

# ART PAPERS

M A G A Z I N E

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## BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

A de-saturated photograph of John Glenn, decked-out in full astronaut regalia, sets the tone for JANET BIGGS' show (*Western Gallery, Western Washington University, April 2 — May 5*). The video still is the frontispiece of *Flight* (1999) — one of the two multi-channel video installations on display. Rather than a heroic voyage into outer space, however, Biggs takes us into a psychosexual realm. In *Flight*, the three gargantuan screens that line the south wall of the gallery become portals into a topsy-turvy underwater world. In each, an amazon-sired swimmer performs gravity-defying feats. Although the women conjure up Esther Williams in a 1950s Busby Berkeley spectacular, Biggs separates flight from that type of Hollywood glamour. First, she documents not curvaceous figures, but androgynous members of a senior synchronized swim team. Second, synchronization occurs not within each frame, but across the three screens. A mesmerizing pattern forms as the women twist, turn and, with great strength, hold themselves in place. Third, she screens the projections upside down, causing disorientation that extends to the fourth projection. On the adjacent wall, Biggs includes a right side up shot of a horse, lying on its side. Because she slows the tape speed, the horse seems to be in the midst of death throes. Upon closer observation, the animal's periodically twitching legs suggest that it is merely asleep, dreaming of flight.



Janet Biggs, *Flight* (detail), 1999, four-channel video installation, each image 18 by 22 feet (photo courtesy of Western Washington University).

Biggs is probably most known for her explorations into the topic of women and horses, an association that immediately conjures up pre-pubescent female sexuality. *Flight*, however, marks the beginning of a more complex inquiry into mature female sexuality. The women's control of their bodies speaks to not a frenzied, but a powerful sense of ease into which one matures. Their muscle control becomes pure sexual energy that, like waves, undulate outward into the gallery space. Their energy sails across Moby's piano-like rhythm, the dominant layer of the soundtrack, transforming the space into a huge underwater pool. As we swim alongside the women, the second layer of the soundtrack—recordings of John Glenn communicating with mission control — floats in the distance.

No sooner do we enter an orbit outside such technological heroism than Biggs brings us back to earth. With the flip of a curtain, we enter Biggs' second installation, *BuSpar* (1999). The title is the name of a prescription drug, which is given to horses and humans to reduce anxiety. In the three-channel video installation, two headshots of horses, cantering in the dark around a riding-ring, flank a close-up of an autistic middle-aged woman, rocking in her chair. Biggs alters the tape's speed so that the woman's movements are in time with the jerking motions of the racing horses. As we walk through the doorway, their synchronization captures us. We mirror the older woman, and become trapped in the "nightmare" of rocking horses. In *BuSpar*, the prescription fails, suggesting that drugs can only at best mask inner tensions.

*Flight* and *BuSpar* represent opposite sides of the same coin. In *Flight*, Biggs reflects the pleasure in physical fitness and self-control. These strong-bodied women do not need glamour to arrest our gaze. Their self-possession captures our awe. In *BuSpar*, Biggs suggests that through a twist in fate, we can just as easily become dispossessed. She shows us that heroic voyages come in many forms; some are lasting and others are momentary victories.

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