



## Improbable Journey

Aesthetics and theatricality are among Pitzer's Bas Jan Ader exhibition

By: [Christopher Michno](#)

"Bas Jan Ader: Suspended Between Laughter and Tears," a group show at Pitzer College, with works from Ader and 10 contemporary artists whose practices relate to Ader, explores the interplay between pathos and comedy and the hazy line that distinguishes Ader's life from his art. What sets this show entirely on edge is the reality that Ader disappeared at sea after embarking on a solo voyage that was part of his most ambitious work, *In Search of the Miraculous*. Despite the fact that Ader was an experienced sailor, the idea that he would attempt a solo crossing of the Atlantic in a 13-foot boat raises questions: it seems an improbable journey. As it should, the exhibit focuses on aesthetic concerns: "Suspended Between Laughter and Tears" sets the stage for the informed viewer to consider Ader's life as the avenue of his art.

Three large video projections, which visually dominate Pitzer College's Nichols Gallery, underscore the theatricality of Ader's practice as a conceptual and performance artist. *Fall I, Los Angeles*, in which Ader falls from the roof of his Los Angeles home, begins with Ader, seated in a chair balanced over the ridge at the very top of his single-story bungalow. Ader leans, slightly at first, then more dramatically, pushing off with his legs, initiating a fall. He slows where the roof transitions to a more shallow pitch, and purposefully maneuvers, flipping as he lurches over the edge. Ader's shoe flies off in a touch of unintended comedy as he drops to the ground in what is perhaps an eight- to 10-foot fall. *Fall I, Los Angeles* reflects a kind of forced "accident" that is full of awkwardness, the possibility of real injury and comedy.

The practiced theatricality that suffuses *Fall I, Los Angeles* also pervades *I'm Too Sad To Tell You*, a three-and-half minute close-up of Ader working himself into weeping. Despite the artificiality of Ader's filmed performance, there is also a sense of *gravity* to *I'm Too Sad To Tell You*, as if his performance conceals something personal. The looped DVD, *Crying Game*, by Mexican artist Artemio is fiction in an entirely different vein. It features 10 minutes of characters misting, crying, and weeping edited together from multiple theatrical release films, leaving us to consider the awkwardness of Ader's forced tears and what they might signify in relation to the very natural looking states of emotional duress that we know are manufactured for the silver screen.

Fiction and gravity figure in *Tripping I (a,b,c)*, a trio of staged photos by Martin Kersels. *Tripping I* "documents" Kersels tripping on the sidewalk in view of a passerby. Kersels is looking for the balance between humor and empathy; while the observer in the frame transitions from looking aghast to laughing, the observer in the gallery is meant to reflect on the man tripping and the woman who is snickering behind his back. Kersels plays off expectations and contextualizes himself within a larger social reality while Ader appears isolated within his work. And while Ader is subject to gravity, Sebastian Stumpf defies gravity in *marcher dans l'air*, a 35-millimeter slide loop derived from his parkour practice. In each slide, Stumpf is caught at the moment of his apex; he appears as if he is walking effortlessly three feet off the ground—levitating. In some slides, the visual information adds up so

that he appears to be striding on an object that we know to be 20 feet away.

Indirectly alluding to the perils of crossing the Atlantic in a small sailing vessel, Jed Lind's *Capsized Dreamers—A Shipwrecked Shelter for 1975* (2005) turns a sailing vessel of the same make and model used for *In Search of the Miraculous* into skeletal remains. Making it ineffective as a shelter, Lind has cut the hull of this vessel—in Lind's installation it is overturned—by excising regular triangular shapes, leaving an exposed structure, so that one immediately notices the beauty of the shape, like an unfolded tetrahedron. Appropriately, *Capsized Dreamers* sits in front of Ader's wall-painting/installation, which literally and figuratively cries out, "Please Don't Leave Me."

**"Bas Jan Ader: Suspended Between Laughter and Tears," at Pitzer Art Galleries, Pitzer College, 1050 N. Mills Ave., Claremont, (909) 607-3143; [www.pitzer.edu/offices/galleries](http://www.pitzer.edu/offices/galleries). Thru Dec. 10.**

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