

## Review of Guido van der Werve's Series of Short Films at the Hirshhorn

Advertisement  
Advertisement

By Jessica Dawson  
Special to The Washington Post  
Friday, August 14, 2009

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.



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. (Guido Van Der Werve)

[Enlarge Photo](#)

### TOOLBOX

[Resize](#) [Print](#)  
[E-mail](#) [Reprints](#)

"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.

Advertisement 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 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.