Janet Biggs and Regina José Galindo: Endurance

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at Cristin Tierney Gallery, NYC
Reviewed by Robin Scher

Picture documentary and artwork as a Venn diagram. Sometimes the line between the two categories is blurred. A fine example of this can be found in Janet Biggs’s three channel installation, Afar, currently on show at New York’s Cristin Tierney gallery, which offers viewers a brief visual sojourn to East Africa’s Great Rift Valley — “the most unlivable place on earth.”

That last descriptor was the title of a National Geographic story about the area that first caught Biggs’ attention. As an artist interested in the extremities of human civilization, Biggs was fascinated by the Afar region made up of a triangular territory belonging to Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. This in turn prompted Biggs to travel to the area twice (in 2014 and 2016) in an attempt to capture the essence of this “most unlivable” place. As for the success of her effort, that’s largely dependant on the category one uses to define the work.

As a documentary, *Afar* leaves viewers wanting. Largely comprised of scenic shots of sparse desert landscapes, locals, and some ominous views of Ethiopia’s Erta Ale volcano, the videos offer a purposeful lack of discernible narrative. Instead of information, we are given something more emotive. This scattered style, Biggs herself explains, reflects the itinerant nomadic lifestyle and the bubbling magma, a sense of the political turmoil that shrouds the region.

“The Danakil Depression [forming part of the valley] is one of the most unlivable areas in the world, but of course, people live there, and for me, that’s compelling,” Biggs told Lily Wei in ARTnews, explaining what inspired her to make the work. As Biggs would come to discover through her trips though, portraying the life of the people in the region was rather complex.

That complexity largely has to do with mounting political tension surrounding the Eritrean border. Biggs for instance had to travel with a crew of 12, comprising her assistant, eight Ethiopian soldiers, two Afar militia, and a further two Afar policemen. Not wanting to reflect this reality in a direct sense and create what Biggs describes as “stereotypical Western pornography,” the artist instead went with the more poetic form of the finished product.

A key feature that helps Biggs achieve this effect was her insertion of shots taken of dancers from the Elizabeth Streb dance company. The choreography involves the dramatic movement of these dancers flinging themselves against steel cages. Inspired in part by a scene Biggs had witnessed in Djibouti City following the arrest of several kids—as well as its use as another metaphoric device for unrest—the foreign footage also represents Biggs most apparent artistic gesture.
Afar might better be viewed then as a work of art. Having captured the environment, it’s people and edited it into a compelling form, Biggs has quite successfully managed to translate her experience of the Afar region into a compelling film. But as she herself admits to Wei, “there are parts of the world where just to pick up a camera is a political act” — and therein lies the rub.

Were this strictly documentary or piece of art, we could simply judge the work on the merits of either category. But unfortunately a project like this sits a bit uncomfortably between the two. On the one hand you could argue that Biggs, wanting to capture this remote region and bring it wider attention and acknowledgement of its existence, has been thoroughly successful. However, in picking up her camera Biggs admits that she has committed “a political act” and in that regard, Afar falls quite short.
The problem largely comes down to a question of capital flow. In creating something that functions as a work of art, Biggs has extracted something from this place for her own gain (regardless of the sensitivity she may have brought to the project and her respect for the region.) A more expansive and well articulated example of this paradox can be found in the form of Dutch artist Renzo Martens’ 2009 film that addresses this issue, *Enjoy Poverty*.

Showing beside *Afar* is a video of Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo’s endurance performance art piece, *Tierra* (2013). In it Galindo stands naked in a lush field as an earth mover digs a massive trench around her, narrowly avoiding the artist at times as it swings its mechanical arm back and forth. Symbolically, the piece was conceived as a reminder of the genocide and crimes against humanity committed under the reign of former Guatemalan president José Efraín Ríos Montt.
Unlike Biggs, there is no ambiguity here regarding who, or what this work is about. Galindo, by centering her naked body, has made her position clear. While both films interrogate underlying political themes, it is Galindo who grapples more directly with the politics of her subject matter. As a result, *Tierra* knows what it is. *Afar*, by contrast, seems to still be working that out.

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