



# Bas Jan Ader, Zoe Crosher, and the Art of Disappearing People

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PHOTO COURTESY ZOE CROSHER



Zoe Crosher's photo of where Michael Douglas jumped at Venice Beach Pier in the movie *Falling Down*

**Some artists take risks because they have insatiable confidence.** French conceptualist

Yves Klein may be the most famous daredevil artist. When he leapt face-forward from his rooftop in 1960, his years of judo training assured him he'd land.

But Dutch-born, L.A.-based artist Bas Jan Ader had a different approach to risk-taking. He didn't try to defy death or gravity. In his performance art, documented by photography, he succumbed to both, toppling off roofs and ledges or out of trees and, in 1975, sailing across the Atlantic as part of his now-notorious work *In Search of the Miraculous* and never coming back.

Still, despite his constant stumbling and succumbing, Ader had a definite defiant streak. What he defied were boundaries, awkwardly butting up against or falling far past them.

Ader arrived in California by boat in 1963, sailing solo from Holland. He enrolled in the Otis Art Institute, where he met and married the director's daughter. Then he moved on to the art program at Claremont Graduate University and, over 10 years, developed a body of work full of films and photographs of himself performing absurdly mundane acts. In *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, he cries silently, and in *Fall II*, he bikes too close to — then over the edge of — an Amsterdam canal. He never veers toward slapstick and always appears intensely, earnestly focused. Looking at his images makes what should be the easiest, most natural thing on Earth — surrendering to nature — seem genuinely difficult.

"No one had really done anything like him at that time," says Patrick Painter, the dealer who began representing Ader's estate in 1990, 15 years after the artist disappeared into the Atlantic. At that point, interest in Ader was just starting to grow. "Artists knew him," recalls Painter, who came across Ader's small oeuvre thanks to L.A. art-world staples Mike Kelley and Chris Burden, among others. Painter has exhibited Ader's work four times since he opened his Santa Monica space in 1997, but it remains mainly artists who appreciate him. People outside art's tighter circles, including many collectors, still

say, "Bas Jan who?" "We still have work to do," Painter says.

The exhibition that opened June 25 at Painter's Bergamot Station gallery primarily features Ader's falls — three of them out of trees and one across a path. Only two images don't depict falls, and one of these, *Untitled (The Elements)*, shows Ader standing on a rough-edged coast with ocean spray coming up to eye level and another ledge looming above him. It's no triumph à la Caspar David Friedrich, whose iconic painting *Wanderer Above the Sea Fog*, in which a man stands confidently on a rock overlooking the ocean, radiated humanist elitism. Here, man is not master over nature.

This lack of cocksure defiance, coupled with Ader's characteristic abandon, has compelled handfuls of young artists to pay homage to Ader over the past two decades. Many relive his mythical final journey. In 1995, Erika Yoemans made the short film *In Search of Bas Jan's Miraculous*, chronicling her therapeutic pilgrimage from Chicago to L.A. to meet Ader's widow and find as much of the artist as she could. Piero Golia, who happens to have a new show at Gagosian Gallery's Beverly Hills space, staged a vanishing act for *Postcards From the Edge*, disappearing from New York and reappearing in Copenhagen a month later.

L.A. artist Zoe Crosher's new exhibition at Las Cienegas Projects in Culver City responds to Ader less cathartically. Called "L.A.-Like: Transgressing the Pacific," it doesn't mimic Ader or even explicitly reference his work, but it does react to his penchant for going one step past the farthest edge.

"He went through, I go around," says Crosher, who spent the past few years researching and photographing the points along the ocean where seven real and fictional figures disappeared. Because her project focuses on the Pacific, westward expansion's ultimate boundary, and Ader disappeared in the Atlantic, she couldn't use him. Still, he's her "secret inspiration."

Before she began "Transgressing the Pacific," Crosher saw the first part of *In Search of the Miraculous*, a series of nighttime images in which Ader starts midcity and gradually moves toward the coast, with flashlight in tow. His wife, Mary Sue Andersen, followed him around with a camera. He ended up at the Pacific, and the image of him standing there fed Crosher's central question: "What do you do when you get to the border?"

"I keep thinking back to Lewis and Clark," says Crosher, "how they must have felt when they got to the ocean. Such a disappointment. A switch from the dream of health to the stunted, abrasive hard edge that's hazardous."

The first disappearance Crosher photographed was of fictional writer Roger Wade, from Robert Altman's film adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. In the movie, Wade, played by Sterling Hayden, charges into the Malibu waves as if he's fighting them to let him in. Philip Marlowe, played by Elliott Gould, runs after him. "It suddenly occurred to me that I'm not in some tank at some studio," Gould remembered years later. "This is the fucking Pacific Ocean! ... My inner voice said to me, 'Don't go in, Elliott. There's no one here to bring you back up.'"

"It's such an awkward scene," Crosher says. All circumstances seem to be working against Wade, and those on shore don't seem to know what to do.

Rephotographing the spot proved just as awkward. Altman had filmed Wade's drowning at high tide, on property he owned. Since then, that portion of Malibu Beach has become a guarded enclave for the rich and famous "who don't want to be harassed," Crosher says. "I had to figure out how to use my flash without being seen as paparazzi." She also had to shoot from below the tide line, where the

beaches are public, and the resulting image is cooler and more menacing than the cinematic version. Dark deep blue recedes into black and the membrane of an incoming wave is just visible in the distance.

But "the eeriest were the places where real people went missing," she says. From Wade, Crosher moved on to Natalie Wood's disappearance off Catalina Island, then to former Beach Boy Dennis Wilson's in Marina del Rey. Both were nighttime shots.

Three daytime images followed, including the spine-tingling all-white scene where theatrical Foursquare preacher Aimee Semple McPherson staged her own death in 1926. The series ends with that orange sunset that crowned Laguna Beach when Norman Maine wandered into the sea in the 1954 remake of *A Star Is Born*. The studio used stock footage. The photo Crosher took is just as gauche. "I'm not interested in tragedy for tragedy's sake," she says. "The disappearances have to be extravagant, mythical in some way."

When Wilson of the Beach Boys jumped into the marina in 1983, just after he'd turned 39, he was drunk and looking for things he had thrown off his yacht three years before. Finding them, of course, would have been a miracle. Ader never specified what sort of "miraculous" thing he was searching for when he wandered around Los Angeles at night or set off on his final Atlantic journey. Andersen, his widow, has suggested he was searching for a connection to his father, a Dutch minister killed by Nazis, who had biked from Holland to Palestine when he was about Ader's age.

The ambiguity led to hype — maybe the artist had survived and the "disappearance" was part of his art. Though Ader may have enjoyed the intrigue, Andersen had him legally declared dead in 1979.

"The thing about the sea is that you disappear without a trace — there is nothing left. It is a true disappearance," said British artist Tacita Dean, speaking of Ader in the 2010 documentary *Here Is Always Somewhere Else*. The openness of such disappearances comes with difficulty: police reports, setbacks, hope that drags on.

Crosher's images, ultimately spare but the result of finagling, research and some stealth, get at this difficulty better than much else. They depict the sea as an exasperating, inconclusive kind of border, and they don't soften the Pacific's jagged edges at all. In fact, that jaggedness seems to be their subject. Certainly, most of the images rely on the unflappable beauty of Pacific coastlines. But they make vanishing into ocean water seem both more real and pricklier than in the movies, not a simple surrender at all.

**L.A.-LIKE: TRANSGRESSING THE PACIFIC** | Las Cienegas Projects | 2045 S. La Cienega Blvd.  
| Through July 16

**BAS JAN ADER: THOUGHTS UNSAID, THEN FORGOTTEN** | Patrick Painter Inc. | Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica | Through Aug. 6