

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Mar/Apr 2015 Review



LOS ANGELES

Bas Jan Ader: "Drifting Home" at Meliksetian Briggs

Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975) is one of those "enigmatic art world figures" whose premature death, tragically unrealized talent, and charismatic personal appeal combine to form a legend that often draws attention from, or even overshadows, the art he did make. Gordon Matta-Clark comes to mind. James Dean. Jim Morrison. In the absence of later work to examine, fans, scholars, and those who claim him as an influence must resort to an endless parsing of whatever they can get their hands on—and certain narratives become dominant. For most people, this means documented performative works in which he is seen falling (off rooftops, into canals, out of trees, on historic pathways), crying wordlessly into the camera, or fatefully setting sail. So on this, the 40th anniversary of his death and debut of a new gallery home for Ader's estate, what Pedro de Llano has curated for the occasion is exceptionally refreshing—a sparse installation of shatteringly profound yet rarely exhibited and relatively unknown pieces that's as close to a show of new work by Ader as possible.

Ader's special knack was for combining art history, semiotic theory, physical comedy, and expressive, ironic *mise-en-scène*. The exhibition's two videos represent his sole soundtracked work and one of his most high production-value shorts. There are both color and B&W photographs, and paper works including a Xeroxed handmade book and show flyers. Unexpected threads build a bright web of references and recurrences, bringing up the lights on themes of home, domesticity, and pleasure. He sits smoking on his roof in *Implosion* (1967). His worldly belongings are scattered on the roof in *All my clothes* (1970). He's comfortably reading by a fireplace in *The artists as consumer of*

extreme comfort (1968/2003). He's reading aloud in *The boy who fell over Niagara Falls* (1972)—from an issue of *Reader's Digest*. *473 Reader's Digest digested* (1970) shows worms eating moldy back issues. Nature also appears on high intensity in *Untitled (The elements)* (1971/2003) as he stands on jagged earth, at the edge of a choppy sea, against a vastness of sky and air, holding a handwritten sign reading "Fire." He doesn't fall down in any of it—nevertheless, his penchant for simple absurdity and DIY peril animates it all. It's no surprise to learn that Ader loved Benny Hill almost as much as Piet Mondrian.

—SHANA NYS DAMBROT

"UNTITLED (THE ELEMENTS)," 1971/2003

Bas Jan Ader

C-TYPE PRINT, 11" x 14"

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