

Sadie Coles

Guy Ben-Ner

This November, Sadie Coles HQ is delighted to present three films by Israeli artist Guy Ben-Ner. Dating from 1999 to 2013, the exhibition bears witness to Ben-Ner's singular style of filmmaking – a wry, absurdist and homespun mode of storytelling whereby epic narratives are collapsed into domestic follies, and conversely, makeshift scenarios are imbued with unexpected poignancy and poetry.

Berkeley's Island (1999), Ben-Ner's first narrative video, is based on Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The video transposes the tale of the castaway – often credited as the first modern novel – into the modest confines of the artist's kitchen, conveying the story as a sequence of vignettes acted by Ben-Ner and his four-year-old daughter. At the opening, we witness the artist, lying on a pile of sand in the middle of the floor beneath a full-sized palm tree, a ship's wheel laid on his chest. Defoe's themes of isolation and survival re-emerge as a dramatization of the artist's own seclusion and resourcefulness, with household items standing in improbably for aspects the story – including the family cat in the part of Crusoe's parrot.

Berkeley's Island refers in its title to the empiricist philosopher George Berkeley (1685 -1753) and his motto *esse est percipi* - 'to be is to be perceived'. And yet the video also tests this notion through its presentation of the artist in an isolated, darkened space, seemingly unobserved except by his young daughter, Elia, and living out a make-believe story. My island does not exist," he states in the voiceover. "It is a fantasy, inaccessible to foreign eyes." Elia acts both as a character within the absurdist fiction and a subversive interloper from the artist's other (real) life – at one point threatening to flatten his sand island with a plastic spade. "

Moby Dick (2000) similarly restages a literary classic as a flight of fancy staged largely in the artist's apartment. "The grand narratives I am interested in have a peculiar trait: they pretend to be inherited rather than acquired", Ben-Ner has explained. "Most people think they know Moby-Dick without ever really reading the book." In the video, he plays upon – and simultaneously undermines – the quality of familiarity attaching to Herman Melville's epic, transposing its plot into silent interludes (again performed by the artist and his daughter) punctuated by title cards. The scenarios suggest childhood games, in humorous contrast to the romance and otherworldliness of the story: the whale's blowhole is evoked by a nozzle protruding out a tarpaulin; sharks' fins disappear and resurface from the 'sea' of the kitchen floor in an animated sequence.

In the more recent video *Soundtrack* (2013), an eleven-minute excerpt from the soundtrack to Steven Spielberg's sci-fi film *War of the Worlds* (2005) is combined with a mime drama performed by the artist, his family and friends. The high-octane dialogue and apocalyptic events of the film are channelled into a slapstick, surreal comedy centred on the artist and his two children, in which Ben-Ner's kitchen autodestructs as if through the agency of a poltergeist, and which features the documentary filmmaker Avi Mograbi emerging, at one moment, from the kitchen fridge. In a counterweight to the incongruous comedy of the piece, the camera returns intermittently to a laptop screen playing footage of recent Israeli conflicts – a periodic reminder of the many other realities that play out in tandem with life's personal catastrophes.

Guy Ben-Ner (b.1969, Ramat Gan, Israel) obtained a MFA from Columbia University, New York (2003) and a BA in Education from Hamidrasha School of Art (1997). In 2005 Ben-Ner represented Israel at the Venice Biennale with his video installation *Treehouse Kit*. Recent solo exhibitions include, *At Home*, VCUarts Anderson Gallery, Richmond, USA (2014); *12x12 IBB-Videolounge*, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2012); *Spies*, SITE Gallery, Sheffield, UK (2011); *Filme, Zeichnungen und Installationen*, Kunsthalle Mainz, Mainz (2010); *Thursday the 12th*, Mass MoCA, North Adams, USA (2009) and *Treehouse Kit*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Montreal (2017). Recent group exhibition include *UNLIMITED*, Art Basel, Basel (2019); *on my island none of this would be true*, Arebyte, London (2018); *Extra Bodies – The Use of the «Other Body» in Contemporary Art*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2017); *Besser scheitern/ Fail Better*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg (2013); *Trembling Time. Recent Video from Israel*, TATE Modern, London (2010); *Bilder in Bewegung: Künstler & Video*, Museum Ludwig, Köln (2010); *Made UP!*, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2008); *Homecooked*, The Jewish Museum, New York (2006) and *Greater New York 2005*, MoMA PS1, New York (2005). In 2008 he was awarded the Sanberg Prize by the Israel Museum. Ben-Ner currently lives and works in Tel Aviv and Berlin.

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Tuesday – Saturday, 11 – 6 pm



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