

Meliksetian MB Briggs

the **guardian**

art and design The Observer

His was the ultimate disappearing act

The mysterious demise of Bas Jan Ader could easily have been the plot for one of his tragicomic films, says Laura Cumming

Laura Cumming

Saturday 29 April 2006

Bas Jan Ader: All is Falling Camden Arts Centre, London NW3

On a hot summer's day three decades ago, a rising star of the American art scene set sail across the Atlantic from Cape Cod to Falmouth. His boat was absurdly small. His journey was part of a performance called *In Search of the Miraculous*. But what he sought, or found, will never be known, for Bas Jan Ader's empty boat washed up off the Irish coast nine months later. There were no logbooks and not a trace of his fate. His body has never been recovered. Ader was already something of a romantic hero when he disappeared at the age of 33. Naturally, there are those who believe, or hope, he is still alive. Many of them are artists themselves, who cannot endure the loss of such a brief and charismatic career. Surely, they claim, he could have staged his own end as part of the performance? Perhaps he jumped ship from his former life.

What became of Ader has partly determined the fate of his art. Everything he made is now tinged with sadness. But anyone who makes the effort to separate the life from the work will still find sorrow in its character. Or at least the kind of sorrow that comes from a finely tragicomic mind. Ader had the shortest heyday - about five years - and left very few works, but everything he made was pensive, beautiful and delicately suspended between tears and laughter.

Some of it literally involved crying. Ader was a Dutchman who sailed to America in his teens and wound up among the conceptual artists of late Sixties California. He worked with slides, film, music and text. He painted words on walls.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Probably his most famous film is *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, in which the artist simply weeps. His handsome face is stricken, agonised, then seems to strain towards a smile, as if it had all been a joke. But it's nothing more than an involuntary reflex. The camera is positioned so that you never see Ader's downcast eyes. Puzzled, sympathetic, eventually distressed yourself, you see him first as an individual then gradually as a Man of Sorrows. Which is the characteristic progression of his work - from the personal to the universal.

Like all his best films, this one is silent and monochrome. Ader did experiment with colour - there is a skit on Mondrian, in which he laboriously arranges flowers in primary colours - but his forte is for black and white. The antique look of his work seems strangely apt, connecting back to Chaplin and slapstick.

For the main body of his art, he said, was 'all concerned with falling'- literally falling down. In one film, he loses control of his bicycle and plunges straight into an Amsterdam canal. In another, he tries to stand upright but gradually loses his balance, falling sideways into undergrowth.

Having struggled to the furthestmost branches of a tree, Ader dangles until his arms give out, then drops dead into a dyke. It is tragicomedy in miniature: the artist vainly trying to stay aloft but brought down by his silly hubris.

The backdrop here is a classic 17thcentury Dutch landscape and you can always enjoy Ader's work for its quips on art. In one piece, he sprawls on the ground in a black suit sending up the rigid grid of a Mondrian painting. In another, he stands out on the shore, dark against the evening sun, a living version of those ciphers in Caspar David Friedrich.

Ader throws a Mad Hatter's tea party inside a minimalist crate. He falls off a roof, a droll punchline to Yves Klein's famous (and fake) photograph of himself in full vainglorious leap. And although he may have been very much a West Coast artist, he even seems to counter the violence of conceptualist contemporaries such as Chris Burden and John Baldessari. His words on walls are so much more human than Baldessari's tough texts. *Please Don't Leave Me* implored one brief legend in paint that swiftly faded.

Ader was a trained philosopher and his best work is both lyric and metaphysical. In this, he is more like Beckett than any visual artist. And the most affecting work here, *Nightfall*, could almost be a Beckett title.

Ader's thin figure is lit only by some light bulbs on the floor. Slowly, effortfully, like a poor, burdened Atlas, he heaves a great weight of granite to his shoulder. It falls, shattering the bulbs on his left. He tries again, now like

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Sisyphus, and again the stone crushes the bulbs on the right. The endeavour is almost comic, doomed to failure, but Ader's slapstick is overwhelmingly poignant. The metaphorical subtlety of the work is that one does not expect what is so obviously to be expected: light and life, then absolute darkness.