



Janet Biggs, GLACIER APPROACHING, Video Projection

Janet Biggs, WATER TRAINING, Video Projection

There is a memorable scene in David Cronenberg's '83 film adaptation of Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*. Christopher Walken uses his recently acquired gift of premonition to foresee the terror that is about to ensue when a group of boys playing hockey crashes through thin ice. Their uniformed bodies, along with sticks and equipment, twist and turn in a slow descent toward the bottom of the lake as rapidly escaping air bubbles race upward. Proving herself equally adept at producing visually poetic images with an incongruously traumatic subtext, Janet Biggs recently had her second New York solo show. In two video installations, Biggs carried out a more subtle, though no less evocative, inquiry into diverse forms of aquatic activity.

A corner of the upstairs room in the Anna Kustera Gallery was occupied by "Water Training." This work consists of two separate video projections (each approximately six by seven feet) that are shown side-by-side, with their edges meeting at the intersection of two walls. The left image is dominated by the head of a struggling young horse, which is strapped into some sort of harness that keeps it suspended in the middle of a swimming pool, its hooves unable to touch the bottom. This sink-or-tread method of physical therapy—the animal is apparently being treated for an injury—strikes the uninformed viewer as rather cruel, considering the horse's wide-eyed expression of bewildered panic. To counter the suggestion of an equestrian torture chamber, a scene of athletic agility makes up the right projection. Alternating groups of young women practice synchronized swimming routines that are captured on video from below the surface of the water. The two spectacles further contradict each other in their soundtracks; on one side is the horse snorting and gasping for breath, while next to it is the muffled music that accompanies and guides the swimmers' movements.

Yet the play of contrasts between the two images is not as absolute as it appears at first glance. Both scenes deal, to a certain extent, with the very human urge to exert control over the natural environment, despite the often predictable futility of such endeavors. A portion of our adult lives is spent trying to work through and subdue the anxieties that we attribute to irrational childhood reactions to harmless events, many of which occur while learning the limitations of the body in the physical world. Bungee-jumpers, spelunkers, and deep-sea divers, it might be argued, are driven as much by the need to overcome phobias as they are by the sheer beauty or adrenaline rush of their respective hobbies.

In “Water Training,” despite its examination of a sport associated with coordination and grace, Biggs focuses on physical awkwardness; the arms and legs of the swimmers, seen through the blue water, kick and flail away in an underwater dance that looks more manic than elegant. Similarly, like a fish out of water, the well-groomed horse can barely survive in its new liquid surroundings, which are about as suited to its biological makeup as a dirt road is to a trout.

The other work at Kustera, a single, large, video projection in the downstairs gallery, offered shifting perspectives on a slow ride down a fjord in Norway. Entitled “Glacier Approach,” the footage of an oncoming glacier taken from the bow of a ship is interspersed with periodic shots of bodies in motion below the sea—these latter images increase in frequency as the glacier nears. This journey into fog and ice smacks of nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist representations of the voyage into the afterlife. Arnold Böcklin’s famous 1880 painting, *THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD*, with its shrouded figure drifting toward the land of no return, comes to mind. Both works compel the viewer to imagine what lies in store for the traveler when the boat finally reaches its destination. Though they share this sense of heightened anticipation, in Biggs’s video the increasingly frenetic pace of the underwater sequences disrupts the meditative experience available “on deck.”

It comes as a bit of a surprise when “Glacier Approach” culminates in a landing at the target site. The camera leaves the vessel to perform a brief exploration of the unfamiliar terrain; its jerky movements record jagged ice formations and a dense white sky. Although very little information is given before the video abruptly ends—at which point the process repeats itself—it feels as if the glacier’s secrets have been suddenly revealed. In removing some of the mystery behind an unknown, once-distant location, Biggs undermines the sublime effect of this looming geological behemoth. A place that only moments before seemed unreachable, as if eternally receding before the advancing boat, is instantly transformed into a tangible, quantifiable reality which the visitor can observe at close range.

The glimpses into a subaqueous world in “Glacier Approach,” though beautiful and dreamlike, are also frightening in their allusion to drowning in the near-freezing waters. Like the fluttering limbs of the swimmers or the painful method of rehabilitating the horse in “Water Training,” some things are perhaps best left unscrutinized. Yet Biggs knows that to grant access to normally hidden activity is to satisfy the viewer’s craving for a peek behind the scenes, even if the unveiled sight is a little scary. No matter how tightly we cover our eyes, we always manage to look between our fingers.

Gregory Williams
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“I show things as they are. I also exhibit the instruments and the mechanisms which bring them to be so . . . I believe whatever the game played, the decision to play is a critical one, whether political or sexual.”

—Sylvie Fleury interviewed by Sadie Coles