“Stories the City Tells Itself: The Video Art and Photography of Neil Goldberg”

The artist transforms everyday life into a state of grace. By Joseph R. Wolin

Goldberg has produced some of the most quietly intense and affecting art of his generation.

The ocean swelling. In fact, Goldberg had sealed his video camera in a plastic bag and attached it to trees, lampposts and traffic lights when weather interrupted other plans, but this stopgap measure of chance operations generated one of his most soulful works.

As these examples suggest, Goldberg’s New York isn’t the one of the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and the Rockeites. Rather, his focus on quiet interfaces, everyday gestures and overlooked phenomena articulates the noniconic, touching—often private—experience that textures life in the Big Apple, or anywhere else, for that matter. For the artist, such moments have encompassed people soberly considering their lunchtime options (Salad Bar from 2006); stopping to smell the lilacs in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (Ten Minutes with X02180-A, also from 2006): having their hair blown by an onrushing L train (Wind Tunnel from 2012); or, in the magnificent Surfacing (2010–11), stopping aboveground from the subway. Here, Goldberg captures shot after shot of commuters adjusting to daylight, getting their bearings and setting off, but their sustained looking and a slo-mo pace impart a sense of gravitas. Moving from the dark bowels of the earth to the sunlit world—from initial confusion to hesitant searching and then determined action to reach a goal—becomes symbolic, as if navigating the urban grid represents an archetypal voyage of life. And maybe it does.

Goldberg’s photographs often follow the same structure as his videos, with multiple shots of a repeated subject. He actually printed the soft-focus close-ups of resigned or apprehensive staphangers in Missing the Train (2002–06) from video stills that surprisingly resemble faces in Old Master paintings. The four large images of Subway Trapezoids (2011–12) form a companion piece to Surfacing, showing the view from below, up the dark stairs of subway entrances to bright sections of trees and sky. In the artist’s hands, this commonplace sight invokes both mythical and psychological rebirth, and our sense of identification with Orpheus ascending from the underworld couples with a nearly visceral yearning for release, for the light and air of nature over our heads. In both still and moving images, Goldberg imbues familiar visions with unexpected associations and unforeseen grace.