

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# ARTILLERY



Janet Biggs, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

## JANET BIGGS

Cristin Tierney / New York

by [John Haber](#)

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Janet Biggs will go a long way to find herself. Her four-channel video unfolds only a continent away, but do not be fooled: with *Can't Find My Way Home* (all works 2015), the real journey has still to begin.

Her principal actor, dressed in a bright orange hazards suit, disregards a warning in German and begins her descent into a salt mine. The narrow passage has no obvious ending, and much else will happen before she is done. For one thing, the scene will switch to a laboratory, where a woman manipulates syringes and specimens that later take shape as brain scans. It will turn, too, to an older man examining rock samples, perhaps from the very crystal cave that is the focal point of the journey. The miner will hold a small sample herself in fear, puzzlement or wonder at its beauty. The viewer may well have the same mixed feelings.

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Biggs is out to find herself behind the mask, and she challenges the viewer to find her as well. The parallels between the video's segments underscore its persistent searching—with two young women, two scientists, two handling crystals, and two threatening environments. The very glow and translucency of the crystal cave has its parallel, too, in new media.

Does she attain her end? The video, which previously screened at the Blaffer Museum of the University of Houston, ends abruptly, and its title may seem to have the last lonely word, but again do not be too sure. As the scientists know, there is real beauty and real satisfaction to the search.

Biggs puts herself on the line in a second video, *Written on Wax*. It opens with what look like vintage photographs from an almost mythical American West. Next come color photos of a girl growing up with a love of horses, ending in the elegant dress of a formal competition. Yet the title identifies representation with penetration, and the video obliges.

It shifts to Biggs in the present, in another neurological laboratory—this time as the subject of an experiment. She helps strap herself into an apparatus that, thanks to the intense gaze of a close-up, one never quite sees. She sets in place a mouthpiece to keep her from biting her lips, for she will receive electric shocks. As she does, more horses appear but with none of a jockey's refinement, starting with leaden hoof beats almost out of a Budweiser commercial. The risks extend to a swimmer, a skater and a woman standing on horseback, rising to a difficult balance. The nostalgic early memories are gone, and yet the standing rider ends the video with quite a feat.

The experimenters could be presenting Biggs with images while subjecting her to shocks, or the shocks may be stimulating long-lost memories. They may be training her to fear what she most loves—or to delve within to find herself at last. Again physical immediacy goes hand in hand with the puzzle of interpretation and resolution.

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Jaume Plensa, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.