

# Guido van der Werve's Pas de Deux on Ice

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If you're prone to depression, you might want to skip the Guido van der Werve film currently on view at the Hirshhorn.

Then again, maybe you should go. Because if there's one kind of person this Amsterdam-based artist understands, it's *you*, depressives.

Last year, van der Werve, 32, said in an interview that "dwelling in melancholy is definitely one of my favorite activities." The artist's "definitely" signaled not only his enthusiasm for sadness but his quirky sense of humor, too. Both are on display in his recent series of short films. In one, he's hit by a car and then a troupe of ballerinas performs a short number around his dead body. Another film finds the artist building a rocket meant to return a meteorite back to space. Black humor, futility, death — they're all here.

"'Nummer Acht (#8)' everything is going to be alright," the 10-minute film on view in the Hirshhorn's Black Box video room, is part of this same series. But its humor is less palpable and its bleakness more profound.

When "Nummer Acht" opens, everything is not all right. After a few seconds of a soundless, white-titles-on-black background screen, a blinding whiteness and massive roar shock us into high alert. The opening image will carry us through the film's full 10 minutes: We see a lone, black-clad man walking toward us on a seemingly endless ice sheet. He is trailed — methodically, menacingly — by a massive icebreaker, a behemoth of a ship lumbering through expanses of seemingly immovable ice.

We are in the Gulf of Bothnia, the northernmost expanse of the Baltic Sea near a Finnish port town. Van der Werve took a small crew there to film his 2007 pas de deux with the icebreaker Sampo. The ship towers over van der Werve's minuscule figure. It's a beast of a machine, confidently biting through the floe as ice crumbles against its powerful hull. The monster is largely faceless: Its black and white prow is many times larger than its above-deck operations tower, and there's no sign of life inside.

Both boat and figure move in lockstep. Van der Werve continues forward while the icebreaker keeps pace. The scene appears as if it could go



In Guido van der Werve's 10-minute film "Nummer Acht (#8) everything is going to be alright," the artist is pursued by an icebreaker.

on indefinitely. To suggest just such an endless journey, van der Werve ends the film as suddenly as it began, snapping back to a silent black screen and final credits.

What to make of this? Though the action is minimal, the psychology is intense. The stark image of man pursued by industrial beast glues us to our seats. When will the man fall tragically through the ice? When will he break into a run? Will the ship give up pursuit? As time passes and it becomes clear that, in fact, nothing will happen next, the film turns into a philosophical exercise.

The artist's steady progress — neither a march nor an amble, it's the walk of a distracted window shopper or a tourist determined to blend in — turns into a metaphor for our journey through life. The beast at his tail stands in for the demons that accompany us from childhood unto death.

Though the figure appears unaware of the monster behind him, he never wavers in his forward march, suggesting that he knows better than to stop. As viewers, we feel at first as if we know something that our hero doesn't. His walk appears too relaxed, he must not know what's behind him. Yet as the

film progresses, we begin to understand that he probably does know. He just wants to keep moving.

As we watch, we begin to understand. The ship becomes a little less menacing. We, like van der Werve, are getting comfortable with our demons.

## Group Show at Hillyer

A half-dozen lucky artists hang work at Hillyer Art Space this month thanks to their fairy godmother, artist Renee Stout. Stout was asked to choose six artists that she considered

» **Black Box: Guido van der Werve**, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through Oct. 11. Artist talk in the museum's third-floor Lerner Room on Oct. 1 at 7. [www.hirshhorn.si.edu](http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu), 202-633-1000.

» **Six in the Mix: Selections by Renee Stout** at Hillyer Art Space through Aug. 26. 9 Hillyer Ct. NW, Monday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. [www.artsandartists.org/artspace.html](http://www.artsandartists.org/artspace.html), 202-338-0680.

"underexposed." None has had solo shows in the past few years. Stout's choices yielded a decidedly mixed bag; all are adept but most present just one or two strong works. As a whole, though, they benefit from one another's company.

The big, messy canvases by artist Cianne Fragione, caked with pigment and parts of cut-up old dresses (think outfits your grandmother used to wear), might have looked downright unsightly hanging alone. Here, they're juxtaposed with Gilbert Trent's paintings and sculptures engaging gender and racial stereotypes through decidedly explicit images of paper dolls (not all show the naughty bits, but many do). In turn, Trent looks less polemical alongside Fragione's busy pieces.

In the exhibition's main room, Kenyatta Hinkle riffs on race with works incorporating old ethnographic photographs and wigs. Her stuff looks familiar — you've seen countless artists working with these materials before, oftentimes more effectively — yet Hinkle's work manages to lodge in the brain and make itself felt (several works come right off the wall and into our space, so they're especially hard to ignore). The artist looks to be on to something.

The other standout here is Adam Griffiths, who stylizes the "eww gross" comic book genre in works on paper with titles like "Creature's Face Imploding." His best work, called "The Good Book," plays with space and narrative. The vaguely macabre scene features a figure who may be dead — or just resting — and who may or may not be dripping blue ooze from her head (might that be a piece of fabric?). It's the most finished of all his drawings and the best because of it.