Turner prize entrant…

Guido van der Werve in his film Nummer Negen: The Day I Didn’t Turn with the World

ARTIST Guido van der Werve filmed himself standing for 24 hours at the North Pole on the exact axis of the world turning clockwise while the earth under him rotated anti-clockwise.

The film, Nummer Negen: The Day I Didn’t Turn with the World, on show at the Site Gallery, aims to create an unearthly feeling of momentary suspense and separation. It is filmed with a time lapse of six-second jumps, condensing the 24 hours into nine minutes, with the result that the solitary figure is seen making flickering movements.

The New York-based Dutch artist explains that this was a matter of self-preservation. “I kept touching my nose because if you can no longer feel it, it’s a sign of frostbite,” he explains. “I had done research on the internet on how to keep your blood flowing. The experts on this are British soldiers on guard duty who found a way of flexing their muscles to keep the circulation going, so I am doing a less professional version of that.” That’s not the only hazard. “The chance of meeting a polar bear at the North Pole is rare but it’s the only animal which actually hunts human beings. As a precaution our Russian guid had brought two guns – one to fire a flare to scare it off and also a proper shotgun if that didn’t work.”

Access to the North Pole is limited to a short period of the year (around now) when the Russians lay on trips for scientists. Van der Werve, his camera operator and Russian guide were flown in by helicopter 100 miles from the nearest settlement. Although guaranteed 24 hours of daylight, they had to wait a few days for mist to clear. Was it all shot in one take? “We were filming with a digital camera over 24 hours and the cameraman had to change the memory card every few hours when I would run out of shot and do the necessary, pee or snatch a bite to eat or a drink,” he reports. And how did he time his 360-degree turn over the 24 hours? “That was easy, I just followed my shadow.”

Also on view is another performance-based work filmed in the snowy wastes. Nummer Acht: Everything Is Going to be Alright shows the artist trudging 15 metres in front of an icebreaker in the bleak landscape of the Finnish Gulf of Bothnia. The practicalities of this involved hiring the vessel from Lapland and waiting for the right conditions (global warming having created unusually thin ice that year, 2007). The camera was mounted on a snow scooter with the operator relaying instructions to van der Werve through earphones. “The ice-breaker takes the path of least resistance so I had to adjust my directions from time to time,” he notes. The slow journey of walker and ship has a never-ending hypnotic quality but also, it has been noted, evokes “the man against machines” character familiar from silent movie comedies. In this van der Werve has been likened to the “romantic conceptualists” of previous generations who incorporated romantic and slapstick tendencies in their work. One of these is fellow Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, who drowned in 1975 on an artistic exploit. Some of his seminal works from the Seventies – falling off roofs, riding a bike into a canal in atmospheric black and white – are on show on a monitor at the entrance to the exhibition.

The Guido van der Werve exhibition continues at the Site Gallery until May 16 and next Thursday there is a talk by Jörg Heiser, co-editor of Frieze and curator of the international touring exhibition, Romantic Conceptualism.