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Guido van der Werve: "The King's Gambit"

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BY DAVID BALZER February 10, 2010 21:02

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Prefix Institute of Contemporary
Art, 401 Richmond W, ste 124.
416-591-0357. www.prefix.ca.

Devotees of Rodney Graham will want to check out Dutch video and installation artist Guido van der Werve's new show at Prefix Gallery. That's to say that the beauty and absurdity of Graham's work are also present in that of Van der Werve, to its benefit and, occasionally, its detriment. Part craftsman, part conceptualist dilettante, Van der Werve wants to take in all of the grandiosities of aesthetics, science and philosophy. He also wants to poke fun at them, casting himself, as Graham does, as a dryly comedic, quixotic figure in his own art.

Of the three video pieces on display, a shorter pair, set in icy climates, resonate best, probably due to the mitigation of the more ironic, self-indulgent aspects of this approach. *Nummer Negen: The Day I Didn't Turn With the World* is a time-lapse video of Van der Werve turning clockwise at the North Pole, and thus accomplishing the assertion of his title. It's a nice, very pictorial experiment. A long shot makes Van der Werve into a black dot – his silhouette the shape of a keyhole – with the Arctic landscape terrifyingly still around him, except for the wind-pushed clouds and the sun, moving in front of and behind the camera and transforming Van Der Werve into a gnomon on a sundial.

Nummer Acht: Everything Is Going to Be All Right deals with similar themes of sublimity. Van Der Werve walks in front of a giant icebreaker on the Gulf of Finland, a sight made light of in the title, but which is genuinely unsettling and breathtaking to behold. Van Der Werve is obviously a Romantic, however cheeky – in addition to the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, a frequent comparison, one also thinks of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* when watching both works – and takes a classical interest in art as simultaneous ego inflator and annihilator.

The focal point of the show, the 40-minute, three-part *Nummer Twaalf: Variations on a Theme* (pictured), is the visual-art equivalent of math rock. As such, it's a bit of a chore, though it's admirably complex, a meditation on notions of infinity, with a strings-and-piano score transcribed from chess moves. (Look for Van Der Werve's amazing "chess piano" contraption in the Prefix office space, on display until Feb. 13.) Other elements are too fulsome to delve into here, but I'd be remiss not to mention a final, pull-away helicopter shot starting from Van Der Werve's shack on the San Andreas Fault, and eventually going – astoundingly, and perhaps not without digital manipulation – so high up as to clear the artist completely from view.

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