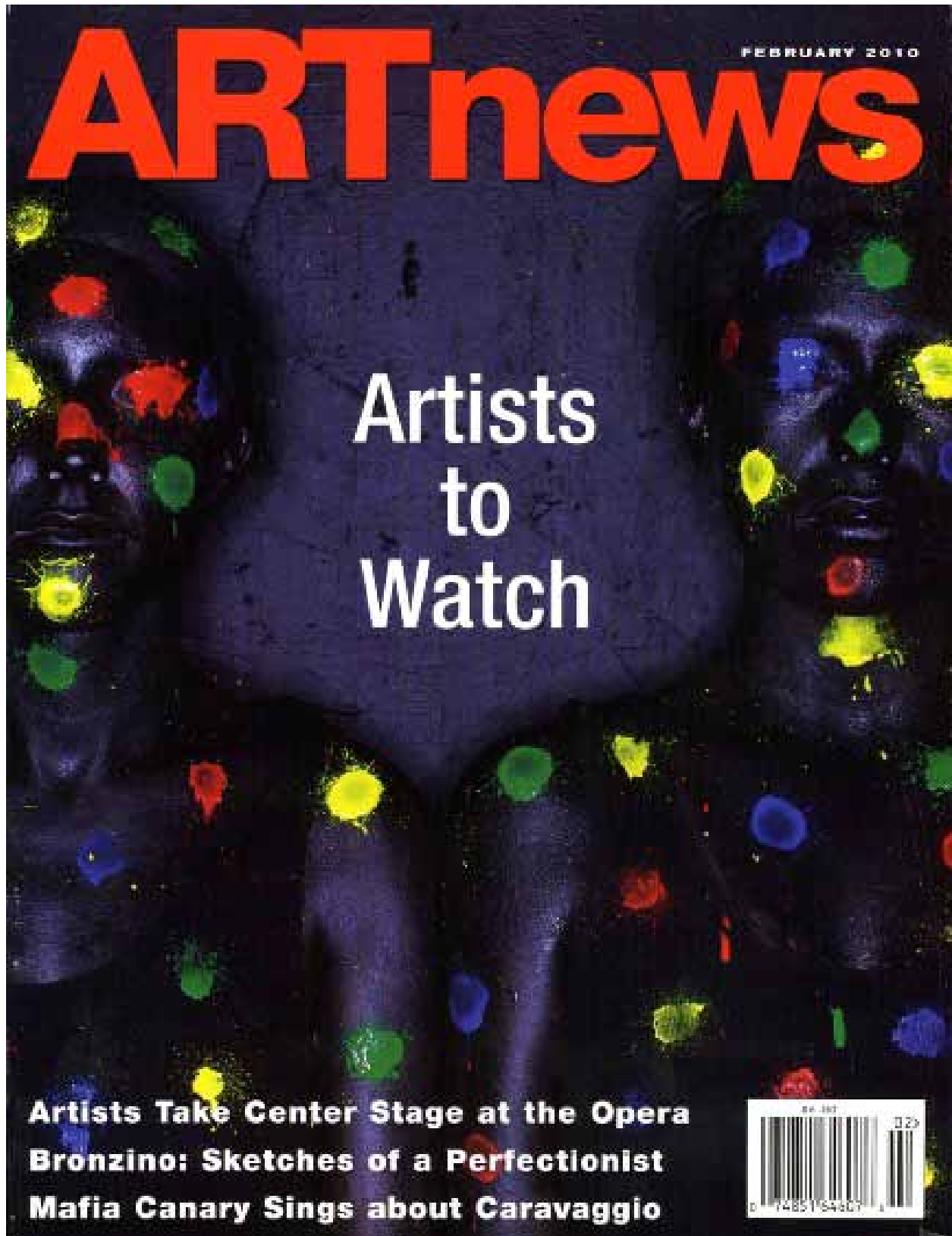


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519 W. 24 STREET NEW YORK, NY 10011 T 212 206 7100 F 212 337 0070
WWW.METROPICTURES.COM GALLERY@METROPICTURES.COM

Swiss prankster **Olaf Breuning** navigates between the sublime and the ridiculous in films,

Seriously Funny

sculptures, and multimedia works that take on everything from Easter Island to Woody Allen



THE 91 STAIRS up to Olaf Breuning's fifth-floor studio in Tribeca are not only formidable, they are ridiculous. Steep and slathered in gray paint, they look like something Breuning might have concocted himself if they hadn't already been there when he moved in. Breuning

BY KELLY DEVINE THOMAS has lived and worked here since 2008, when

he left his previous studio, a former massage parlor below a seafood bar in SoHo.

"I think he saw that staircase and bought the apartment without seeing it," says his longtime collaborator and best

Kelly Devine Thomas is a contributing editor of ARTnews and author of artlovesmoney.com.



LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST; RIGHT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND METHO PICTURES, NEW YORK

friend, Brian Kerstetter, who plays the main character—a bumbling, feckless drifter/hoodlum/tourist—in Breuning's *Home* films. "He likes to make you jump through hoops and make you work a little bit."

The stairs are featured in the series of photographs that welcome visitors to Breuning's scavenger-hunt-like Web site (olafbreuning.com). "It used to be even worse," says Kerstetter of Breuning's "click here" online antics. "You used to have to type in long URLs. I told him, 'I can't sit here and do this all day.'"

The artist is known for his absurdist sense of humor (a scene in his 2004 film *Home 1* follows a crowd of golf-club-wielding bungling mayhem-makers who tackle an "Amish" man, strip him naked, and force him to wear an E. T. mask). But Breuning, 40, who has dark, lush hair and brown eyes, is surprisingly tame in person. "He is very Swiss and very polite," says Whitney Museum curator Shamim Momin. "But there is something not quite right. You get the sense that he might be messing with you. His bluntness makes you suspicious and unsure of what position to take."

Artist Ruby Sky Stiler, Breuning's studio assistant, attributes this in part to his "unusual sense of the English language, and the way he relates to words in a formal, instinctual way. Often he thinks things mean something entirely different than they do, and he has a few commonly used phrases. Like, when he means to ask how one is doing, he often says, 'It comes good?'"

An existential experimentalist masquerading as a merry prankster, Breuning is a multimedia



fiend—he works in film, installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, and music (he composes many of the soundtracks for his films on his computer). His work, imbued with a sense of random, yearning, impotent connected disconnectedness, reflects a mash of influences, from slasher films and heavy-metal-music videos to Woody Allen, Larry David, and *Jackass*—with a strong Martin Kippenberger undercurrent.

"I always try to be somehow of the time," says Breuning. "I speak about things that are a part of human beings' daily lives, about being part of a world that has bigger things in it than only art. It has shopping malls, it has wars, it has all of these things that I think of when I want to speak about us." As *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson noted, Breuning explores "a variety of entertaining and sometimes movingly poetic ways to connect the ridiculous and the sublime."

Breuning was well known in Europe for more than a

decade—he was given a solo exhibition at the BINZ39 Foundation in Zurich in 1998, when he was just a year out of art school—before he attracted attention in the United States, at the 2008 Whitney Biennial. His 2007 film *Home 2*, part of a series that follows a charmingly ignorant narrator as he encounters foreign people and scenarios, was a success there. At the Park Avenue Armory, the biennial's off-site exhibition space, he lined up an "army" of sculptures handcrafted from teapots, lava lamps, and other objects he had picked up at Pearl River Mart in Chinatown (the store is now in SoHo).

He has also in recent years collaborated on a fashion show with designer Bernhard Willhelm (in 2004); built a giant sand castle in the form of a reclining nude (in 2008), commissioned by the Sagamore Hotel for Art Basel Miami Beach; and designed the labels for the limited-edition bottles of Grolsch beer (an evolution-of-man parody) that were distributed at the New Art Dealers Alliance Art Fair in Miami Beach this past December.

Among the idiosyncratic items in Breuning's sparsely furnished studio is a British shorthair cat named Whale and a picnic table, where Stiler sits next to an intern/blogger manning the computers that are vital to Breuning's work. A coffee table is covered with his catalogues, which the artist flips through somewhat tenderly (a series of photos on his Web site that depict him doing this ends abruptly with a photo of a handwritten note reading, "AND SO ON!!!").

In his art, silly imagery is juxtaposed with heartfelt sentiment ("Why can you not be more nice with nature?" "Can someone tell us why we are here?") and in-your-face inanity. The 2002 photograph *We only move when something changes!!!* features

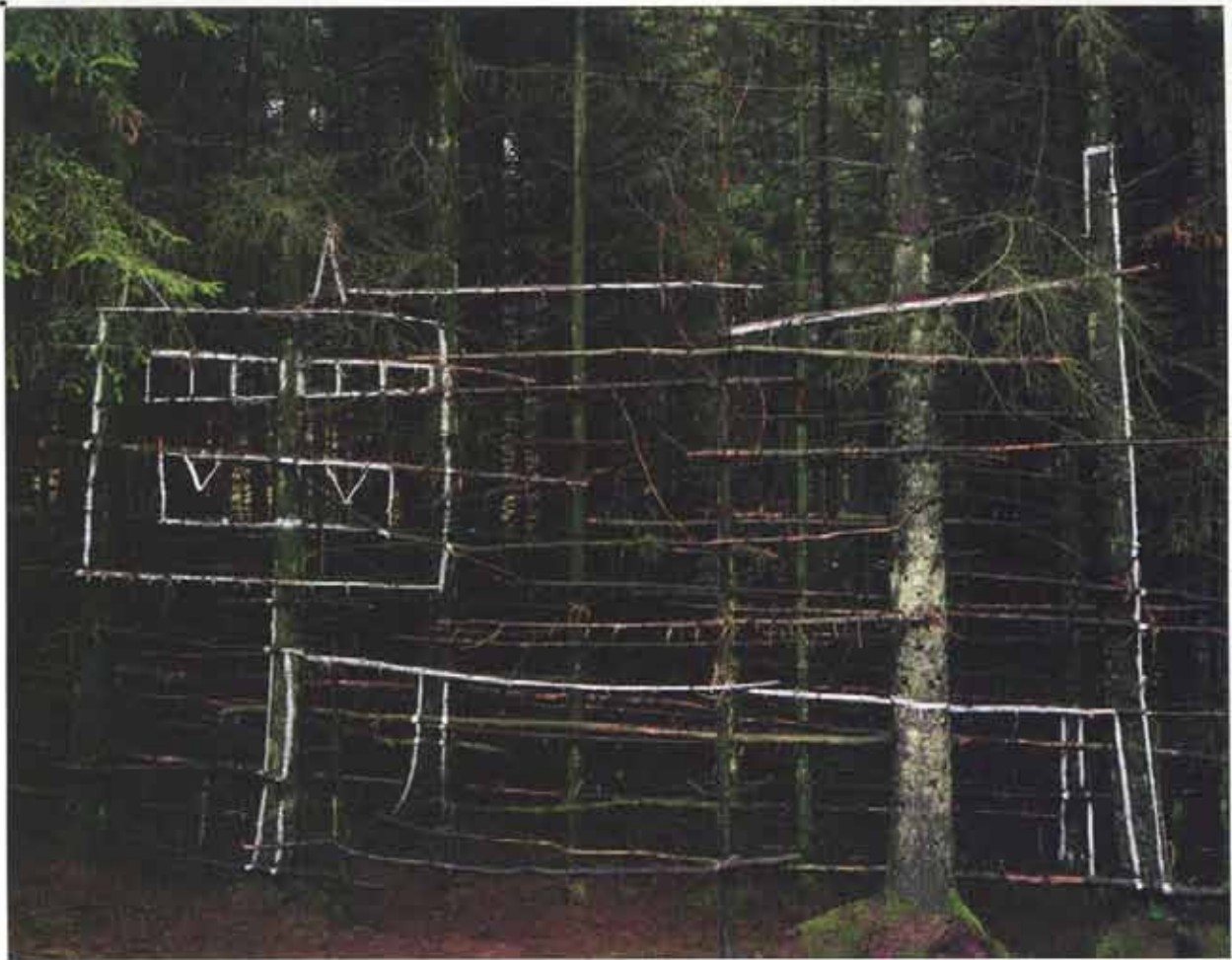
a jumble of visual references—a tall concrete wall with a peace sign, a white Range Rover, ladders, a pirate flag, a tent, bicycles, and motorbikes—punctuated by men and women lounging and wearing red clown noses.

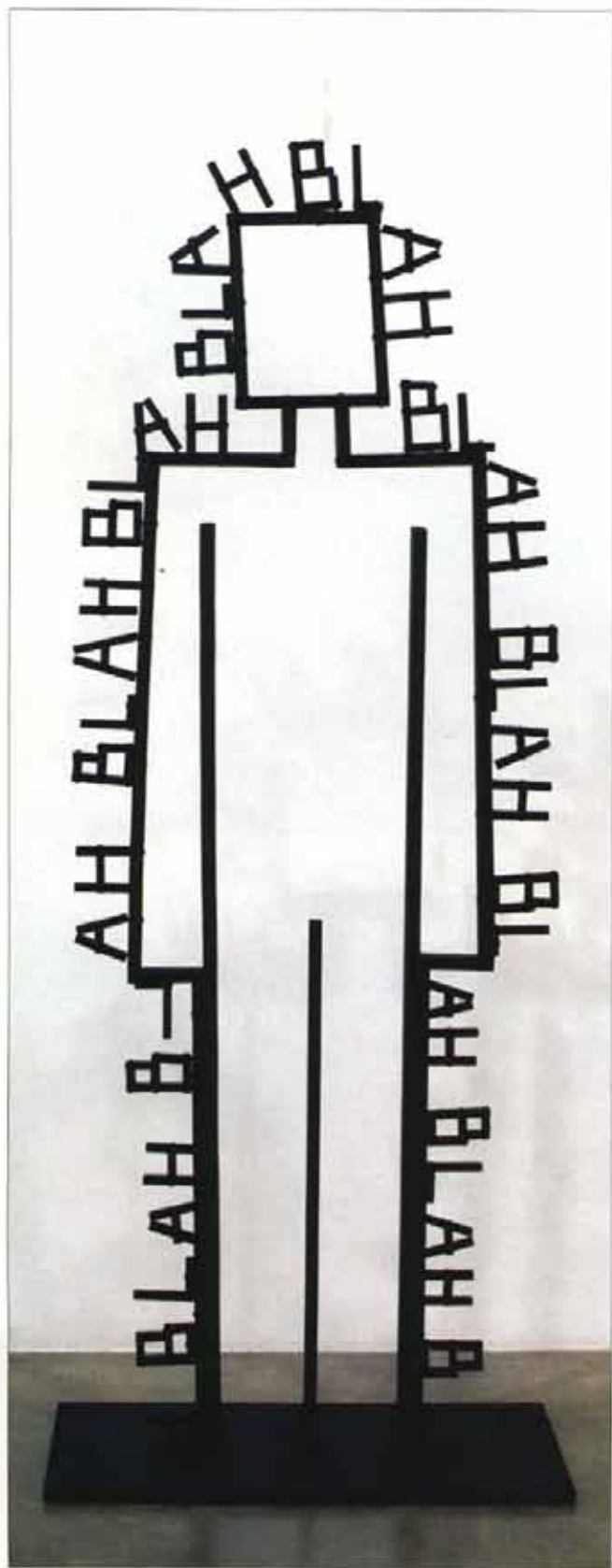
Breuning's works both capture and reflect an Internet-obsessed, globe-hopping generation. On Google and Google Earth, he searched "rocks" and tracked down the Seattle-area monolith that would become the subject of his 2008 photograph *Mammoth*. An inflatable boat and a lifesaver that Breuning and accomplices hoisted up by pulley transform the rock into the face of a woolly beast. "The good thing is that wherever you go on the planet someone has been there before and someone had a camera and they put it all online," says Breuning. "The Internet is a very nice resource to inspire and figure out things."

Mammoth is something of a sequel to *Easter Bunnies*, a photo Breuning made with Kerstetter's aid on Easter Island six years ago. Unable to obtain the necessary permits for the project, "we had to be like Sherlock Holmes," says Breuning. He and Kerstetter set up a handmade iron-and-string apparatus that Breuning had assembled in New York. When photographed in the foreground, in front of the *moai* statues, the apparatus made it look as if the statues had bunny ears

LEFT *Untitled*, 2008, a sexy sand sculpture.

OPPOSITE *Cat*, 2002 (top). *The Army*, 2008 (bottom).





and red bucktooth smiles. "He likes to take two extremes on this planet and see how they react," says Kerstetter. "He is fascinated with modern life and whether technology and gadgets make you more happy or unhappy."

BORN IN 1970 in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, Breuning grew up watching Woody Allen and John Carpenter films and learning to break-dance. "When you grow up in Switzerland, you watch all of the American movies," he says. "We were very oriented toward the United States. Mentally we lived in that world."

His father, a graphic designer, played in a band. His mother was addicted to crafts, always spinning wool or knitting. When he was ten, Breuning says, he thought he would be an actor, but his girlfriend at the time told him she wouldn't marry him if that were the case. Twenty years later, he cast himself as the main character in his 2000 film *King*, in which he drives through the desert bare-chested, tattooed, dreadlocked, and wearing aviator sunglasses. He stops the truck and puts on a suit of armor while lyrics by Beat Cadruvi blare: "You are man, you're machine, and

everything in between.

Whether you feel or not doesn't count as long as you can pretend." He runs off into the distance wielding his sword.

LEFT *Mr. Blah Blah Blah*, 2009. **OPPOSITE** Still from *Woodworld*, 1998, Breuning's first film.

Breuning's mother thought he might become a businessman, but his life took a new direction

when his father gave him a camera. He was 16. "I became obsessed with it," he says. He began by taking Henri Cartier-Bresson-influenced photographs and then started to invent scenarios of his own. For an early work, while he was a postgraduate student at HfG Zurich, he took photographs of himself in 41 different poses and deposited the small cutout figures in a red birdcage.

Breuning soon began making films, sculptures, and installations. "I like photography very much, but I felt limited with the possibilities to speak," he says. "I get very quickly bored. I am not an artist who can do for ten years exactly the same thing." His first film, *Woodworld*, from 1998, depicts a Range Rover in a forest; while the car stands still, various external and internal elements (passengers, special-effects machines, audiovisual equipment, a strobe light, and a flashlight-on-a-wire "spaceship") change. Breuning describes the work as "photography with moving surroundings."

In 1998, Breuning met Kerstetter, a friend of a friend, an Ohio native six-foot-five-inches tall, who showed up to be an extra for one of Breuning's films, *Chris Croft*. It features a group of men and women, topless and wearing white skirts, sleeping, while a single figure swathed entirely in black except for yellow sneakers dances on a boat. For a recent shoot, Kerstetter was covered in one-inch pieces of yellow, blue, and red masking tape. "When they pulled them off, I had to have two shots of whiskey," says Kerstetter. "Sometimes I think he's doing these things just to torture me."

THIS IMAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK, NY

After receiving three Swiss grants in 2000, Breuning moved to New York, where Janelle Reiring, founder of Metro Pictures, soon contacted him. Art adviser Philippe Segalot, then head of contemporary art for Christie's worldwide, had suggested that she check him out. "I thought his work was wild and interesting," says Segalot, who had seen examples in the home of collector Attilio Codognato in Venice. "It was different and fresh. It appealed to me."

Today Breuning works with six galleries in addition to Metro Pictures: Nils Staerk in Copenhagen, Air de Paris in Paris, Kodama Gallery in Tokyo and Kyoto, Galerie Meyer Kainer in Vienna, Galerie Nicola von Senger in Zurich, and Michael Benvenuto in New York and Los Angeles. "It's too much, it's too many, but I just like the galleries," he says. At Kodama last spring he exhibited wall drawings and sculptures (he calls them three-dimensional stick drawings) espousing such sentiments as "I can not do it anymore," "Just a normal person," and "The times are not very good!"

He followed this with his fifth solo show at Metro Pictures last fall. "Small Brain Big Stomach" was a fun-park assortment of wall drawings and stick-sculpture id-isms, like a head full of eleven "me's" and a single "you." This summer, he will have a solo exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain at La Chapelle du Genêt (July 3–August 29).

In his films *Home 1*, in which a manic man holed up in a hotel suite tells stories of faraway adventures, and *Home 2*, which follows the same character on a tourist excursion to Papua New Guinea, "the big question is, 'What is home?'" says Breuning. He describes the character as someone "who has no relationship with anything anymore. He is basically a sweet guy who says some impolite things. There are a lot of *Jackass* moments in the film, but finally it is about this guy with a Western view, going through this world. And not only a Western view, but just a view that can stand for any view metaphorically. We go through life and that's what we know, and when we meet something we don't know, we just sometimes cannot handle it." Speaking of the *Home* films, Breuning says, "They are something I will work on my whole life. When I am an old man, I will be making *Home 50*."

He hopes to begin working on the third film in the series soon, but at the moment, Breuning says, "it seems like I am a victim of the economic crisis. I definitely don't want to invest thousands of dollars in films and sculptures or whatever, so I am taking this time to make drawings." A walk-in utility closet in his studio is full of props, defunct projects, paraphernalia, and a bundle of old credit cards pinned next to a girlie calendar on the wall. (Instead of using a wallet, Breuning, who eats breakfast daily at Balthazar in SoHo, carries around a thick wad of cash bound in a hefty rubber band. "It looks like it's all money," says Reiring. "It's not. It's money and every business card he's ever picked up.")



Breuning's works sell for \$2,000 for 8-by-10-inch drawings; \$15,000 for 60-by-75-inch photographs (in editions of five); \$20,000 for sculptures; and up to \$75,000 for installations. After more than ten years of making art professionally, he suggests that maybe he should have "a big studio somewhere, like Jeff Koons, making big paintings, having 20 assistants do all the work for me, and making millions of dollars. But I just like beginning again all of the time. I always want to be fresh and restart. I want to keep it, in an artistic way, small."

He looks around his studio closet, searching for some possession he would miss if it were gone. "I'm not really materialistic," he says. "I love things, but I think I could lose all of it."

Except, according to Kerstetter, the five-star hotels and the really expensive bottles of red wine. ■