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The Larger-Than-Life Projections of a Modern-Day Artist Adventurer

by Susan Silas on December 7, 2015



Janet Biggs, "Duet" (2010) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MIAMI BEACH — When I was much younger, I was obsessed with the writings of Ryszard Kapuściński. He was a journalist, yet not a journalist — more like a poet journalist — and he traveled to forbidding and barren places and described what he saw in exquisitely observed prose, with understated humor. I often thought with envy then that this kind of life, wandering into unknown places, especially cultures with a real antipathy toward independent women, could never be the life and career of a woman; it was the sole preserve of men. But this is not entirely true. Janet Biggs is a modern-day

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adventurer, an explorer in the best sense. Not a white male imperialist, but a woman keen to see the edges and create aesthetic experiences from within those spaces. In the past few years Biggs has visited a number of extreme landscapes to make work: crystal caverns below the German Merkers salt mine, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, the Arctic. Often her videos are structured as binaries in which two specific subcultures or specialized environments are paired with one another to create meaning.

Such is the case with two of Biggs's earlier single-channel works, "Vanishing Point" (2009) and "Duet" (2010), screened in Miami Beach last weekend, outdoors on the New World Center's projection wall, which appears to be roughly six stories high. Biggs's videos were presented by Cristin Tierney Gallery as part of the Art Basel Miami Beach Film program, called *Our Hidden Futures* and curated by David Gryn, who's also the director of Daata Editions and London's Artprojx.



Janet Biggs, "Vanishing Point" (2009)

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Janet Biggs, "Vanishing Point" (2009)

In "Vanishing Point" we see Leslie Porterfield, who holds three land-speed world records, preparing to race her motorcycle across the Bonneville Salt Flats. It is a bleached and barren landscape. She is slender and beautiful and completely in control. Her feat is about this control. About precision. About fearlessness. The video takes in her surroundings and lingers momentarily on the devoted audience that has come to watch her performance. Then the camera takes us to another kind of performance: that of the ARC Gospel Choir. This a cappella choir was started by a former heroin addict and is part of the Harlem Addicts Rehabilitation Center.



Janet Biggs, "Vanishing Point" (2009)

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We see a champion of precision and control taking off into an empty, nearly lunar landscape at incredible speed, and then we cut to a group of people who have made the voyage of recovery from serious drug addiction, trying to regain control of their lives through ritual and song. And we see two types of exhilaration — one that stems from mastery and bravado, the other stemming from hope and community. It's not an easy, direct binary. In fact, the work temporarily suspends the activity of decoding by creating an engagement strong enough to keep us in the present moment, so that we don't really think about meaning until afterward. The incredibly bold female rider slowly vanishes into the distance, becoming smaller and smaller until she disappears into the mirage hovering above the surface of the salt flats. Meanwhile, a solo voice briefly bursts forth from the chorus, then blends back into the rest, each individual disappearing into the sound that constitutes the voice of the whole.

The juxtaposition brings to mind the different paradigms available in the construction of the self. The Western notion of individualism can be said to be represented by the lone rider in a hostile landscape, heroic and dictating her own destiny. In many cultures in the East, each individual is just a small component in a universe defined in relation to others, where cooperation and community are valued, much like choral song.

"Duet," completed a year later, is structured not unlike "Vanishing Point," showing two very specific cultures juxtaposed against one another. We have something mechanical — the activity of a pit crew during a race, changing a car's tires with maximum efficiency so that the car can resume its place on the track — and we have a soloist and violinist performing the "Flower Duet" (French: "Duo des fleurs/Sous le dôme épais") from Léo Delibes's opera *Lakmé*. Here the music is given a greater part, as the duet's playing continues after we have cut to the pit crew, and the music becomes the soundtrack for the synchronized ballet they perform. They sweep around the car with a long snaking air gun, remove lug nuts, roll away tires, replace tires, retighten lug nuts, and jump away. All the while, the singer and violinist continue, sometimes on-screen and sometimes off.

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Janet Biggs, "Duet" (2010)



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In "Duet," the examples resonate in a different way than the counterpoints of "Vanishing Point." In this case, both the musical and the mechanical accomplishments rely on training, accuracy, and the need for participants to work together, to anticipate and keep

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pace with one another. And the work of the pit crew is transformed by the music into a nearly operatic theatrical activity. Biggs has taken the “highbrow” cultural labor of a classical musical performance, whose audience is generally upper and middle class, and leveled it with the “lowbrow” mechanical labor of a NASCAR race, whose audience is more often working class. She presents the labor of both as graceful, highly refined skill, requiring absolute discipline. The equivalent of “Vanishing Point” might have been to focus on the race car driver, but here the gaze has shifted away from the individual in relation to the collaborative group as a definition of identity, and instead onto class, highlighting sameness across class lines rather than difference. In both pieces, as in all her work, there is formal beauty.

The setting for this screening was SoundScape Park, across from the Miami Beach Convention Center, home of the Art Basel Miami Beach fair. It’s a landscaped plaza with a neat lawn, where beanbags akin to small sofas were set out for viewers. We could lie on the grass and gaze up at the enormous building. The art world, especially at fairs, seems increasingly focused on scale and spectacle. Not everything is meant to be big, and not everything works or gets better because it is larger. But in the case of Biggs’s videos, which I have seen on monitors and as full-size installations in galleries, it is clear that her work can not only handle the scale of the side of a many-storied building, but is meant for it.

Janet Biggs’s videos were screened in SoundScape Park as part of the Art Basel Miami Beach 2015 film program on December 4 and 5.