



We do things for reasons even we don't understand. We may think our motivations are love or safety, but really they may be fear, or denial, or the fact that without doing something we feel powerless. Leonard Wood did something incredible: he built a house by hand, but not a normal house—a house chaotically filled up with rooms, some with twenty-three-foot ceilings, some with floors placed halfway up the doors to other rooms, so you had to hoist yourself inside. He started building this house when his wife Mary was diagnosed with cancer; he built it for her, and in his mind maybe it was a healing machine with colored panes of glass to affect her health; maybe it was a secular cathedral, built to invoke a miracle from God; maybe it was his own therapy, to help him cope with such an unbearable loss. Maybe it was all of those things or none of those things. But he kept building it, even after she died, and he kept talking to Mary, yearning to be reunited.

Brent Green also built a house by hand; actually, he built a whole movie set, with five houses, crashed cars, kinetic props, wooden stars that hang on wires, and a giant crescent moon that glows through its balsa wood form, all to make a film inspired by Leonard. Of course Green's reasons for making the film aren't that simple, since when we tell stories about other people, we are telling stories not only about how we see the world, but also about ourselves and our own obsessions. The film is about Leonard, but it is not a biography. Green uses the remarkable facts as a basis for a kind of fable, building this fantastical world that parallels our own.

Green has always been a builder, a sculptor who is also an inventor, building pianos from scratch, or machines that generate sound and image through mechanical means. Allusions to building recur throughout Green's film about Leonard, as they do in the Bible—Noah's Ark, Jesus the carpenter, the man who built the wooden cross for Jesus's crucifixion. Even the title, *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, grounds us in a concrete material reality. Leonard may have been building his

house for God (and we'll get to that later), but building also offers some measure of certainty in the face of life's great uncertainties. Nails connect boards, boards build walls, walls shelter us, wires bring power, power brings illumination. And if a light won't work, or a board cracks, we can fix it. Nail by nail, Leonard was building a shelter, but also reinforcing what he could know about the world, reinforcing the limits of his own power in shaping it. In very real ways, Leonard was building his own world, to share with Mary, but the house is also a metaphor for the mind. And so this house becomes a vessel for Leonard's obsessions, for his retreat from rationality, for his own sequestering after Mary's death.

Green, like Leonard, persists in trying to make something new, to build a world, to reinforce that our existence is tangled up in the actions of doing and making. In this age of invisible operating systems, all of Green's work bears the traces of making on its surface, and its mechanics are never obscured. Our understanding of his work is anchored in the physical and the visual, the same way that Green wants to understand the world through the act of making and making visible these material realities. And so for the film, he has built five houses, largely by himself, with scrap wood, a screw gun, and duct tape. And he builds mechanical sculptures as props and extensions of the film. As much as the sculptures, Green's filmic vocabulary of animation betrays its fabrication. Frame by frame Green builds a world, painting and sculpting its characters and forms, manipulating even human bodies incrementally to generate motion. His animations flicker, jerk, and stutter, marking the individual acts of image-making strung together to craft a reality.

It's no wonder that Green was attracted to Leonard and his house. Leonard was a stranger, and dead himself, before Brent found his house and the letters, recordings, and ephemera that helped to sketch a picture of the man and his obsessions with death and loss, love, faith, invention, and human powerlessness in the face of it all. But these are also Green's obsessions, at least in his films and installations, which often involve family members like his Aunt Carlin, or personal heroes like Thomas Edison. In *Gravity*, like all his films, Green plays the role of a deeply subjective narrator, advancing the story at the same time as he advances his own motivations for engaging with a particular tale. Each film is accompanied by a soundtrack, recorded by Green's loose cadre of musical collaborators, or improvised for live events. Here Green's DIY aesthetic translates from visual to aural as instruments are adapted to create new sounds and strange materials are adapted to make "instruments." Punk, folk, Americana, rock, and Foley effects converge with the same logic of invention and making do that guides the work physically, like anything could fall apart at any minute, and indeed Green's own vocal delivery is always on the verge—of breaking down, bursting out, going mad.

Leonard was also a musician, whose delivery was also on the verge. If we want to see the house as some sort of domestic cathedral, a way that Leonard was trying to leave the earth and build up to the heavens to invoke a miracle from God, Leonard's music

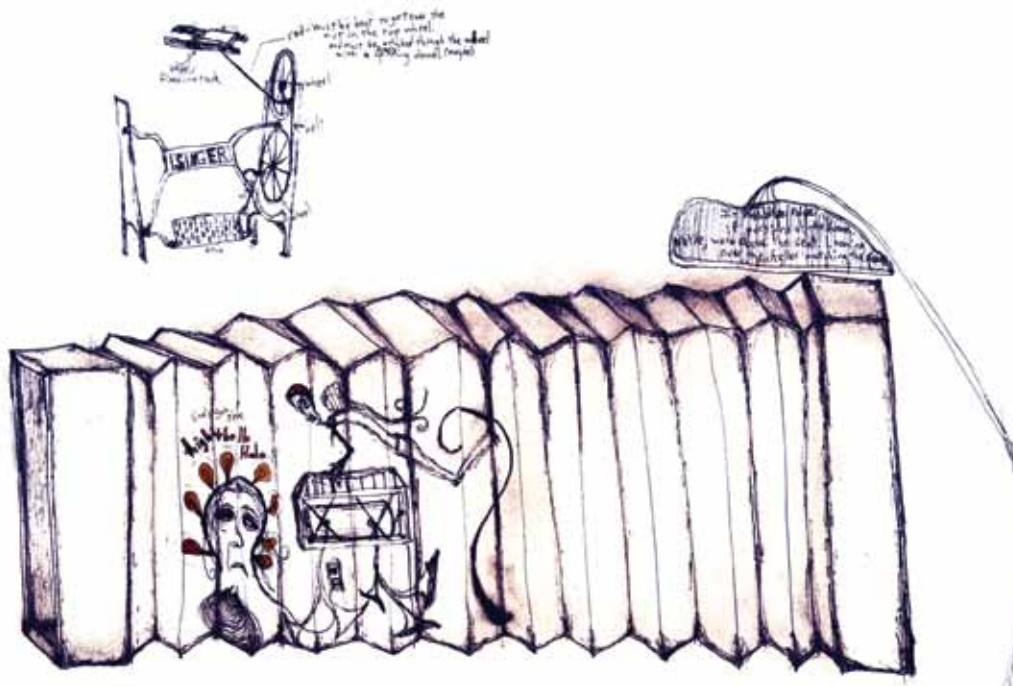


leaves no doubt that he was trying to talk to God, to shout at him, to get his attention, in whatever way he could, by pounding the piano and chanting his devotion. Music is a means to deliver messages—songs as letters that use our senses to convey more than words alone can do. Alongside the film, to extend the importance of sound into the galleries, Green has made a choir of thirteen figures, singing to us, to God. Their sound is based on shape singing, a musical language of forms rather than scales, used often in religious songs. Thirteen carved wooden figures each sing, the sound playing from a large spinning drum; Green adapted contemporary materials (in this case a water tank) to nineteenth-century technology, refashioning Thomas Edison's early wax recording cylinders in the process. Each of the thirteen tracks is incised into the plastic to play through a needle, the earliest and closest relationship between sound and its physical record on an object; the spinning of the drum is a reminder of perpetual motion, perpetual devotion, perpetual emotion.

Perpetual and furious refrain, the title of this exhibition, refers to those acts and to Leonard's perpetual refrain of building, of loving, of longing, of hoping, of praying, and of coping. And while Green's work offers no moral instruction, it seems to say that life itself is a perpetual (and furious) refrain. It is an improvisation, we do the best we can with what we're given, we can build our own world to look for certainty, we can entreat outside forces in the face of larger uncertainties, but there is no salvation outside of us. Certain facts, death being one of them, are inevitable and also incomprehensible. And so, in some ways death comes to define the living—confronting the loss of others, or our own mortality, making sense of it, evading it, these things are primary to our humanity, and to how we navigate our relationship to the world and others.

Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



BRENT GREEN was born in 1978 and lives and works in a barn in Cressona, Pennsylvania. His work has been a regular feature at Sundance, and received acclaim at the Hammer Museum, Wexner Center for the Arts, Walker Art Center, and Getty Museum. *Gravity* premieres at the IFC Center in New York in early May 2010; upcoming screenings and exhibitions in 2010 include the Museum of Modern Art, New York; SITE Santa Fe Biennial; Diverse Works, Houston; and Arizona State University Art Museum. Brent Green is a 2005 Creative Capital grant recipient.

The **MATRIX** Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.

ABOVE, FACING PANEL Brent Green: untitled preparatory materials for **MATRIX** exhibition, 2010.

FRONT, INSIDE Brent Green: stills from *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, 2010; 16mm film and digital photographs transferred to digital video; color, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.

OPENING EVENTS

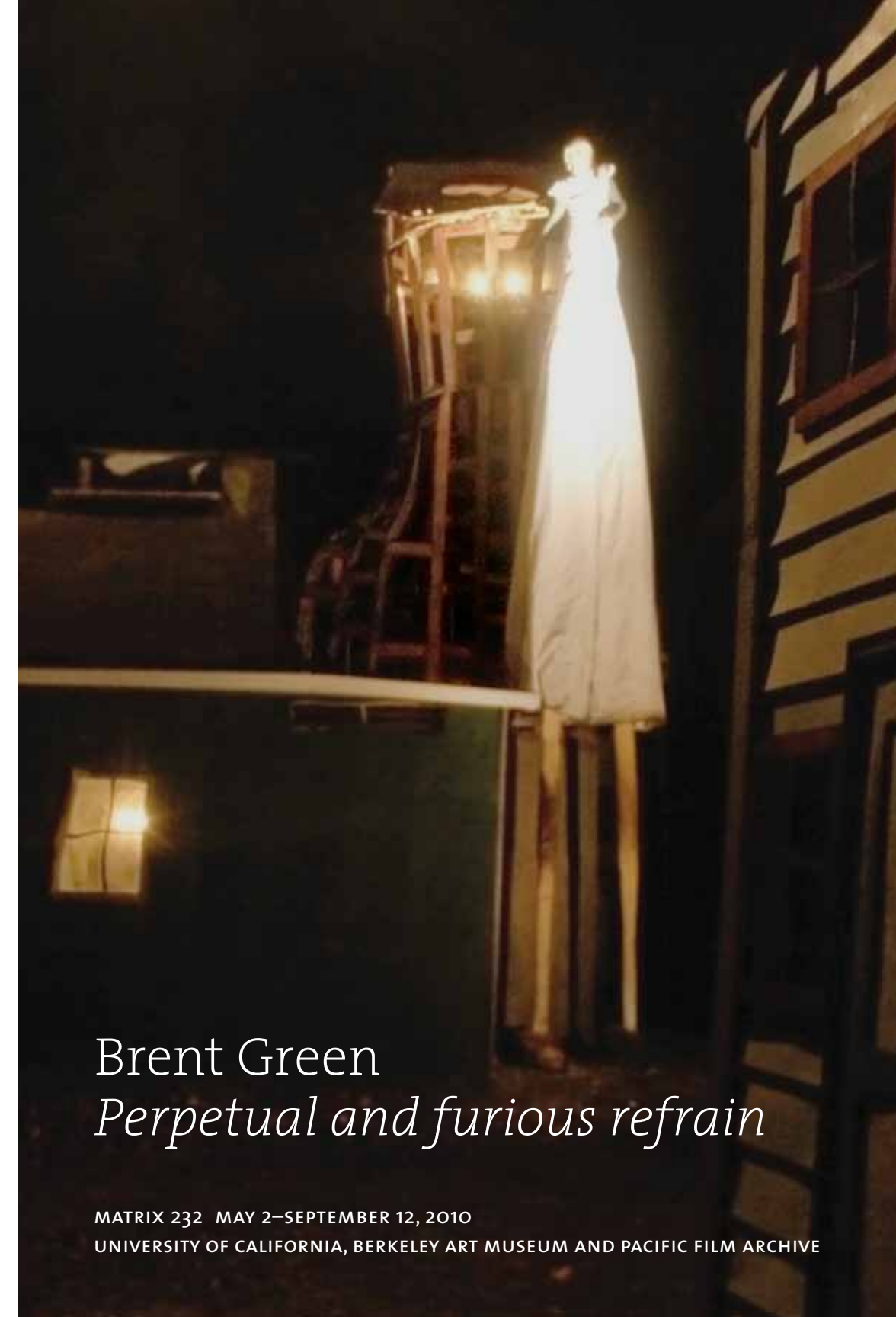
Reception
Sunday, May 2, 5 p.m.
Bancroft Lobby

Performance by Brent Green,
Brendan Canty, and Donna K.
Sunday, May 2, 6 p.m.
Museum Theater

WEST COAST PREMIERE

Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then
Wednesday, June 16, 7:30 p.m.
PFA Theater

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Brent Green
Perpetual and furious refrain

MATRIX 232 MAY 2—SEPTEMBER 12, 2010
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE