



On Persistence and Hope: An Interview with Janet Biggs

Natalie Sandstrom | November 29, 2017



Brightness All Around / Janet Biggs / 2011 / Courtesy of Connersmith / Washington, D.C. / © Janet Biggs

*Janet Biggs is an American artist working in video, photography, and performance. She is based in Brooklyn, New York, but travels often, and has explored places such as the Arctic, China, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and sites across the United States. Her imaginative and riveting art often focuses on people living and working in severe environments, as in her video **Brightness All Around**, featured in the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition **The Sweat of Their Face: Portraying American Workers**, on view through September 3, 2018. By juxtaposing images of Linda Norberg, a female coal miner and machine operator working near the North Pole, with the uninhibited and flashy performance of singer Bill Coleman, **Brightness All Around** invites viewers to consider strength and boldness in a new light.*

Biggs told us a little more about her art, and discussed why she is so interested in portraying such intense subject matter.

NPG: How did you become interested in video art?

JB: I came to video because of a specific idea. I wanted to create a piece about my first experience with power and autonomy – which came [to me] on the back of a horse. I thought this experience would be best communicated using large scale, immersive video projections. I had no knowledge or experience with shooting video or editing. I am completely self-taught.

NPG: In your work, where is the line between video art and documentary film?

JB: I am dedicated to witnessing, which gives me a kind of kinship with documentary filmmakers. When I travel for a project, my primary role is to see and film as much as I possibly can and to be sure to maintain the dignity of the people that I'm filming.

My departure from documentary film into an art project happens when I push myself sideways, off a traditional documentary path. It can happen in different ways: through encounters with the landscape and its inhabitants, when I realize that the smallest detail or ritualized behavior can be as captivating as a grand story or dramatic vista; or through editing juxtapositions, collaging seemingly disparate elements.

NPG: What inspires you?

JB: I am inspired by Linda Norberg, the coal miner in *Brightness All Around*. Linda works in one of the most inaccessible places in the world, the High Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard, daily descending deep under the frozen ground of the Arctic.

I'm inspired by Slamet Hariadi (Abi), a sulfur miner working inside an active volcano in the East Java province of Indonesia. In unimaginable conditions, he would recognize and point out the volcano's beauty and talk about his hope for the future.

I am inspired by Leslie Porterfield, who holds three world records for speed on a motorcycle, with a top speed of 234 mph.

All of these people are determined to define and defend their identities in the face of the extreme. That is truly inspiring!

NPG: What draws you to focusing on people in extreme situations and activities? Why is that topic important to explore?

JB: I am astonished at the human capacity for hope. Over and over again I witness individuals in locations and conditions where direction often seems undetermined and achievement an undefined notion, yet hope exists and we continue to explore. These experiences have made me conscious of our responsibilities to each other and to our planet.

NPG: You are also interested in exploring how people push the boundaries of the way society limits identities – can you speak a little more about the relationship between women laborers and danger, and how that manifests in *Brightness All Around*?

JB: I think there is a duality of existence in all of us. We all can embody fragility and have the potential for manifest strength. Linda becomes more of who she is every time she enters that mine, but in another way, she disappears. Linda is the first worker to enter the mine once a new section of it is machine cut. She bolts up the ceiling, making it safe for the rest of the miners. Through her focus, skill, and dedication she achieves a kind of uber-state, challenging simple binary reads of genders norms and forms, but at the same time, she has withdrawn from the traditional choreography of social interaction.

NPG: What kind of relationships do you have with your subjects?

JB: When I contact a subject for a project, I make it very clear that I plan to pay them for their time. I am an intrusion—I've walked into somebody else's life and world. I'm very aware of that fact.

At first it's really just a business agreement, but as the filming progresses, often the relationship will start to change. Sometimes, if a certain comfort level is achieved, my subjects can become a real collaborator helping shape the project.

With *Brightness All Around*, I developed a collaborative relationship not only with Linda, but also with other miners. While I was granted access into parts of the mine, there were parts that were restricted. At Linda's suggestion, I trained some of the other miners to use my cameras and they filmed for me in the deepest regions of the mine.

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NPG: What do you hope people will take away from your art?

JB: I strive to create a visceral experience, a window into someone else's life through my work. I hope to generate curiosity about people's situations and circumstances in different parts of the world.

NPG: What are you working on next?

JB: While I think that the role of a witness is important, I think it is essential that first person narratives and perspectives exist. My current project is being filmed in the Horn of Africa—in part so I can bring first-person perspectives out.

This new project looks at the far ends of the spectrum of human movement in the pursuit of hope. While in Djibouti, I witnessed Yemeni refugees fleeing the bombing and devastation in Yemen. They risk everything to cross the Gulf of Aden. The persistence of hope is endless.