

Art in America

Janet Biggs at the Herbert P. Johnson Museum of Art

Risperidone is an antipsychotic medication prescribed to patients with a tendency to obsessive, self-abusive behavior. Janet Biggs chose it as the title of her three-channel video installation at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, which was screened in three adjacent bays, divided by curtains. This was not the installation's first showing; it had appeared at Team Gallery in Chelsea shortly after 9/11, and like several strong shows of the immediate post-disaster exhibition cycle, was overlooked. But this is hardly work that would have comforted jumpy New Yorkers. In five-minute sets, which loop indefinitely, Biggs, who has said she wishes this work to imitate the effects of psychosis under drugs, juxtaposes athletics and a landscape to devise a metaphor of fixated mental states and their merely intermittent soothing.

The three screens show as many different athletic activities, each accompanied by its own soundtrack that blends with those emanating from adjacent bays. In the first, a female swimmer butterflies in slow motion toward the camera, positioned somewhere in the water, it seems. Her breathing and her strokes are amplified on the soundtrack, but already we hear the sound of a bouncing ball next door; sure enough, it's basketball dribbler, but one confined to a wheelchair. Bounce, bounce, bounce goes the ball, accelerating and decelerating; and all the while the paraplegic athlete stares open-eyed at the lens, one of his legs involuntarily jerking from his efforts. In the third bay, teenage football players practice tackling dummies, also in slow motion, and with the sound of their bodily efforts amplified in slowed-down grunts. The background score, by composer Dan Raetz, is very loud techno. At intervals, the noise from all three channels suddenly ceases, as the camera somewhat incongruously, but elegantly, pans across three separate views of temperate rain forests along the Washington State coast. It creates a break, like going on vacation; yet soon the athletic efforts and their accompanying din return. The screens are large and the athletes either life-size or, in the case of the swimmer, larger than life-size. The figures loom, but



Janet Biggs: Basketball player from the “Risperidone” series, 2001, video projection; at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.

their oblivion is profound; the noise they make is palpable, but they are also cut off, focused as they must be in order to perform. Thrust directly into our space, they force us into an uncomfortably proximate attention that is not returned. As skilled as the man in the wheelchair is, there is something disturbing about his unblinking stare, directed outward but likewise internally fixed: like the gaze of an insane person trained on something nonexistent—in this case, us. At first the landscape breaks are a relief, as we pan over a lush nature of hallucinatory colors that apparently actually exist in this misty, dripping ecosystem (here silent). Yet as we find ourselves remaining in the gallery, drawn in habitual, nearly morbid fascination to the athletic spectacle, the breaks begin to feel edgy. since we know we will soon be plunged back into the fray. It is an experience both seductive and maddening.

—Faye Hirsch, July 2003