

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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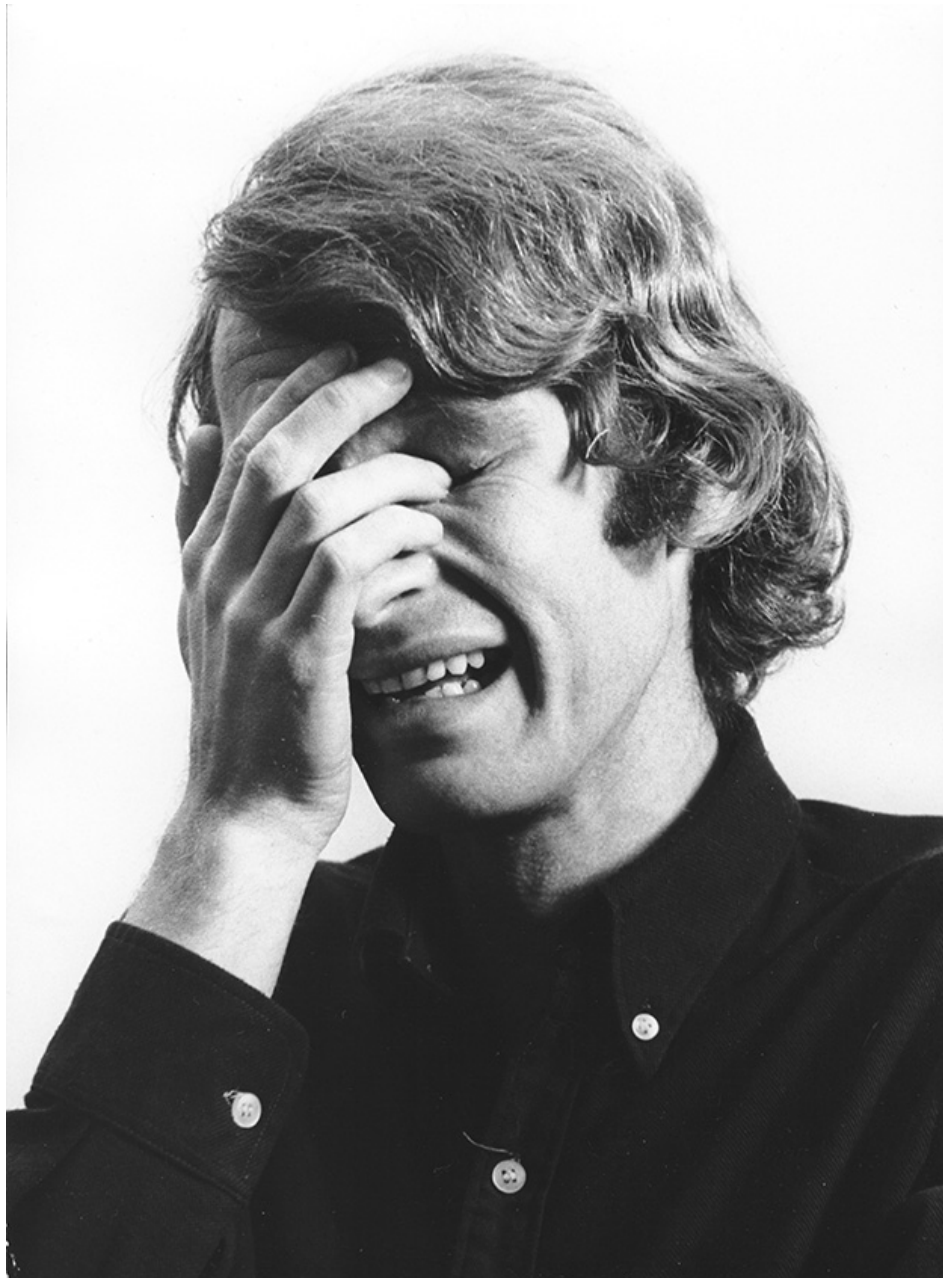
## Dallas gallery offers a rare chance to see the art of Bas Jan Ader, who vanished in 1975

Meliksetian Briggs exhibits an influential artist who was rarely shown in his lifetime.



Bas Jan Ader's "Untitled," a 1967 oil-on-canvas self-portrait, is included in the "Thoughts Unsaid ..." exhibition, which runs through Feb. 25 at Meliksetian Briggs gallery in Dallas.

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Bas Jan Ader's "I'm Too Sad to Tell You," a 1971 short film, features the artist's face, grimacing in sorrow.

By Eve Hill-Agnus

To disappear. It recalls Hamlet's famous line: "To sleep, perchance to dream."

# Meliksetian MB Briggs

Such ambiguity suits the life, work and untimely end of [Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader](#), who vanished in 1975 at the age of 33, having departed the East Coast alone in a small sailboat bound for Europe — the voyage itself a performance piece that never reached its end.

We have a rare chance to see Ader's work in an exhibition, "Thoughts Unsaid ...," at Dallas' Meliksetian Briggs gallery. Curated by artist David Quadrini, the show sensitively explores selected works from the gallery, which recently moved from Los Angeles and is the sole representative of Ader's estate.

In the 1960s, Ader moved from his native Netherlands to sunny Los Angeles. There, he dived into the heady world of conceptual art, earning a Master of Fine Arts and studying philosophy. During his brief career, he taught at various universities and produced films, installations and performance art.

He once rode his bicycle into a canal to chase his obsession with gravity. For Quadrini, Ader's ethos is pure poetry, bound by the laws of physics.

It's not the first time Ader's work has been shown in North Texas. A 2019 exhibition at the [Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth](#) placed him in the context of California's conceptual art movement in the early 1970s.

Anna Meliksetian, who co-owns the Meliksetian Briggs gallery with her husband, says there is a steady demand for Ader's work. "We get requests for loans once a week," she says.

Ader's lyrical style makes him stand out in the conceptualist canon. His work has been featured in the Venice Biennale, and he is a favorite of artists as stylistically different from him as contemporary painter Kehinde Wiley, who's perhaps best known for his [2018 portrait of former President Barack Obama](#). And yet, Ader remains fairly obscure.

Solitary figures and lonely landscapes figure prominently in the show.

In *Untitled (Swedish Fall)* (1970), two color photographs form a sequence. Ader stands on the edge of a wood in one frame; in the next, he lies prone among the trees where he was standing.

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Our minds complete a simple action (falling down), but the narrative evokes something more profound about Ader's biography: His father, a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, was executed by the Nazis in woods like these for offering safe harbor to Jews.

Ader's body traces other stories as well. In *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1971), a short film, his face is shown against a white background, grimacing in sorrow. Storms of grief move across his face like clouds in the sky. For three minutes, one landscape (psychological) imprints on another (physical).

Ader seems eager to hand us clues. In the photograph *Untitled (The Elements)* (1971), the rail-thin artist stands on a wind-whipped coast, holding a handwritten sign reading "FIRE," completing the elemental quartet of earth, air, water and fire.

With the show's namesake installation, *Thoughts Unsaid, Then Forgotten* (1973), Ader's clues were undiscovered for decades. Meliksetian realized by looking at Ader's original handwritten instructions that every show since the work's debut in Nova Scotia had repeated an error in its placement of objects.

This show is displaying the installation the way the artist intended for the first time, Meliksetian says.

In the new layout, a tripod holds a lamp that illuminates the title, written in oil paint on the wall. Flowers in a vase unfurl and wilt over the course of the show. Eventually, the flowers are discarded, the text wiped away. But the lamp remains, poignantly illuminating what is gone.

The exhibition is rounded out by unusual works, including a never-exhibited landscape painting and self-portrait — both recently uncovered by Ader's widow, Mary Sue Andersen-Ader — as well as works on paper, from when Ader took printmaking classes with the artist, nun and social activist Corita Kent.

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Ader's contribution to art history is "poetry and emotion, where other [artists] had a dry conceptualism," Meliksetian says. Rarely shown in his lifetime, Ader's work has become well-known in artistic circles.

"We have a show, and all these kids show up that never come to the gallery," Meliksetian says of previous exhibitions. Many of them, she adds, are MFA students.

Ultimately, Ader wrestled with universal ideas, teetering on the edge of the ambiguous and ever-changing. His work deserves to be seen on its own merit, not merely because of his mysterious end.

## **Details**

The "Thoughts Unsaid ..." exhibition, featuring works by Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, runs through Feb. 25 at Meliksetian Briggs gallery, 150 Manufacturing St., Suite 214. [meliksetianbriggs.com](http://meliksetianbriggs.com).