

# Art

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The Ends of Post-Internet Art

Richard Grayson

Art and the Anthropocene

Bob Dickinson

The Welfare State

Chris Clarke

Letter from Capetown

Morgan Quaintance



marks the 40th anniversary of Bas Jan Ader's attempt to cross the Atlantic from Cape Cod to Falmouth. The choice of the Icelander's work has nothing to do with a vessel seemingly lost at sea (Ader's fate) but in the challenge to reason it implies.

Ader's voyage was an artwork (and not a prank or performance), the second part in a proposed tripartite piece that could be said, like much of his work, to place sensations linked to departure, risk and absence at its core. Despite being an accomplished sailor, his adventure in a pocket cruiser measuring little over 12ft in length ended in tragedy with the artist's disappearance somewhere between the Azores and his destination. Thus an exhibition titled 'In Search of the Miraculous' raises expectations by borrowing the title of that final artwork. Lifted in turn by Ader from the writings of philosopher-mystic GI Gurdjieff, the words presume the quest for spiritual self-knowledge found in both men's outlooks. Ader's artistic aspirations, which were evolving beyond narrative towards art in which life itself was communicated, narrowed into an absurdist struggle for concrete truths. His reliance on the humour of slapstick comedy sweetened the embarrassment and failure inherent in the process.

Guido van der Werve's work often resembles a homage to his Dutch-born compatriot, although in his tightly framed ten-minute film, *Nummer acht: everything is going to be alright*, 2007, van der Werve swaps the everyday surroundings preferred by Ader for the extraordinary setting of icy terrain in the Gulf of Bothnia. Enduring its physical and natural extremes, the artist walks steadily alone except for a massive Baltic icebreaker, the noisy dark bulk of which dwarfs him from behind and shadows every step. As the unlikely pair advance, the camera retreats at the same pace so, as with Jónsson's boat, no end point is reached.

The result is palpably gothic and van der Werve is not alone in this show in nurturing the impact of his imagery through art-historical reference. With their focus on natural phenomena, Andrew Friend's *Experiencing Lightning Strike*, 2010, and Jessica Ramm's *Cloud Release*, 2013, evoke in modern photographic media traditional Enlightenment-era portrayals of experiments to grasp nature's mightiest unknowables, a staple of the sublime. Carolina Redondo's *Salto de Marimán (Anti-Gravity Series)*, 2014, summons the spirit of Caspar David Friedrich (as did Ader) through the lens of an extreme sports enthusiast by photographing herself perched perilously in an acrobatic pose on a rock above a mighty rushing river in the dramatic Andean landscape.

Consideration of the medium's role in conditioning viewers'

responses to extreme nature augments the visual representations in Sax Impey's video and large-scale mixed-media painting, both titled *Veil*, 2011, which depict dense mist on the open sea. This chest-tightening prospect of sensory dislocation is apprehended with subtle variations through the filter of film's supposed realism and painting's more diverse cultural associations. James Thurgood's *Chasing Time (Water Study)*, 2009, 2015, however, injects remarkable poetic resonance into 24 colour exposures taken rapidly with a disposable camera. Crudely displayed in a grid tacked to the wall, they register the futility of photographing water to convey time's passage. Transience is an attribute of technology, not the sea.

Water appears in some form in 11 of the 17 artworks chosen by Newlyn's deputy director, Blair Todd, and thankfully not because of Ader's unfortunate last embarkation. The ocean persists in terrifying the mind with its destructive unpredictability, rising levels and trackless vastness. It offers the optimum stage on which to goad and cheat death, the one certainty that Ader, who admired Albert Camus's existentialism, would have known as the 'ultimate reproach to the habit of life'. Perhaps only on the high seas can the modern imagination still wonder about an omnipotent sublime force.

The part-focus on the sea at Newlyn also personalises this commemoration to the gallery's littoral location, allowing it to broaden its selection beyond an examination of Ader or even of Jörg Heiser's definition of emotionally charged Romantic Conceptualism. This show assembles 12 artists whose work has, to quote the gallery publicity, 'a yearning for the sublime, a playful pursuit for new experience and journeys, or a romantic contemplation of the sea and what may lie beyond'.

This mild brief annuls several initial expectations. Indeed, the Dutch-born artist does not appear within the body of the exhibition. Instead, a looped programme of his seven films is displayed on a monitor in the cafe from where the view offers his work the panoramic backdrop of Mount's Bay, which, had all gone to plan, the artist would have sailed past in September 1975. A sentimental gesture, perhaps, but also playfully inclined towards Ader's own *Farewell to Faraway Friends*, 1971, his ambiguous parody of romantic imagery in which a diminutive lone figure is silhouetted against a coastal sunset photographed in rich Kodachrome tones.

Nonetheless, the spirit of commemoration survives in the perspectives adopted on the show's themes. The lone figure or object facing superior odds recurs, as in the late (Obituary AM387) Chris Burden's *Ghost Ship*, 2005, a crewless sailboat on a computerised course between two North Sea ports that Burden hoped to endow with some autonomy within overall constraints. That aspiration, surely emblematic of man's lot, fell foul of maritime laws, however, with the result that even minimal 'free will' succumbed to total shore-based remote control, which Burden accepted as fate intervening to alter the constitution of the piece.

Simon Faithfull's swim and walk along the exact line of the Greenwich Meridian through England accommodated no deviation; he surmounted (mostly literally) such obstacles in his singular path as fences, kitchen windows, shop floors and mortuaries. Being always filmed from behind in *0°00 Navigation*, 2009, the artist's identity merges into his quest, which, like Ader's voyage, becomes the artwork. The works that resonate most profoundly beyond the gallery are those that channel self-reference outwards, rendering the artist a medium for the audience to sense intense encounters, rather than being a totem of private self-revelation or biography.

Guido van der Werve  
*Nummer acht:  
everything is going to be  
alright* 2007 video

