

Scaling history's peaks

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Published: December 24, 2013 - 9:25AM

It would be fair to say that Alexander the Great, Frederic Chopin and the endurance triathlon make for a somewhat perplexing triumvirate. But the military genius, the masterful romantic-era composer and the torturous sport of swim-bike-run provide the unlikely context for Dutch artist and composer Guido van der Werve's *Nummer veertien: Home*.

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The 2012 film, performance work and requiem, part of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's (ACCA) *Crescendo* exhibition, traces van der Werve's expedition - via bicycle, foot and freestyle - from Warsaw, the city of Chopin's birth, to Paris, the place of his death. Along the way, the artist invokes themes and motifs from Alexander the Great's life. Both earnest and slapstick in delivery, his epic journey to reunite a vessel filled with soil from Chopin's native home to the patch of earth in Pere Lachaise cemetery where his body lies in permanent exile was the equivalent distance to that of seven-and-a-half Ironman triathlons. It forms both a celebration and critique of the mythology of the epic - be it steeped in history or that of modern sporting endeavour.

"What binds Chopin and Alexander the Great is that they both left their homes when they were 19 and they were never able to make it back," says van der Werve, who prefaces the work as a kind of autobiographical project. "A few years ago, I found myself living in several different places and never really feeling at home anywhere. I was turning 35 so I was beginning to look back a little bit and I felt like the time was right to make a work that was about my life."

The artist - who is known for his annual Running to Rachmaninoff performance, in which he jogs 55 kilometres from his Manhattan art dealer to the town of Valhalla in Upstate New York to place chamomile flowers on the composer's grave - first decided that the Mount Everest base camp would be the perfect setting to bunker down and write his life story. But after attempting a "test climb" up the Argentinean mountain of Aconcagua (he describes the climb as one of the worst experiences of his life), van der Werve decided that mountaineering, let alone writing a conventional autobiography, wasn't for him. He decided instead to write a requiem in three parts. But it was when the artist added the medium of film to the equation, for the purposes of "reanimating" some of his strongest childhood memories and interests, that the work really began to take shape.

"When I was a kid, my two idols were Chopin and Alexander the Great, so I thought they should be involved somehow," says van der Werve, who studied to become a classical archaeologist for two years with the hope of becoming an Alexander the Great scholar before shifting his focus to art and music.

ACCA artistic director Juliana Engberg, who curated the *Crescendo* exhibition, frames the film as a poetic "intersection" between personal and wider history. "Guido is using all of these aspects and locations in between to tell the story of war in its bigger sense and exile in its bigger sense - this tragic circumstance in which neither Alexander the Great nor Chopin were able, through the circumstance of war, to return to their home or birthplace - and then his own heroic, triathlon effort to reunite that person with that place.

"The music is a conveyance that moves you through the whole thing," she says. "It's both inspiring and quite mad in a way."

The exhibition explores music and film's potential for invoking and articulating history, human pageantry and the momentousness of life and death. It features European artists such as Julian Rosefeldt, Hans Op de Beeck, Markus Kahre and Dorothy Cross. "My idea was to almost tap into and borrow some of the atmosphere from the Melbourne Ring Festival, through which we'd have this wonder work from Wagner in our midst," says Engberg.

"Artists really are using music quite a lot these days. They've really embraced this extra-sensory element that builds a sense of atmosphere, is a mood-setting device as well as a sort of narrative device, and many of the works that I'm showing have this expanded narrative structure that they're dealing with, creating what might be described as a total world."

Some of the works' engagement with music is allegorical rather than literal. British artist Rodney Graham's silent film *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8* is a kind of requiem for the renowned "Rolls-Royce of typewriters", which was produced out of a German munitions factory co-opted by the Nazis during WWII. Screened using an Italian Victoria 8 projector, the film traces the elegant contours of the Rheinmetall machine, forging a stylised and melancholic portrait of an object loaded with historical implications.

"In filming the typewriter and making it this almost glamorous silent movie star of this film, Rodney is delving into a very complicated history of writing narrative coupled with film narrative, which of course was one of the first ways we saw war and was one of the ways we first created celebrity - one of the reasons someone like Hitler was so adept at encouraging crowds and wrangling power," says Engberg. "So even in this seemingly small context or object, we have these incredibly big, embedded histories."

Belgian artist Ana Torfs' 2006 work *Anatomy*, meanwhile, explores the malleability and fallibility of history and truth, taking the 1919 murders and trial of German communist activists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht as its nub. Editing and condensing more than 1200 pages of court documents and records from the trial, Torfs commissioned young German actors, filmed front-on, to read witness statements and testimony from 25 defendants and random witnesses who were "narrowly involved" in the killings. Using multiple projections, alongside the image of an anatomy theatre, she frames the work as tracing the "anatomy" and "analysis" of a murder. "Through 25 versions of the 'truth', a fragmented and always shifting image of the last half hour in the lives of Liebknecht and Luxemburg reveals itself," says Torfs.

For Engberg, the scrutiny of history doesn't come without the examination of its artifice, expression and indeed histrionics. "I'm trying to reference both history itself and also the theatre of history, the media of history and all of the aspects that are culminating in these works."

Some of the artworks, such as van der Werve's film, take a little more creative licence than others. "With the triathlon you have the swim-bike-run," he says. "And with my requiem, there are three movements, and on top of that, the work has three elements: Alexander the Great, the requiem and Chopin."

"So it made a lot of sense to make this film." A chuckle. "Even though I had some moments when I thought, 'This is a weird soup I'm cooking up here'."

***Crescendo* is at ACCA until March 2, 2014. accaonline.org.au**

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/scaling-historys-peaks-20131220-2zpk.html>