Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

End Times Photography

Frances Stark
Brice Marden
Brent Green
Art and Protest in Postwar Japan
plus
MCA Chicago's Madeleine Grynsztejn

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IN THE STUDIO
BRENT GREEN
WITH SAUL OSTROW

BRENT GREEN (b. 1978) works in the tradition of artist as mythmaker, as teller of tall tales. If Mark Twain were with us today, he would probably be engaged in endeavors comparable to Green's films—works that focus on characters tragically consumed by their obsessions, due to their woefully imperfect understanding of themselves and the ways of the world.

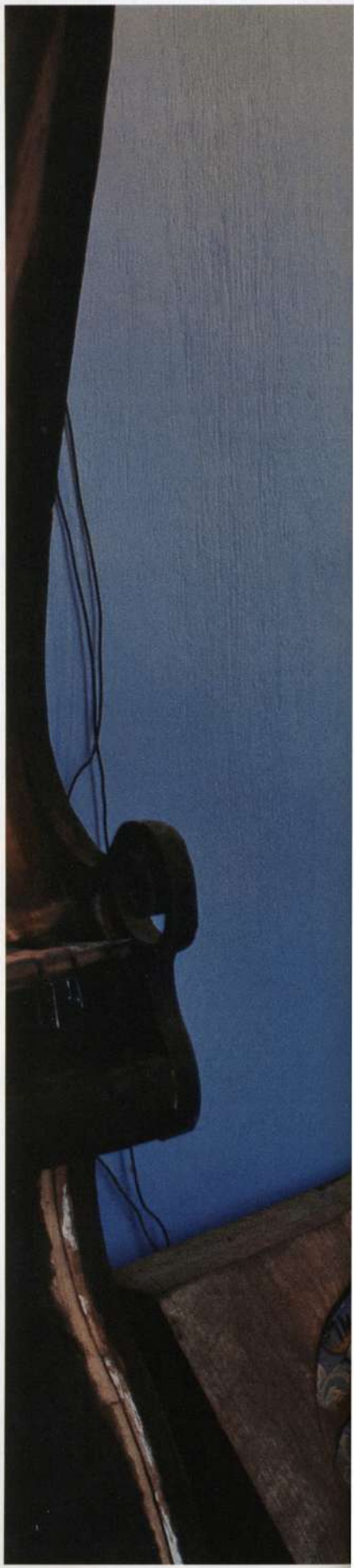
I interviewed Green in mid-September in Cleveland, Ohio. We first met two years earlier, when he had an exhibition of objects and drawings at the city's Sculpture Center. This time, Green was driving a 16-foot-long truck from Berkeley (where he had just deinstalled his show for the Matrix exhibition program at the Berkeley Art Museum) to Ithaca, N.Y. (for a performance at Cornell Cinema). He stopped in Ohio to attend the screening of his most recent film, Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then *(2010), at the Cleveland Cinematheque. This feature-length, stop-action film uses live actors to spin a fantasy based on the true story of Leonard Wood and the idiosyncratic house he built in Louisville, Ky.*

Green, as voiceover narrator, informs us that Wood began building one bizarre addition after another onto his house when his wife, Mary, was diagnosed with cancer. His hope was that this "healing machine," the fruit of his labor and faith, might somehow save her life. After Mary's death, Wood—to distract himself from his loss and sorrow—continued to work on the house for the next 15 years. Green visited the house following Wood's own death, just before a neighbor, who found the structure unsightly, bought it and tore it down. The artist built the version we see in the film as well as four neighboring clapboard houses at his studio in rural Pennsylvania. His reconstruction of the Wood house, having been made to travel, now serves as an installation piece, usually accompanied by the film.

Many of Green's eccentrics attempt—through their often maudlin pursuits—to transcend the mundane and transform the world into a place of wonders. Yet most of them are the kind of people who would ordinarily go unnoticed. In conversation, Green portrays himself as being akin to the protagonists in his stories, driven people living inconspicuously in a realm where the motto is live and let live. He not only shares the all-consuming passion of his dramatis personae but also implies that his own artistic impulse is analogous to their despair-driven creativeness.

Susa's Red Ears *(2002), Green's first film, is a 6-minute animation about a hyper-imaginative young girl who magically inserts a red toy fire engine in her brain.* Hadacol Christmas *(approx. 11 minutes, 2005), also an animation, features a skinny Santa who invents Christmas after drinking the whiskey-laced cough syrup Hadacol.* Carlin *(7½ minutes, 2007), using jointed totemic figures and other props, recounts the slow demise of Green's Aunt Carlin, who died from diabetes in his family home at age 35. In* Paulina Hollers *(12½ minutes, 2007), which mixes wooden figures and cartooning, a deeply religious mother kills herself in order to try to retrieve her dead son from hell.* Weird Carolers *(approx. 4 minutes, 2009) employs jointed figures and crude drawings to detail the torturous process by which a deaf Beethoven composed his Ninth Symphony. All the films are shot in stop-action, with deliberately bad lighting, wry hand-lettered placards ("This is my new film / I hope you like it"), alternative-music soundtracks (except* Weird, *which ends with the "Ode to Joy" blasting) and the artist's sometimes plaintive, sometimes railing voiceover.*

Green is high school educated, and lives and works in a barn in Cressona, Penn., a town of 1,600, where he grew up. As an aspiring writer-musician in his early 20s, he taught himself how to draw cartoons so that he could animate the images in his stories and songs. Green writes short stories, a couple of pages long, which become the basis for his films, sculptures/props and installations. His esthetic tends toward the naive folk-gothic, in keeping with his characters and their plights. Direct and pragmatic in method, he simply



Brent Green in one of the five houses he built in his Pennsylvania yard for the film *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, 2010. Photo Ben Liddle.

Photos this article courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.


Stove

moves images and objects frame by frame to low-tech effect—a method that disguises the artist's inventiveness and dramatic sophistication.

Though Green is best known for his films and performances (he at times screens his works with live narration and musical accompaniment written and played by himself and members of Califone, Fugazi and other indie-rock groups), he has become increasingly ambitious in creating installations that incorporate his props and sets. He has also begun to produce handmade kinetic sculptures and a series of smaller devices crafted from sewing treadles and accordions, which when cranked or extended produce animated images. His recent Berkeley show, "Perpetual and Furious Refrain," centered on a gigantic version of an Edison wax cylinder used for recording sound.

Other 2010 solo exhibitions were held at Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York; Arizona State University Art Museum, Phoenix; and DiverseWorks, Houston. Green's films have been screened at the Sundance Film Festival; the SITE Santa Fe Biennial; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Wexner Center, Columbus; the Getty Museum, Los Angeles; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

SAUL OSTROW You had an unusual start in the art world, didn't you?

BRENT GREEN I just got lucky. I received a Creative Capital grant in 2005 as a filmmaker. But after I showed my work in upstate New York at the Creative Capital retreat, I walked off the stage and only visual art people were standing there, saying, "Well, you need to show your work at the Getty, at the Walker, and here's a gallery." So the art world just kind of embraced me.

SO And you had no relevant experience—because you didn't go to art school. So the idea of being an artist was . . .

BG Foreign to me. It didn't occur to me that it was a job one could have.

SO How did you respond?

BG Honestly, at first it was disappointing. Wow, I thought, all these film people don't care about what I do. Which wasn't entirely true. I'd been in *Filmmaker* magazine during Sundance that year. Then I decided, well, why try to kick down doors when others are opening for you? It was exciting because previously I hadn't followed art at all. So all of a sudden I was in a new realm. And I had the New York gallery Bellwether representing me. I figured I should walk around Chelsea and learn about this stuff. It was really kind of thrilling, because I was just a guy from backwoods Pennsylvania.

SO But you had to have made something to get the grant. Creative Capital doesn't give money to people with no track record.

BG I'd made three short films, animations, and I got the grant. I applied for the grant because I had gotten fired from my job as a waiter at Red Lobster. I was 25, I hadn't gone to college, and I only qualified for a couple grants. I got them both—one from Creative Capital, one from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. I didn't know it was a big deal. I applied because a friend said I should. I didn't really think of myself as a filmmaker. I thought of myself as unemployed.

SO It sounds like art was a hobby at the time. You had a job, and you came home and amused yourself this way.

BG It was a hobby—and therapy. I was trying to write things that I wanted to hear people say. But keep in mind, I turned the corner pretty quickly once I realized that you can make a living at this. I came up with a business plan. I'm not a total hick.

SO You originally saw your audience as music people, right?

BG Musicians and writers. I sent VHS tapes of *Susa's Red Ears* to the band Califone, and to [singer-songwriters] Vic Chesnutt and Bill Callahan. I don't even remember who the writers were. I think one was Douglas Coupland. I didn't send it to Kurt Vonnegut, because I thought he'd probably laugh at it. I wanted to send it to Ken Kesey, but he died three months before I finished it.

SO Home-style self-promotion?

BG Self-promotion and self-education. Remember before the Internet? You would read the thank-yous in a book or on a record liner, and try to find out who those people were. I remember I was in a 24-hour diner in Pottsville [Penn.]—when I was 16—and this dude, a heroin addict up from New Orleans, heard me say that I was reading Kerouac. He turned around and said, "If you like Kerouac, you should be reading Burroughs and Bukowski." He started listing all these people, and that did it for me from 16 to 17. Other times, I would read things and think, Bob Dylan changed his name because of Dylan Thomas, so I'm gonna go get that Dylan Thomas book. That's how it was—logical steps from one to another.

SO You were also into making music, weren't you?

BG Writing is the most important thing to me, but as a teenager and in my early 20s I had a much firmer grip on music. I could sit down at a piano and play Scott Joplin stuff back in the day. I can't anymore.

SO Once you started doing films, you let that skill slide?

BG Yeah. Also I found piano players who were way better than me, so I was like, why bother? Still, music was the most important thing at first. But it was music based in writing—like Vic Chesnutt, Bob Dylan.

SO Your bio is fairly sparse. Accounts literally go from your being born and living in Pennsylvania to the first film showings—in rock clubs in 2004, in galleries and museums in 2006.

BG It was fast.

SO There's not even an indication of your having gone to high school.

BG I actually didn't realize that I had graduated from high school until I was 20. One

Above and right, stills from Brent Green's *Carlin*, 2007, stop-motion film, 7½ minutes.

Far left, *Paulina Hollers*, 2007, stop-motion film, 12½ minutes.

Near left, two stills from *Hadacol Christmas*, 2005, hand-drawn animated film, approx. 11 minutes.

day as I was driving, I reached behind my seat and found a manila envelope. I opened it up, and there was my diploma. I was like, "This is going to make getting jobs so much easier!"

SO Isn't that a lot like the stories that appeal to you?

BG Of course. The only stories that any of us relate to are ones we see ourselves in, right? More or less?

SO For you, then, what's the subject of *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*? In a way, it seems to be about your own compulsions. Leonard is not really the subject.

BG That's true. Leonard is the hook.

SO So what is it about yourself that you're examining?

BG There are things I need to remind myself of in order to get out of bed every morning. *Paulina Hollers* closes with the line "we're always forgetting the sun will end." I need to remind myself of these things, badly. Like a sense of wonder—I really need that, to a ridiculous degree. All my films are about wonder, urgency.

SO You seem to empathize, even identify, with your characters.

BG Well, there's the idea that Vonnegut borrowed from his son's letter: "We're here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is." I also think in terms of comfort. In *Gravity* the most important line is "you have to build your own world." Everyone has to, from the richest Wall Street investor to the poorest nerd dropping fish into a McDonald's deep fryer. That's the crux of it. And you have to keep in mind how important your work ethic is. You have to remember you're driving. Don't look around and say, "Man, I wish somebody else was driving." You're fucking driving.

SO What is it about a story that eventually makes you say, "I need to see this on screen"?

BG It's whatever I'm having trouble getting over. *Hadacol Christmas*, for instance, is essentially about my grandfather Garlands. He died, and I really missed him. I had to make this film to celebrate his life and get over his death.

SO So your art is about working through things.

BG Yes, definitely. Usually to reach the fact that it's really worth being alive.

SO Yet you've made some of the most depressing films ever. Sometimes they're like being hit by a hammer!

BG But it's a hopeful thing. Like, it's gonna be OK. You're gonna die, but it will be OK. It's supposed to be comforting.

SO In *Carlin*, things get to the point where you *hope* the aunt will die. Given

Above, view of the exhibition "Perpetual and Furious Refrain," 2010, at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Calif.

Right, still from *Weird Carolers*, 2009, stop-motion film with unique wood box, approx. 4 minutes.

her successive amputations, death seems like the only way out.

BG To me, the films are still positive. In order to end on a hopeful note, in order to complete the narrative arc by yanking people up, you have to drag them down first. In *Carlin*, you wish she'd just die and all, but the last line is "there is euphoria all around you, you're swimming in it."

SO In the teens and '20s, animation was thought to be pure film, because it was virtual. Walter Benjamin believed it would one day replace theatrical film. Were you aware of any of that when you started? Did you go back and look at work from the 1920s and '30s, when cartoons were made for adults?

BG When I went to make my first film, I was watching a lot of Disney—I love Disney stuff. Also the Cartoon Network had a mind-blowing show called "Late Night Black & White," full of Merrie Melodies material. I didn't have a TV growing up. Later, though, when I was living in Green Bay [Wis.], I had some money. My rent was $350 a month, including utilities. I said, "Fuck it, I'm getting cable!" I really got into it, especially "Late Night Black & White." Popeye is pretty entertaining; Porky Pig is horrible. It was interesting, in a literary sense, to learn what the characters were historical parallels for. The stories have these hidden threads and messages, you know. I love that.

SO Do you read any sort of literary criticism, any history?

BG I read history.

SO What kind?

BG I recently read Matthew Stewart's *Monturiol's Dream*, which is about Narcis Monturiol, who made the first really functional submarine. Also Laura MacDonald's *Curse of the Narrows*—a book about how, in 1917, a munitions boat in Halifax, Nova Scotia, exploded and leveled the town, which was then almost immediately hit by a massive blizzard. And I've made everyone I work with—all the musicians, the crew guys—read Edison biographies.

SO Edison came up in some of your earlier films and then in your Matrix installation in Berkeley. There you had a room-size version of his sound cylinder, with 13 tracks for 13 tall, flat sculptural figures.

"MY RESPONSIBILITY IS TO MAKE A FILM THAT CONVEYS A SENSE OF WONDER, OF URGENCY. AND I WANT PEOPLE TO SEE THAT IT'S A HANDMADE FILM, BY ONE PERSON."

BG I can relate to Edison because he's not [Nikola] Tesla, who was an otherworldly genius. If there is divine inspiration, Tesla had it. Edison was a sledgehammer; he just pounded his way through everything. That I understand. I can relate to sleeping very little to get something done.
SO Why did you make the jump from literature and music to animation?
BG Because I wanted to control what it looked like, exactly. Also, I'm not an extraordinarily likeable person, so I'm not sure I could have gotten people to work with me on a regular film.
SO Well, you're doing that now.
BG I've learned how to be tolerable. Back then, I had to control everything. I had to control the most important part of every picture, everything about it. Also I didn't draw at all before I made the first film. I needed to be able to sit down when I got home from work and just focus. *Susa's Red Ears* started out as a very short story, and turned into a 6-minute film. If I had made it with people, we probably would have finished in a weekend. But I wanted to do something that took more than a few days.
SO Do the stories and music come too easy?
BG I wouldn't say too easy. The writing is really important to me. I need to get a message across, to say something, all the time. I love crafting a narrative arc, I love making threads run through a story, I love making sly references to things. I just love writing. I love music, too, but I'm not that good at it.
SO On your website, you've got several different pieces of writing—all very intense, sharp and precise. How much of that is due to whittling away?
BG I have to go in and pull things out of each text. I overwrite everything and then really draw it in, to get to a more concise story, poem, manifesto, whatever.
SO Is it the same process with the films?
BG Sometimes I'll write a line or a scene that's beautiful, but it sounds really bad out loud. I have to get rid of that. Often I turn it into a purely visual scene.
SO But once a scene is shot there's no editing?
BG There's no editing once it's shot.
SO You seem to have worked in every form of animation except claymation.
BG My film about Beethoven has some claymation. *Weird Carolers*—it's short, it's good. It's about him losing his mind writing the Ninth Symphony. But I've never done digital animation.
SO Do you make test reels?
BG I don't really test. I just plan very specifically.
SO There's absolutely no trial and error?
BG So far.
SO Even for *Gravity*, where you were planning a car wreck?
BG I just went at it. I'm extraordinarily lucky. Leonard flying through the windshields without getting hurt was accomplished by shooting the film entirely frame by frame. There were at least 10 minutes between each picture. I'd manipulate the actors like puppets, beat up the cars with sledgehammers, push the cars and debris around the set, etc. That was the easiest way, given my skill set and the materials I had on hand. Shoot frame by frame, without any post-production work.

SO And you did it in one go? I guess you had only those two cars to smash.
BG You get good at what you do.
SO Yes, but you don't seem to do anything twice.
BG That's true. The shooting has to stay really difficult. On the other hand, it's easy to break down the world into 24 frames per second. You walk around and count. That's what I did, right from the beginning. When I made my first film, I walked around my apartment saying "one-1,000, two-1,000," and looking at the angles of my arms and legs at different points in the count.
SO So there is some form of rehearsal?
BG Oh yeah, for the walking in the first film. But for the car wreck in *Gravity*, no.
SO But camera angles, things like that, especially as you move into more and more live action . . .
BG I certainly pull the camera around to different angles to see if I have a good shot.
SO You do all the camera work yourself?
BG On *Gravity*, I had a couple of friends come at various times. And the guy who plays Leonard, his wife showed up for one day. All of them got a camera. Aside from those three or four days, I shot everything. And even the things they shot, I reshot. They shot it all on film—Kodak gave us 16mm stock—and I then went through the film and reshot frame by frame.
SO So you transcribed their stuff?
BG Yeah, onto my camera. Which is not as asshole-ish as it sounds.
SO I'm just trying to understand the process.
BG I ran the 16mm film through a hand-cranked editor/viewer and shot each frame with the same camera the rest of the movie was shot with. That way the 16mm would have the same flicker and feel as the rest of the movie.
SO But you more typically do things straight off?
BG The car crash is probably the best one to talk about, because it's a quick scene. I knew I wanted the characters, the future husband and wife, to meet in a violent accident. Falling in love—that's the way it feels sometimes. I think everyone gets the car crash bit. Leonard flies out his windshield, through Mary's and ends up seated beside her. They drive off together. Psychologically, that's how it happens, very often. And there has to be this dramatic thing that snags the audience. Once I know where the story needs to go, I just ask "so how do I do it?" Literally, that's just how my brain works, how it translates each frame.
SO Is your brain working the same way now as at the beginning of your career?

"I KNEW I WANTED THE CHARACTERS, THE FUTURE HUSBAND AND WIFE, TO MEET IN A VIOLENT ACCIDENT. FALLING IN LOVE—THAT'S THE WAY IT FEELS SOMETIMES."

Or have you entered into some critical dialogue with yourself? Once when I mentioned *Susa's Red Ears*, you said "not very good." Is this part of a self-correcting process?

BG *Susa* was exactly the film I wanted to make at the time.

SO But it's not what you would want to make today?

BG I was 22 when I started working on the script. When I listen to the narration now, it sounds psychotic. Of course I wouldn't want to make it today. It's reasonable to grade yourself, but I couldn't have worked harder on any of my films. I made the very best film I could back then. I don't second-guess myself. Naturally, now that I'm older, I see more effective ways to do things. But I was pushing myself to my limit in every case.

SO I've read that you consider turmoil the driving force in your work. Turmoil at 22, turmoil at 32?

BG They're miles apart. But no matter what age you are, if you're telling a story honestly, people of all ages will find something to relate to. You may find a certain character more poignant when you're 22, 32, 42 or 52. Or you might focus on a different part of the story. These days, I try to cut back on the voiceover, to say a little more in the third person. But I'm not capable of writing in other voices. I've tried, and I'm really not good at writing for other characters.

SO Is that a fatal flaw?

BG Not necessarily. My responsibility, as I said, is to make a film that conveys a sense of wonder, of urgency. And I want people to see that it's a handmade film, by one person. I find that quality in some brilliant and incredibly socially conscious work, like William Kentridge's. When I saw his films the first time, I thought, I gotta step up my game; I have to get better. Don Hertzfeldt's work affects me the same way. His films are very well put together. He's just funny, and that's enough. For me, there's something great about one person really going at it, no matter what it is—like seeing a guy build a nice porch in one day. Even if the project is nuts, even if you're watching your neighbor make a bomb shelter for his family. As long as somebody is really going at it.

SO Kentridge's films are very entertaining, but they have a political edge. Your work doesn't seem to be political. However, it does have a sort of existential quality.

Stills from the crash scene in *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, 2010, stop-motion film, 71 minutes.

Opposite top, set for *Gravity* in the artist's yard, 2010.

BG I think the politics of my work is along the lines of the "you build your own world" concept I mentioned earlier. I think that idea runs through all of my films.

SO Along the way, you've built a character for yourself. You, Brent Green, do not narrate these films. There's a voice, a disembodied voice. How did you decide who that person is? It's not the voice of *Our Town*.

BG No, it's me—exaggerated.

SO But that creates a very particular character.

BG I read a review of *Gravity* that said, "Blah, blah, the narrator sounds angry at times." And my thought was, well, aren't you fucking angry, too? The amount of political disappointment in the world, from every kind of authority, is really unbelievable. I feel like I need to yell to be heard. There's intensity, for sure; fury, for sure. But it's a rage to say something positive. I want to yell at people to celebrate good things. Apparently, the art world loves an eloquent hillbilly, luckily for me. The character who narrates the films is saying, "Wake up and pay attention. Open your fucking eyes when you walk outside. There are really wonderful, beautiful things in the world. Pay attention to them. Fucking pay attention."

SO Twice now you've emphasized the handmade, personal nature of your films—how different they are from, say, Pixar.

BG Right. I love Pixar, by the way. But you couldn't get further away from what I do.

SO How did you decide on the look of things in your world?

BG It *is* the look of things in my world. If I walk out of my front door in Pennsylvania, the weird dried curly plants from my films are right there. When Santa Claus is flying over the town in *Hadacol Christmas*, the buildings are from Pottsville.

SO Some people who live in small towns just want to escape.

BG Not me. I love the quiet. I love that there's nothing to do but work.

SO In some ways, you share an esthetic with Tim Burton. But his is more polished.

BG His is super-polished. I'm sure Tim Burton has influenced me, because his first film came out when I was eight. The Burton look has always been there. It's like asking a musician today if he's been influenced by the Beatles. Of course he has. Tim Burton is great—he's dark, he's funny.

SO What is it about that Gothic sensibility that appeals to you?

BG I grew up, I still live, in Amish country. The woodworking there is exactly the same as the woodworking in southern Germany. I see really rustic, really strangely made furniture that looks the same in Lancaster as it does in Passau, Germany. Maybe my taste comes from having the Grimm fairy-tale books when I was a kid. To this day, if I see certain weird things that were made close by, or similar things from Prague, I find them visually amazing. They're all really moving to me. And Sol LeWitt isn't.

SO There's a sense of wonder, but also of nostalgia and loss, in that fairy-tale style.

BG The only reason we need to be reminded of a sense of wonder is because we lose things. We wouldn't have to get over much emotionally, except maybe an occasional argument, if our parents didn't die, if our kids didn't die, if our friends didn't die. I've never made a film about getting over an argument—I don't think I will. Maybe the sense of loss in my films needs to be there—as a black contrast to the white of wonder.

SO You often fold fictions inside of fictions. In *Gravity*, for example . . .

BG I'm a liar.

SO I was going to be a little more polite about it, but is *Gravity* composed of fictions inside of fictions?

BG Of course. I think that in every one of my films I've taken the barest structure of a true story, the barest framework—and then I've draped stuff on top of it. Yeah, I'm a liar. I'm trying to entertain myself, using fictions within fictions.

SO There's a difference between the truth of a story and the truth *in* a story.

BG The truth in the story is the only thing that matters to me. And if you don't have an epiphany along the way, you're wasting everyone's time.

SO Declaring yourself a liar means that you're acting in bad faith with the intent of doing something good.

BG Yeah!

SO Is that one of the reasons you do performances with the films? The work becomes a double form of theater?

BG It's bringing the film, this thing I really want to get to viewers, around in a form that they're more likely to see. Many, many more people come to my live shows than my theatrical screenings. The audience pulls for you, either to fail or to succeed. The sound is improvised at these shows, and there really is a potential for disaster. Risk adds to the urgency of it all. It also encourages people to think, hey, I could do this myself. My goal

"IT'S REALLY HARD FOR ME TO IMAGINE, IF I DIDN'T MAKE WORK CONTINUALLY, HOW I WOULD GO TO BED AT NIGHT AND NOT HATE MYSELF."

is to get them to make something.

SO Did you do live performances with the films from the beginning?

BG I had a live show before I ever had my first theatrical screening. As a musician, when you finish a record, you promote it live. I thought I should do the same with the films. Over time, I started to find more and more value in that. The films are meant to hold their own, but the live show is really where it's at for me. It's where I feel like I'm elevating people; it's where the preacher in me can come out.

SO You go so deep into character that Brent Green is nowhere to be seen.

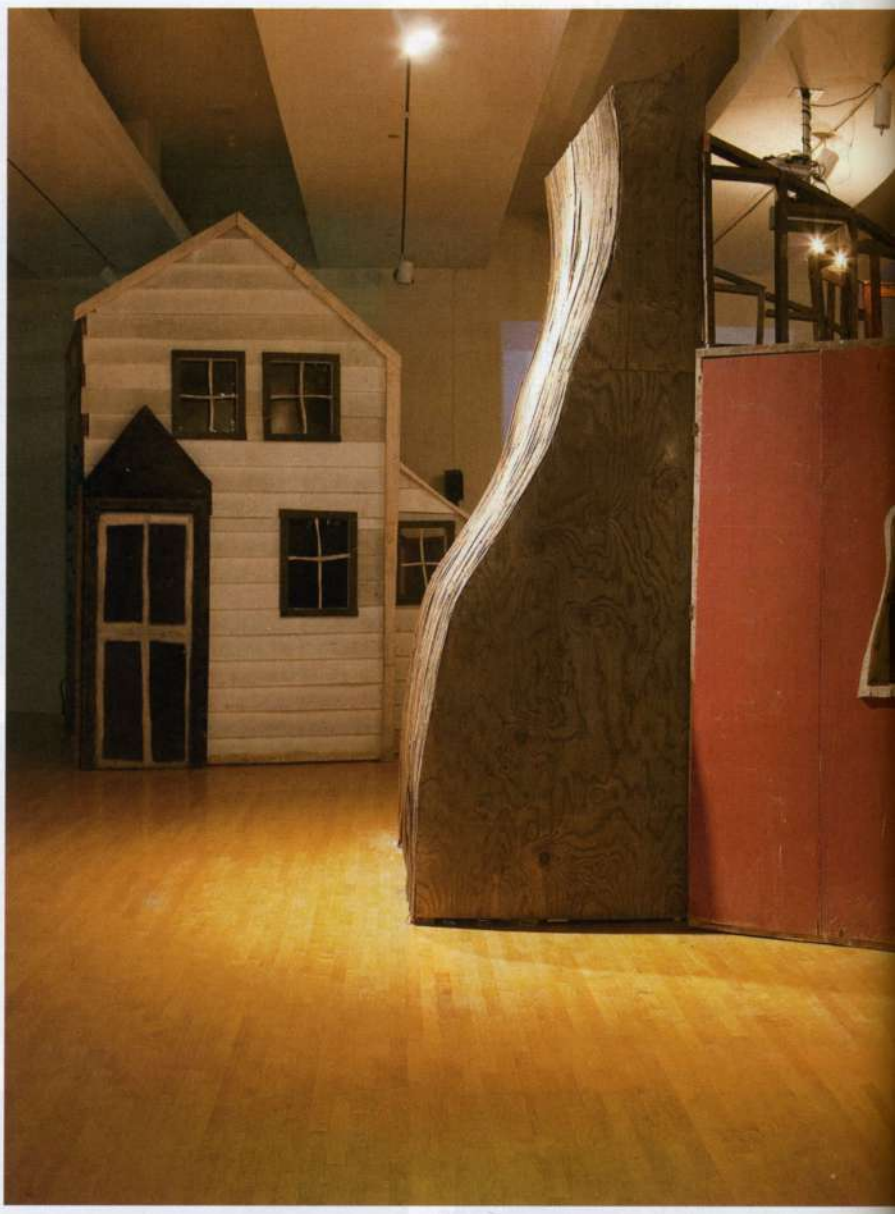
BG But he's wearing my clothes.

SO Exactly, or wearing your face. At what point did you decide that the things you were making for the films could function on their own as sculpture? That dual use reminds me of Matthew Barney.

BG I don't think it would have occurred to me if it weren't for Ann and Albert Albano, who run the Sculpture Center here in Cleveland. When they approached me about doing the show, I said, "Oh, uh, I don't know . . ." Then they started explaining to me the way that they saw the sculptural pieces in the films, which was pretty fascinating. Albert told me never to separate the *Paulina Hollers* set into pieces, because it's a lot like Calder's *Circus*. So I went to the Whitney and I was like, all right, I get this—the idea of having people look at your props under a different light, in a different context. In 2009, I had a show at SITE Santa Fe with freestanding 3-D versions of storyboards, made mostly of wood and steel. And then the Berkeley Matrix program called. This has been happening a lot, collectors and curators calling to say, "We want sculptures." It's odd, because I'm not as good a sculptor as I am a filmmaker. But I'm learning, and it's fun to push myself. The Berkeley installation was a massive challenge. Basically, the room is 72 feet long, and I wanted to tell the story in one frame. I really challenged myself to make an Edison wax cylinder out of a water tank. The piece ended up being, I think, pretty beautiful.

SO Were the houses from *Gravity* made to break down? Did you know they were going to be sculptures as well as film sets?

BG Yeah, I did. But the wind where I live flattens buildings, so the houses were made to withstand the wind. Of course, if you put something up, you can take it down. I didn't originally plan to make the piano functional. But I did know it was also going be a sculpture. Not only that,



but I would have to sell the sculptures to cover the debt I incurred making the film. So it had to be a really good one. Same with all the furniture. I sit on the chairs, I play the piano. I think of these things in 360 degrees now, instead of as a facade.

SO These objects, however decontextualized, seem to be intimately tied to the themes of your films. How do you understand them?

BG I definitely see them as more than ways to pay the bills. The piano, for instance, had to be this beautiful thing. When I put up the *Gravity* set, all my neighbors hated me. Everyone kept saying, "You're bringing down the property values." Because I built this insane wreck of a house—well, what looked to them like an insane wreck—behind my barn in Pennsylvania. But while I was working on the piano, my neighbor, a landscaper, asked if he could bring his crew over to see it. Then local kids started coming by with their friends. It was really important to make this marvelous, functional thing—inscribed with the words "It's a Wonderful Life"—so that my neighbors didn't shoot holes in my stuff. I knew it would end up in a gallery or a museum. The piano has a true statement written

View of the exhibition "Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then," 2010, at Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe. Photo Craig Smith.

on it, and it's admirable for the amount of work that went into it. That's important. I don't want to add to the pile in the world. Whenever I make something, I want people to be able to look at it and respect it. I can't imagine just throwing paint on a canvas—even if the work sold for a lot of money—and then showing it to my dad, you know? I care. I want my parents to respect what I do.

SO Is that a type of redemption? Does it go back to the notion that by modeling your own world you save yourself?

BG It certainly feels that way. It's really hard for me to imagine, if I didn't make work continually, how I would go to bed at night and not hate myself. I constantly need to prove to myself that I'm worth something.

SO Beyond the personal, does art play a redemptive role in society?

BG It can; occasionally it does. Unfortunately, that aspect is largely ignored right now. But when people look back in the long run, they'll say, "Yeah, well, this country and that country had nuclear bombs, and some people were trying to cure AIDS, even though the government stepped back from it . . . But look at their art." I can only imagine that it's supposed to matter in that sense, like an apology. ○

Brent Green's solo exhibition "Perpetual and Furious Refrain" appeared at the Berkeley Art Museum, May 2-Sept. 12, 2010. The set of *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, consisting of all five houses with their handmade furniture, will be on view at Art Without Walls, Louisville, May 1-June 1. Green's upcoming live performances include shows at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [Feb. 15]; the Kitchen, New York [Feb. 17 and 18]; and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [Feb. 19].

SAUL OSTROW is chair of visual arts and technologies at the Cleveland Institute of Art.