

Nearby Explosion Adds Extra Drama to Video Installation at Hermès

by Magdalene Perez

NEW YORK, Aug. 11, 2006—When video-installation artist **Janet Biggs** was offered space to show her work in the windows of New York's **Hermès** boutique, she was eager to take advantage of the opportunity—after all, it's not every day that a contemporary video artist gets to expose her work to the throngs of passing crowds on Madison Avenue.

But just days before her installation, *Behind the Vertical*, was to make its debut, the reckless suicide attempt of an unhappy Upper East Side physician nearly brought the whole project to pieces (literally).

Last month, when Nicholas Bartha, a 66-year-old internist involved in a bitter divorce battle with his ex-wife, allegedly tampered with a gas line in the basement of his home office around the corner from Hermès, the resulting explosion left little more than a rubble-filled hole in the ground where a \$6 million town-house once stood.

At least four people were injured in the incident, and several nearby windows were broken by the force of the blast, which some say they had mistaken at first for an earthquake. At Hermès, fire trucks pulled up outside, but by some twist of fortune, the store's glass exteriors went undamaged.

While the windows were spared, Biggs and her curator, **Susan Reynolds**, in the middle of installing Biggs' multi-channel video piece, were caught up in the drama that ensued.

"There were firemen three feet deep in front of the store," said Reynolds. "It was a few more days after that before we finished the installation."

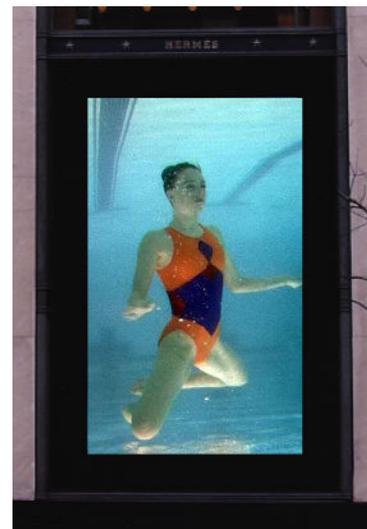
The unscarred work is a two-story-high wall of images and sound that wraps around Madison Avenue and 62nd Street. Drawing on earlier work that incorporates imagery of horses and athletes in motion, Biggs uses two large windows to display video footage of a young equestrian vaulter effortlessly going through a difficult horseback routine and, opposite it, a surreal underwater shot of an equally lithe synchronized swimmer caught mid-plunge.

Above, three more monitors pan over what appears to be a desolate glacial landscape while a hidden speaker spills out the plaintive serenade of songwriter **Daniel Cartier**.

"I wanted to make a piece that would explore the effort required to make something difficult seem effortless," Biggs said of the piece. "I am interested in draw-



"Behind the Vertical" installation view, Hermès, New York, NY
Janet Biggs



"Behind the Vertical" installation view, Hermès, New York, NY (detail)
Janet Biggs



"Alice and Nav" (2005, digital C-print) installation view, Hermès, New York, NY
Janet Biggs

ing connections between athletes' studied and choreographed movements and how individuals' behavior is rigidly choreographed for inclusion in society."

Through a partnership with **Dinaburg Arts**, Hermès agreed to provide the cash needed to produce the videos and paid for the multiple flat-screen monitors used to display them. When the piece comes down this September, Biggs will retain the full right to sell or hold on to the work as she wishes.

"They just truly love art and want to support it," **Susan Anthony**, president of communications for Hermès, said of the company's drive to create the artists' windows program. "Of course the [Hermès] family owns art, but there is nothing like an organized collection in our own offices."

And there's no denying that Biggs' well-developed repertoire of work using horses fits nicely with the long-established Hermès tradition of manufacturing equestrian-themed products.

Around the corner from the front entrance, for example, the artist has placed two stills from a recent performance piece held at the Claremont Riding Academy as a backdrop to an arrangement of leather Hermès backpacks, along with riding gear such as a leather saddle and horse-grooming equipment.

But Biggs emphasizes that the subject matter of the installation was decided solely by her.

"Hermès did not request a piece with horses or any direct tie-in to their merchandise," she says. "Although they did offer me the use of any of their merchandise if I wanted to use it. They gave me complete content control."

Shoppers, art lovers and curious passersby will have the opportunity to see Biggs' Behind the Vertical installation for themselves through Sept. 8.



"Breathe" (2005, digital C-print) installation view, Hermès, New York, NY
Janet Biggs