

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Not One to See the Father for the Trees

LA's Meliksetian | Briggs leads heavy for their Dallas debut with a Bas Jan Ader exhibition.

BY BRANDON KENNEDY



Bas Jan Ader, Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks, 1970, eight objects, rope, and cement cylinder blocks, dimensions variable, unique. Two detail views of installation at Meliksetian | Briggs, 2021.

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Bas Jan Ader, *Thoughts unsaid, then forgotten*, 1973, oil stick, tripod, clamp-on lamp, flowers, and ceramic vase, dimensions variable, unique. Installation view at Metro Pictures, New York, 2016. Photograph by Genevieve Hansen.

Let us begin with the artist's disappearance at sea. Departing his adopted shores to return to the motherland. The second component of a never-completed trilogy, *In Search of the Miraculous*.

The tragicomic artist with an existentialist bent. His melancholic longing echoes in the waves, concealing previous melodramatic splashes elsewhere. Sea shanties sung by a choir, nighttime walks from the city to the ocean, now long gone but not completely silent.

Dutch conceptual performance artist Bas Jan Ader often used photographic and filmic means to capture his Beckettian variations influenced by Buster Keaton's sense of comedic timing. Drawn or printed text was also widely utilized by the artist to provoke, plead, or share a pursuit with the viewer. Ader commonly worked stylistic variations of connected themes and made the majority of his small but potent oeuvre while living in his adopted hometown of Los Angeles or his native Netherlands. Ader settled in Los Angeles in 1963, having initially sailed across the ocean from Morocco. The City of Angels haunts a number of the artist's works and vice versa, as the Los Angeles namesake gallery of Anna Meliksetian and Michael Briggs solely represents the estate of the late artist.

The centerpiece of the January exhibition at Meliksetian | Briggs' new location in Dallas' River Bend is a durational installation entitled *Thoughts unsaid, then forgotten* (1973). The conceptual work consists of the titular phrases rendered in oil stick in capital letters on a white wall. The two-line phrases are illuminated by a common clamp-on light on a tripod, a ceramic vase of flowers placed adjacent on the floor. Once the blooms fade, they are disposed of and replaced. The



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text is then painted over and written again, starting the cycle anew. The click of the lamp's switch marking an empty envelope of time.

Similar in tone, *Light vulnerable objects threatened by eight cement bricks*, (1970), features an arrangement of objects resting on the gallery floor (pillows, a boxed cake, a string of lights, a flat of eggs) with a cinder block looming just above each scenario and secured by a rope. The anxiety of the present moment, oozing an absurd, yet-to-be-realized finality to the gravity of the relationships between objects.

Telling gestures and repeated motions mark the edges of Ader's artistic ideas. An idea can run the gamut of media in his oeuvre or exist solely as directives or explanations; the dissolving of a subject into its circumstances. In his *Broken Fall* series, the artist presents both (*geometric*) and (*organic*) subtitled variations filmed in Holland. Rocking rhythmically on a path in the direction of a nearby sawhorse, the artist eventually succumbs to listing over sideways onto the supporting object and off the path. A lanky figure swings back and forth from a high tree limb, a stream below to break his eventual descent. In 1970—a year before the two previous examples—the Dutch artist famously veered his bicycle into a murky Amsterdam canal, disappearing with a splash for *Fall 2, Amsterdam*, resulting in both a color production still and black-and-white silent film of just nineteen seconds. Adam, Icarus, Man.

Running under just two minutes, *Untitled (Tea party)*, 1972, is a black-and-white silent film featuring the artist crawling slowly on a hillside. At left is the open long side of a large appliance box propped up with a simple long limb tied with a string leading offscreen. Once underneath, Ader methodically pours and sips tea from a porcelain

set whilst on his haunches in suit and tie. He turns away from us after setting his cup down on the tray, and the string pulls taut as the artist is trapped underneath in a timely fashion. A cardboard coffin parked beneath a tree on a sunny hillside cleft.

Ader's father, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (as was his mother), aided Jewish refugees during the Holocaust by hiding them in the family's home in the countryside near the German border. He was later arrested by the Nazis and then executed along with several others at the edge of a wooden area. Israel honored the fallen hero by planting 1,000 pine trees in the Hebron district of the West Bank on the ruins of 350 homes of displaced Palestinians razed during the 1948 war, their former occupants never allowed to return. Decades later, Bas' brother Erik, a retired diplomat, learned of the cover-up and donated olive trees to an occupied Palestinian territory. He has also asked for their father's name to be removed from the grove of trees dedicated in his honor.

In Bas Jan Ader's *Untitled (Swedish Fall)*, 1971/2003, the artist is photographed at the edge of a wooded area in two separate color, square-format compositions. The first image captures the artist standing at the composition's center, erect among the straight, tall pines alongside and behind him. The second mirrors the first but finds Ader fallen, laying prostrate among a few felled trunks. The implied actions between postures confronts the past, yet also projects into the unknown future an echo of mortality, absence, and grief. Tinged with longing and ringing softly through the tendered quiet of a thicket. Planted by others in memory of those once, or not yet, lost. **P**

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Clockwise from top: Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 2*, Amsterdam, 1970, black-and-white 16mm film, silent, duration: 19". Color production still from set; Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall* (geometric) *Westkapelle, Holland*, 1971, black-and-white 16mm film, silent, duration: 1'32". Still image from 16mm film; Bas Jan Ader, *Untitled (Tea party)*, 1972, black-and-white 16mm film, silent, duration: 1'52". Production still from 16mm film. All images: © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Andersen-Ader, 2022 / The Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs.

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