is taking to heart Picasso's famous quote: "Bad artists copy. Good artists steal."

The video then follows Ben-Ner and his children as they tour around the city of Münster on their stolen bicycle. A homemade soundtrack accompanies the image. The work directly references Rodney Graham's work *Phonokinetoscope* (2001), a record album and film featuring the artist cycling through Berlin's Tiergarten while tripping on acid. (The phonokinetoscope was an early cinematic experiment of Thomas Edison's which incorporated both sound and sight.) *I'd give it to you if I could, but I borrowed it* literally and figuratively takes art off its pedestal, making it more accessible to viewers both in the narrative played out by the artist and by means of the interactive bicycle, which actually gives viewers control of the video. With this work, the artist disregards social taboos that usually keep us from breaking rules—from taking drugs, or from touching the art—temporarily allowing us to see things in a new way.

Stationary bicycle, computer, monitor, single channel video DVD, with sound, 12 minutes  
Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster

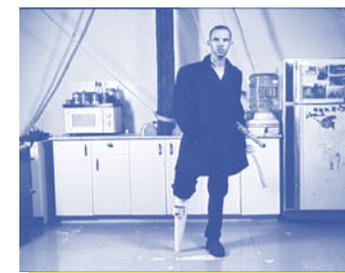
## Moby Dick



2000

In *Moby Dick*, Guy Ben-Ner and his then 6-year-old daughter reenact a truncated version of Melville's epic tale of adventure at sea. Set in their apartment, the video is reminiscent of both home movies and early, silent cinema, which Ben-Ner references with scenes from Buster Keaton's *One Week* (1920) and Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) and *Gold Rush* (1925). With a ship's mast rising from Ben-Ner's kitchen sink, the refrigerator doubling as a cargo-hold, and the cabinets serving as crew quarters, the video is homage to the make-believe of childhood play as well as the suspension of disbelief demanded by cinema. Ben-Ner distills the saga into simple vignettes that illustrate the story's deep-rooted lessons while offering new ones. In a comedic send-up of Melville's description of the harpooner Queequeg as a big hearted cannibal, Ben-Ner highlights our romantic notions of the noble savage and simultaneous fear of that figure, a theme the artist returns to in subsequent works.

Like the novel's over-riding narrative, Ben-Ner's piece emphasizes that, like Ahab, we are usually the cause of our own undoing. Enacting a scene from *One Week* that appears again and again in his work, Ben-Ner saws off the branch of a tree that he is sitting on and subsequently comes tumbling to the ground. Ben-Ner also finds ways to connect the narrative to his own life. Inhabiting dual roles as both crewman and Captain Ahab, Ben-Ner articulates his own shifting positions as father and artist, perhaps hinting at a parallel between Ahab's blinding obsession with the white whale and the artist's own pursuit of his art while raising a family. In the script, however, Ben-Ner reveals his young daughter's influence. Playing a wily bartender, Elia abducts Ben-Ner's sailor onto the whaling vessel. Later, as the deck-boy Pip, she has Ben-Ner at her mercy as the two play out a number of classic slapstick routines which reverse the traditional power relationship between parent and child.



Single channel video projection  
DVD, silent, 12 minutes, 35 seconds  
Museum of Modern Art, New York



Single channel video projection  
DVD, with sound, 17 minutes  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Based on Francois Truffaut's 1970 film *L'enfant sauvage*, the true story of a feral boy, Ben-Ner's *Wild Boy* explores the disparity between man's natural instincts and civilized society. The family's Brooklyn apartment is the backdrop for the video, with the boy's forest home built in the kitchen. Ben-Ner plays the part of the doctor and his son Amir the savage (named "Buster" in a nod to Keaton) whom Ben-Ner teaches to wash, dress, and use proper table manners. The boy is exposed to civilizing forces through a jury-rigged conflation of technology and culture in the form of an oversize book of Aesop's fables set into the refrigerator, as well as a flip book of a train in motion; Ben-Ner emphasizes that cultural knowledge and morality are learned, and not innate. Yet clearly there is some cost to the rituals of socialization, as when the once-happy boy does learn to write, he spells out "life sucks" in refrigerator magnets. As Ben-Ner teaches the boy through imitation, we watch as the adult seems to regress, acting more like a young boy himself. Quoting a scene from Truffaut's original film in which the doctor asks the child to repeat the rhythms he plays on a drum in order to develop his hearing, in Ben-Ner's version adult and child both drum wildly on kitchen pots and pans, much like toddlers do, as they play along—in sync with each other—to The Doors "Break on Through to the Other Side."

## Elia—A Story of an Ostrich Chick 2003



In *Elia—A Story of an Ostrich Chick* Ben-Ner, his wife, Nava, and his two young children, Elia and Amir, play the parts of a family of ostriches migrating to find better feeding grounds. (Ben-Ner had recently brought his family from Tel Aviv to New York to attend the M.F.A. program at Columbia University). The video follows the family, dressed in ostrich costumes, as they wander through Manhattan's Riverside Park. Mimicking the format of nature documentaries, the video features a voice-over narrative which translates the emotions and movements of the family for the audience. Like the narrator, who anthropomorphizes the creatures with his descriptions, Ben-Ner also collapses human and animal. The video seems to poke fun at conventional ideas of familial relationships and how they are socially perceived and dictated. At the same time, the work attempts to resolve the frictions within the family unit, much as children do through play.



Single channel video  
DVD, with sound, 22 minutes, 30 seconds  
Two ostrich costumes  
International Contemporary Art Foundation, Louisville



## Stealing Beauty 2007

Opening with a cheerful, trite soundtrack reminiscent of a theme song for a family sitcom, *Stealing Beauty* is a scripted drama set in a series of Ikea stores in New York, Berlin, and Tel Aviv. Ben-Ner's family acts out simple daily routines and private moments amidst perfect showroom displays that offer identical, middle-class fantasies to buyers across the globe. Filmed without permission, scenes jump from one store location to the next as the story continues against the backdrop of a different bed or sofa. Setting his own sitcom in the middle of a store, price tags visible, Ben-Ner makes overt the significance of money to the modern institution of the family. True to the sitcom's usual structure built around a particular lesson, the video's narrative revolves around a philosophical discussion inspired by the mother's announcement that their son "Max" has been caught stealing at school. The father shrugs off the incident, claiming to understand his son's urge to acquire wealth (he himself "stole" the sets for this video).

Throughout the video Ben-Ner bickers with his wife and offers lessons to his children about private property and Friedrich Engels' Marxist views on the function of the family in a capitalist economy. "Sharing," Ben-Ner declares, is for "animals": the aim of private property is to keep others out. With this humorous, politically charged video Ben-Ner addresses the overwhelming consumer desires firmly instilled at home (the artist frames the usual transactions made between parents, children, and siblings in monetary terms; instead of an emotional plea for a bedtime story, the Ben-Ner kids pay for one out of their piggy bank) and via television. At the same time Ben-Ner questions the notions about love and family that we internalize much like we do the desire for a new sofa.



Single channel video projection  
DVD, with sound, 17 minutes, 40 seconds  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York  
Purchased with funds contributed by  
the Young Collectors Council, 2008



## Second Nature 2008

This work begins as a behind-the-scenes look at the filming of Aesop's iconic fable *The Fox and the Crow*. Two animal trainers are seen coaxing a fox and a crow into performing. As the crow's trainer successfully cajoles the bird into dropping a bit of cheese, she unknowingly enacts the fable and its lesson, taking the part of the fox.

While the trainers train the animals, Ben-Ner trains the trainers, directing them to act out a scene from *Waiting for Godot*. The lone tree used as a set for the fable doubles as the backdrop for the Beckett play. Ben-Ner, shown with camera and soundman, is filmed instructing the actors in rhyme. While Ben-Ner's verse seems odd to the trainers, it is perhaps no stranger than their own language of clicks and commands. Like the animals they coach, the trainers-cum-actors reluctantly do as they are told in rote fashion, responding to praise like the crow, stumbling over their words as they follow Ben-Ner's directions much like the characters they play, Estragon and Vladimir, who wait futilely for Godot without question. Film and reality become intertwined. As the stories collapse into one another, looping like the video, the circular nature of the social condition, the values we are trained to perpetuate, seem inescapable.



Single channel video projection  
DVD, with sound, 10 minutes, 13 seconds  
Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York

HD projection  
Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York



For the exhibition at MASS MoCA Ben-Ner created a new work (untitled at press time). Like the show's title, which suggests a parody on big Hollywood blockbusters such as the *Friday the 13th* franchise, the artist's new work, which features an airplane, a car, a bike, and a series of crashes, seems to spoof action movies as well. This absurdist, literary take on the "buddy" film is an action-packed journey that, like life, ultimately goes nowhere. Filmed in the Berkshires and starring the artist and the museum's director, the work references a series of iconic duos: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, King Lear and the fool, *The Little Prince* and the pilot, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Pooh and Piglet, and Vladimir and Estragon, among others. Ben-Ner examines the shifting power balance between these two character types (while suggesting a similarly complex relationship between artist and institution) as master becomes servant, madman becomes wise, and teacher becomes student.

Using dialogue excerpted from familiar tales—ranging from *Through the Looking Glass* to *Around the World in 80 Days* and the *Divine Comedy*—Ben-Ner cobbles together a personal narrative with the words of others. Framing his divorce and a mid-life crisis as a clichéd story that seems less like an accident along his life's path and more like an already-written inevitability, Ben-Ner tries to determine where we are in control and where, like Don Quixote, we are living out the stories we already know.



*Making of a Second Nature*, 2009  
Felt-tip pen on paper (16 drawings)  
Courtesy of the artist and Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin

Punning on the title of the video *Second Nature*, which documented its own making, Ben-Ner refers to this suite of drawings as a second type of art-making. The pen-on-paper works depict scenes related to *Second Nature* as well as scenarios related to the new work made for MASS MoCA.



Single channel video projection  
DVD, with sound, 10 minutes  
Wooden tree construction, mattress with silkscreen cover, carpet  
Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery, New York

With *Treehouse Kit*, commissioned for the Israeli pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, Ben-Ner makes humorous connections between the classic *Robinson Crusoe* tale of survival and self-reliance and contemporary society's do-it-yourself fantasies. The video features the artist as a modern day Crusoe (or perhaps an Israeli settler), recognizable by the long beard grown over years in isolation. Ben-Ner's island, however, depicted as a floral rug, is closer to a suburban living room than the rugged landscape of Dafoe's original story, the traditional palm tree replaced with a tree made from wooden furniture parts. Parodying instructional videos and survival shows, Ben-Ner demonstrates how to create useful items from the tree, including a sun umbrella, table, chair, and bed. Like many of Ben-Ner's works, *Treehouse Kit* hints at the artist's struggle between human desire and society's rules and his conflicted dreams of the freedom of living away from expectations of family and society. While Ben-Ner's family seems notably absent in this work, they do figure prominently in a photograph that the artist-cum-castaway uses as a shim to stabilize his wobbly bed. It is hard to say whether the gesture is a symbol of the artist's family as stalwart support, or an indication that they may be sacrificed in the face of a greater need.

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## About the artist

Guy Ben-Ner was born in Ramat Gan, Israel, in 1969. He received a Bachelor's degree from Hamidrasha Art College in Ramat Hasharon in 1997 and a Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University in 2003. Ben-Ner has exhibited internationally and in 2005 represented Israel at the Venice Biennale. The artist has had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2005), Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv (2006); Center for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2006); Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2007); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2007); and the National Gallery of Canada's L'Espace Shawinigan (2008). Ben-Ner's work has also been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2004); P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2005); Skulptur Projekte, Münster (2007); the Shanghai Biennale (2008); and the Liverpool Biennial (2008). He is currently creating a new video that will premiere at Performa in New York in November 2009. In 2007 he was awarded a prestigious DAAD residency. The artist is represented by Postmasters Gallery, New York, and Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin. He is currently a guest lecturer at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem. He lives and works in Tel Aviv.

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*Guy Ben-Ner: Thursday the 12th*  
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Curated by Susan Cross