

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Bas Jan Ader disappeared at sea
at age 33. His art still haunts

By LEAH OLLMAN
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Bas Jan Ader, "Studies for I'm Too Sad to Tell You," 1971. Silver gelatin print, 9 by 6.75 inches (From Meliksetian Briggs)

Tragically truncated lives tend to be told in reverse, as narratives of inevitability, thick with prefigurations of death. The Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's life (1942-75) can hardly be seen otherwise. He disappeared at sea at

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age 33, the same age his father was in 1944 when executed by the Nazis for his active role in the resistance.

Loss and disappearance bookend Ader's life and permeate his art, the half-dozen years' worth of photographs, books and films that constitute, at once, his early, mature and late work.

"Water's Edge" at the L.A. gallery Meliksetian Briggs neatly gathers a selection of Ader's work around the theme of water. His staged, performative actions, carried out for both still and film cameras, enlist gravity as a tool of self-negation, concealment and potential harm. In every case, water factors as an agent or expression of loss or disappearance. In the video "Broken Fall (organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland" (1971), Ader appears hanging from a high branch for more than a minute, swaying and adjusting his grip, before dropping into the shallow canal below. The 10 black-and-white photographs of "Fall 2, Amsterdam" (1970) chronicle, from a fixed position, Ader entering the scene on a bicycle, veering toward the pavement's edge and tipping down, bicycle and all, into a canal.

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Bas Jan Ader, "Broken Fall (organic)," Amsterdamse Bos, Holland," 1971/1994 silver gelatin print 18 by 25 inches
(Meliksetian Briggs)

In another documented performance, Ader reads a true account from the Reader's Digest of a boat that plunged over Niagara Falls and the miraculous survival of one young passenger. However dramatic the tale, Ader reads it in a neutral voice, sitting in a neutral setting, intermittently sipping from a glass of water. The crisp, matter-of-fact approach, in this piece and throughout, dovetails with that of many of his fellow Southern California conceptualists of the early '70s. Beneath the veneer of dispassion roiled deep emotionality and sorrow, as well as humor. That bicycle fall, untethered to Ader's personal history, could read as Chaplinesque.

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In one of his best known and most affecting works, “I’m Too Sad to Tell You,” Ader’s face is tightly framed, isolated against a blank background, as he enacts deep distress, weeping, tugging at his hair, wiping his eyes. In the

two photographic studies here, as in the 1971 video, the scene is as wrenching as it is spare. Gravity of both sorts is in full, demonstrable force.

Meliksetian Briggs, 313 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through July 27. (323) 828-4731, meliksetianbriggs.com