

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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Janet Biggs: *In the Cold Edge*, 2010, video, 5½ minutes; at Winkleman.

JANET BIGGS WINKLEMAN

Janet Biggs tempts fate every time she makes a video, focusing on acts of extreme physicality that are as difficult to film as they are to perform. Having captured the feats of wrestlers, synchronized swimmers, race-car drivers and equestrians, among other subjects, she recently traveled to an Arctic environment so challenging that merely walking across its frozen tundra is a demanding endeavor.

For this show, titled “The Arctic Trilogy,” Biggs presented three short videos with sequences filmed in Svalbard—a small archipelago 500 miles north of Norway—which she circumnavigated on a 1910 schooner, the *Noorderlicht*, during two trips in 2009 and 2010. In *Fade to White* (2010), she intercuts footage of a lone kayaker, Audun Tholfsen, rugged and heroic, with segments showing New York performance artist John Kelly, wan and androgynous, in the studio. Tholfsen paddles around ice chunks and close to polar bears on the nearby shore, the last explorer in this threatening and threatened environment. Kelly, singing a Baroque madrigal without accompaniment, likewise demonstrates skills far beyond those of most mortals.

The title refers to a film editing device in which a scene dissolves to a white screen, often used to represent transcendence or near-death experiences. Here, by pairing the shades of white of the Arctic landscape with the stark white of the performance studio, Biggs transports her viewers to a sphere light years away from ordinary life.

In stark contrast, the second video, *Brightness All Around* (2011), is a study in degrees of darkness at the bottom of a coal mine, deep below the Arctic surface. Biggs follows a female miner, Linda Norberg, as she drives into the depths of the mine, passing through miles of frozen tunnels until she reaches her equipment, lit only by the lamp on her helmet. As in *Fade to White*, *Brightness All Around* contrasts a dirty, dangerous activity with a performance, this time by African-American punk rocker Bill Coleman, dressed in a black leather apron and filmed against a black background. The throbbing beat of the music perfectly matches the drilling of the machinery, just as the spotlight on the performer mirrors the head lamp worn by the miner. This formal device visually connects the characters, who in reality are worlds apart,

though linked by their engagement in extreme pursuits.

But by far the most effective video is *In the Cold Edge* (2010), because it never cuts away from the icy landscape and allows viewers to see the magnificent northern environment through the eyes of the artist. In this work, an expert spelunker burrows into the snowy terrain to reach an icicle-filled cave. After he returns to the surface, the camera pans across a frozen lake surrounded by rock formations under a slate-gray sky. Biggs appears holding a gun, which she then fires, shooting a red flare through the air. In this forbidding yet alluring terrain, her act could be a cry for help, but more likely it announces that she is present, a survivor in a land far more dangerous (arguably) than the art world.

—Barbara Pollack