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DAILY BEAST

LOST MASTERPIECES

*The 'Methodical Romance' of Bas
Jan Ader, the Artist Who Set Sail and
Never Returned*



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In 1975, artist Bas Jan Ader set out on a three-month Atlantic crossing as part of his new work. He was never seen again. His wife recalls his ‘earth-shattering kind of heroism.’

Allison McNearney

As Mary Sue Anderson Ader drove away from the Cape Cod coast on July 9, 1975, she began crying.

She had just returned from towing her husband, artist Bas Jan Ader, out to sea to begin what he estimated would be a three-month voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. It was to be the second piece in his three-part conceptual art project titled “In Search of the Miraculous,” and, if he succeeded, he would make history in the smallest sailboat ever to complete the journey.

Anderson Ader believed in her husband—he was a skilled sailor and confident in his quest—but she says she wasn’t unrealistic. She knew there was a possibility she wouldn’t see him again. Today, over 40 years after Ader was declared lost at sea, presumed dead, Anderson Ader still tears up when talking about her late husband and his last work of art.

“In Search of the Miraculous” is featured in a new exhibition now open at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth that explores the work of three conceptual artists active in California in the 1960s and '70s.

[*Disappearing—California, c. 1970*](#) showcases the work of Chris Burden, who disappeared into the woods for three days among other performance art pieces often involving extreme bodily acts, and Jack Goldstein, who explored the idea of

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disappearance throughout his career starting with his shocking student art piece in which he buried himself alive leaving only a single light above ground blinking red.

But it is Ader for whom disappearance became the unintentional heart of his incomplete last work and the void around which the tides of his legacy would swirl.

“I held out hope for a long time. Although my mind knew that he was most likely dead, the back of my mind wanted to have him come home”

Ten months after Ader waved goodbye one last time, his boat Ocean Wave was discovered off the coast of Ireland. It was still bobbing in the sea, but it was broken down and partly submerged in water. Some food and four forms of identification for Ader [were found](#) on board, but otherwise the boat was eerily empty.

“I held out hope for a long time,” Anderson Ader tells The Daily Beast. “Although my mind knew that he was most likely dead, the back of my mind wanted to have him come home, to have just disappeared and come back like Chris Burden did and I guess Jack Goldstein did, too.”

Mary Sue and Bas Jan met while they were both attending the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s. It was love at first sight.

“I was kind of lounging against a car hood with a couple of other girls next to the taco wagon and he came up to me,” Anderson Ader remembers with a laugh. “He had a rope around his waist for his belt and he had long blonde hair and he had had a beard, but he looked too much like Jesus Christ so he shaved the beard. He had the

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most beautiful smile. He was really strikingly good-looking, but his smile would light up the room.”

She was hooked with his opening line inviting her to check out his stomach, which he jokingly claimed featured “one of the five most beautiful belly buttons in the world.”

California during this time and into the early '70s was a tense place to be. The Vietnam War was in full, curdled swing, the [Charles Manson](#) murders had ripped through the psyche of the Golden State, violence swirled around the Oakland-born [Black Panther](#) movement, and the influence of the youthful, [LSD-laced](#) rebellion of the Merry Pranksters was still being felt.

But it was an earlier event in Ader’s life that preoccupied much of his work.

Bas Jan Ader was born in 1942 in a remote area in the northeastern part of the Netherlands near the German border. His father was a minister in the Dutch Reform Church and both of his parents were involved in the World War II resistance movement.

His mother turned her attic into a hiding place for people fleeing persecution, while his father helped smuggle hundreds of Jews out of the country to safety and, as family lore has it, may have participated in derailing a Nazi train or two.

But when Ader was just a toddler, his father was captured by the Nazis and eventually shot in the woods for his resistance work. This loss would become the grain of sand at the center of Ader’s life and art.

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“As well as his desire for concrete truth, he had a corresponding attraction to the imperfect, the broken, the mistaken and the misunderstood,” William Leavitt, Ader’s friend and fellow artist, once said.

“His father was the absolute ideal that existed powerfully in his imagination. But there was, however, no balancing image of a fallible human being by which he could gauge himself, and he therefore could only participate with a handicap in the natural process of the son striving to surpass the father.”

By 1975, Ader was making waves in the conceptual art scene. He was gaining attention for works like a series of videos involving falls in which he lets gravity do its work—Ader tumbling off of his bike and into an Amsterdam canal or out of a tree.

In “The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls,” he slowly sips a glass of water as he reads a magazine article telling the story of the boy who survived the fall. His 1971 photography piece “Untitled (Swedish Fall)” had strong echoes of his father’s death. In the left photo, the artist stands among trees in the Swedish woods; in the right, he has fallen to the forest floor.

But in what would become his final piece, he would explore an even more direct connection to the life of his father.

When Ader’s father was 33, he undertook an arduous bike ride from Groningen in the Netherlands to the Holy Land. It was an adventure not without its dangers—Anderson Ader said he was almost killed a couple of times—but one that clearly became a beloved family story told long after his death.

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So, in 1975 when Ader was himself 33, he decided to set out on his own epic journey, one that was inspired by his father's daring bike trip.

"I don't know what kind of a man he was as a father, we don't know, but he was a very strong character and the adventurous part of it was fun for Bas to think about," Anderson Ader says. "That connect[ion] to his sail was setting out on a journey without knowing what the end would be like. In the dad's case, he made it."

"In the tradition of vision quests, this passage was his own epic poem where the artist serves as the central heroic figure"

"In Search of the Miraculous" was conceived in three parts. The first is a series of black and white photographs showing Ader walked around L.A. and making his way to the ocean. It was accompanied by a video of his students singing sea shanties.

The second part was to be his three-month journey from the coast of Massachusetts to the coast of England in a 12.5-foot sailboat, while the final installment involved his attendance at an exhibition of his work at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands.

"In the tradition of vision quests, this passage was his own epic poem where the artist serves as the central heroic figure," Pilar Tompkins Rivas wrote in [the catalog](#) for a 2010 Bas Jan Ader exhibition at Pitzer College. "In this work, Ader pits himself against the elements, a proposition in which the reconciliation of existential truths, and queries of fate and faith likely played a major role."

Anderson Ader said the boat was constructed to be virtually unsinkable. It was swathed in styrofoam and Ader planned the trip so that, even if the sail was

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somehow lost, the ocean currents would naturally carry him to the coast of the U.K., just in a bit more time than he had allotted.

“But the problem was that it was a very small boat in a very large ocean,” Anderson Ader said.

The boat was found 10 months after Ader set sail on the path that he had predicted it would naturally take. The artist was not on board.

*“I don’t think anybody really thought of him as a hero—
except for me, of course”*

In the years following Ader’s disappearance, rumors began to swirl that it was a deliberate act that was part of the artwork. But, Anderson Ader denies this. She said her husband was making plans for the future, for the work he would do when this piece was complete, and he had no intention of disappearing for good.

What does Anderson Ader think today of the work of art for which her husband is presumed dead?

“I think it’s a really great piece. At the end, I understand why people are attracted to it and to Bas’s [other] work also. It’s quite romantic, and an earth-shattering kind of heroism. I don’t think anybody really thought of him as a hero—except for me, of course—but nevertheless I think the way he went about doing his work was methodically romantic.”