

» TORONTO STAR «

The artist who turned falling into art

Bas Jan Ader's mystical legacy comes to the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery in a rare retrospective — the only presentation in North America.

Aug. 24, 2026



Bas Jan Ader (1942–1975), *Fall 2, Amsterdam*, detail, 1970. 16mm black and white film, silent, 19 seconds, documented in a color photograph. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Dallas.

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More than 50 years after Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader disappeared at sea, his work is making an extraordinary journey of its own — to the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (KWAG) — offering audiences on this side of the Atlantic a rare opportunity to experience his evocative body of work.

“Bas Jan Ader is, in many ways, an artist’s artist, influencing generations of makers and thinkers around the world over the last five decades,” said Darryn Doull, KWAG’s curator of exhibitions and programs. “What I believe sets his work apart from his peers is the emotional resonance and humanity at the heart of his creative and conceptual journey. Like setting out to sail the oceans, there is a leap into the space of existence, an endless searching that is a timeless human condition.”

Ader worked across photography, film, video, performance and installation, creating art that could be melancholy and absurd, emotional and conceptual, simple yet complex. He often put himself at the centre of his work, using falling to explore failure and the surrender to gravity — from tumbling off a rooftop to losing his grip on a branch or riding a bicycle into a canal.

Doull said that while many viewers focus on Ader’s falls or even the moment he hits the ground, it’s the space in between that makes the most impact.

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Bas Jan Ader (1942–1975), *I'm too sad to tell you*, 1971. Black and white 16mm film, silent, 03:18 min. Edition 1 of 3. © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Dallas.

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“It’s akin to the moment at the top of the roller coaster, after the climb but before the first big drop — time freezes and we hear our breath and our heart beats more clearly,” he explained. “I feel that these moments are the unifying elements of Ader’s work and are crystallizations of a similar search that we all carry within us in different ways.”

For Ader, that search ultimately led to his demise. As part of his artwork *In Search of the Miraculous*, he set sail in 1975 from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, on a solo crossing of the Atlantic but never reached his destination. His sailboat was found nearly a year later off the coast of Ireland, but Ader remained missing.

For Doull, the journey was an expression of something deeper.

“As an artist, life is not separate from art. Life is art and art is life,” he said. “As much as this is about searching, there is also an element of calling. A person can search in many ways and for many reasons, but someone who is truly called to something in life cannot help it.”

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Bas Jan Ader (1942–1975), *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*, detail, 1973. 18 gelatin silver prints, handwritten in white ink, each 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Private Collection, New York © The Estate of Bas Jan Ader / Mary Sue Ader Andersen / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025. Courtesy of Meliksetian | Briggs, Dallas.

Doull cautions against romanticizing Ader's disappearance, while lamenting all that the artist might have given the world had he not disappeared so soon.

KWAG is the only gallery in North America presenting Bas Jan Ader: I'm searching..., with the entire gallery given over to the retrospective.

"While it is not quite 'once in a lifetime', it is still incredibly uncommon to have this opportunity — and with free admission, it is unprecedented," Doull said.

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Doull hopes visitors will return to the exhibition and discover something new each time. “I sincerely hope that each visitor finds something in the work to take away with them,” he said. That’s the magic of Ader. “His work keeps bringing you back to the top of the roller coaster again, ready to leap into the infinite one more time.”

Plan your [visit](#) to Bas Jan Ader: I’m searching... at KWAG. Admission is free, with donations helping the Gallery continue to make ambitious exhibitions and programming accessible to the community.