

JANET BIGGS: A STEP ON THE SUN

Filmed inside an active volcano, artist Janet Biggs discusses her recent project, A Step On the Sun, with artist and writer Suzanne Anker. Biggs often assumes the role of a wanderer in search of unexplored territory, both physically and psychologically. In this recent four-channel video installation, Biggs documents sulfur workers as they extract minerals from inside Indonesia's Ijen volcano. While myriad references to sulfur are embedded in folklore, alchemical texts and ancient writings, this element is compared to fire in its fierceness. Anker and Biggs discuss the associative, social, and personal aspects of Biggs' work, including the challenges of working in one of the world's most uniquely beautiful and brutal locations.

In conversation between: Janet Biggs and Suzanne Anker



Janet Biggs

A Step on the Sun, 2012, (still from the video)

Multi-channel, high definition video installation with sound. Courtesy of the artist, Analix Forever, Geneva, Switzerland, CONNERSMITH, Washington, DC, and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, NY. © Biggs

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Janet Biggs' work takes the form of videography and performance in her explorations of extreme environments. She assumes the role of a wanderer in search of unexplored territory, both physically and psychologically. In this interview, we discuss her stunning multi-channel video, *A Step on the Sun*, which documents the mining of sulfur in Indonesia. Myriad references to sulfur are embedded in folklore, alchemical texts and ancient writings in which this element is compared to fire. With an atomic number of sixteen, sulfur is a yellow crystalline solid. Although considered caustic, several studies suggest that sulfur, when combined with oxygen to create sulfur dioxide, has a cooling effect on global warming.

Suzanne Anker: What brought you to film in an Indonesian sulfur mine? Was there something about this substance that intrigued you? Why did you choose a sulfur mine as opposed to a diamond mine or a coal mine? Did the color or liquid states of sulfur have something to do with your choice?

Janet Biggs: The Ijen sulfur volcano is a uniquely beautiful and brutal place. I am drawn to environments that are elemental and extreme, the ends of the earth. I use these landscapes as surrogate characters or equal subjects to the individuals who struggle to maintain a sense of self within them. I use grand stories and heroic efforts as points of departure, then slide sideways into small gestures or esoteric tasks as seen from deeply personal perspectives. I am interested in how incidental, small moments are as wondrous as the stupefying wild and beautiful landscapes where these actions occur; how places untouched by the digital age can be transported and experienced through technology.

I was first seduced by the visuals; the indescribable vibrancy of sulfur in its solid state, bubbling, blood red when in a liquid state, and the brilliant turquoise of the world's largest sulfuric acid lake. Ijen is remote – a day's drive through unpaved, mountainous boulder roads, then a two hour hike up straight up a steep volcano slope, then a perilous scramble down the crumbling inside rim down to a pure acid lake.

Existing within this incredible beauty is one of the most extreme examples of human exploitation and hardship I've ever witnessed.

Miners scale the outside of an active volcano, and then descend into its harsh interior to extract the sulfur. They carry more than their body weight for miles, back up the caldera walls and down to the weigh stations at the base of the volcano. Nothing is mechanized. It is mineral extraction at its most primitive basic.

SA: Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) is infamous for its smell, frequently compared to rotten eggs, What did it smell like on the mountain? Did you have any difficulty breathing? How long were you on the mountain?

JB: I expected the hydrogen sulfide to smell of rotten eggs, but it surprised in its intensity and lack of any identifiable smell. It was so acrid that it burned your mouth, nose, and eyes. It didn't smell like anything, it engulfed, blinding me and burning my throat and nose. When the wind changed and I was hit full on by the fumes, the only thing I could do was crouch down low, close my eyes, hold my breath, and moan until the wind shifted. You couldn't run from the fumes. The hydrogen sulfide was totally blinding, and the risk of falling into the sulfuric acid lake was too great. You just had to wait it out.

We had brought gas masks, but found them difficult to wear. Hiking up and down the caldera was so strenuous it felt like your lungs would burst when wearing a mask. I tried to give some of the miners masks, but they rarely wore them, instead preferring to cover their noses and mouths with a bandana.

I spent two weeks filming in and around the Ijen volcano. We would camp on the volcano rim, as sulfur was mined day and night. At night, the miners would ignite the sulfur so they could see. They worked with blue flames shooting up all around them.

We brought a small three-person tent where I, my assistant, our guide/translator, and two miners, all in gas masks, tried to sleep. About every third day, I would have to hike down the volcano to a



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guest house, where I recharge my camera's batteries.

SA: Were you able to communicate with the sulfur workers? Did you have a translator? Were they at

all interested in your project? What is the life expectancy for the workers?

JB: Yes. I found Aan online, advertised as an independent guide and translator for the Ijen



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plateau. He had been the guide for an Italian photographer who photographed inside the volcano. It was a risk to hire him, but it couldn't have turned out better. Aan grew-up close to the volcano and had friends who were miners. He taught himself English and eventually was able to attend the university in Surabaya. He was an incredible resource and is now a good friend. Aan was able to get us permission to film inside the volcano. The Ministry of Forestry, which oversees Ijen, does not allow anyone except miners inside the volcano. Imam, a good friend of Aan's, who can no longer mine sulfur due to his damaged lungs, joined our team. The life span of an Ijen miner is 35-45 years, as breathing sulfuric dioxide fumes causes irreparable lung damage. Imam introduced us to many of the miners, including Abi, who became the focus of my video.

I was able to communicate with a number of the miners about my project, especially Abi. Abi understood my desire to try and understand how such an extreme place affects someone's sense of self. To me, his life was unimaginably difficult, but he could look outside the harshness of his existence

and see the beauty of his environment. He spoke as a poet and never lost hope for himself and his family.

SA: What happens to the sulfur extracted from the mine? Is it exported to another country or does it stay in Indonesia?

JB: The sulfur from Ijen is primarily bought by local factories that use it to bleach sugar. Some is also sold locally to vulcanize rubber. None is exported. The Ijen miners are independent, which means the companies that purchase the sulfur and the government agencies that oversee the volcano do not implement any safety regulations or support. If you can rig two bamboo baskets into a sulfur carrier, physically manage to ascend five steep miles and then descend into the volcano, break apart the solidified sulfur with an iron rod, and carry out at least your body weight of sulfur crystals, you can be an Ijen miner.

SA: What attracts you to places of such intensity? What kinds of fear you have experienced? How do



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you prepare yourself psychologically?

JB: My work often begins in the autobiographical and associative, then winds its way into scientific and anthropological research.

I feel a compulsion to find places that are wondrous and extreme, otherworldly, and film the people who call these places home. I can't deny that there is a thrill seeking side to my personality and practice, but I'm drawn to locations and situations where new discoveries can be made. The kind of discoveries that come from stepping completely outside of what you know, experiencing uncertainty, allowing yourself to be destabilized ... and at times terrified. And there is always awe!

The locations where many of my projects are filmed are physically demanding. I do whatever physical conditioning I think is necessary to be

effective in these locations. For Ijen, I spent a lot of time running up and down the Brooklyn and Williamsburg bridges. I also occasionally need to learn new skills. I joined the kayak polo team to become a competent paddler so I could paddle in Arctic waters. I became certified on a high powered rifle to protect myself from Polar bear attacks. I've learned how to pack a camel and trek for hours in a growing desert, and most recently, I needed to research prisoner release strategies in case of kidnapping.

SA: Please describe the narrative you constructed in this piece.

JB: This work addresses the very idea of the modern age, of technology, scientific advancement, and its place in the larger world. There is an



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A Step on the Sun, 2012, (installation view: International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena)

assumption that science and technology have changed how we live our lives, bringing new possibilities for intellectual, industrial, and individual advancement. I'm interested in parts of the world where technology doesn't or can't exist; places so extreme that there is not the possibility of satellite connections or electrical power; locations so harsh that metals corrode and humans are the only source of power.

A Step on the Sun focuses on Abi, a sulfur miner working in the Ijen volcano of East Java. Footage of Abi is framed in and amongst images that evidence both the beauty that surrounds him and the exploitation that he endures. The images from Ijen are intercut with footage of a *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)* weather balloon launch and near-space images from a recent MIT student experimental balloon flight into the stratosphere.

The sulfur miners wake long before dawn to hike high up to the Ijen volcano's rim, then down into the crater to mine for sulfur. Formal industrial mining is impossible, as the volcano erupts from time to time, projecting acid to the height of 600 m (2,000 ft.), splashing the neighboring areas with a corrosive rain.

Abi's environment is extreme. Almost two miles above sea level, the crater houses the largest sulfuric lake in the world. Along the shore of this intense turquoise lake, miners install pipes into sulfur-spewing volcanic fumaroles, which collect a condensation of boiling, blood-red molten sulfur, which turns yellow as it cools and hardens.

Abi collects the hardened sulfur crystals, and packs them into a hand-made bamboo basket. Amid clouds of sulfur dioxide gas, he carries heavy baskets from the crater floor up an almost-vertical rocky path to the rim.

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The piece ends with Abi reaching the rim of the volcano and then cuts to a camera view from a high altitude weather balloon. The images from the balloon represent the promise of transcendence, but as the balloon ascends the oxygen depletes and it eventually bursts. The final image shows the burst balloon falling back to earth.

A Step on the Sun presents an individual who has put everything on the line in a struggle to define and defend a sense of self in one of the most extreme environments imaginable. He willingly accepts the risk of free fall in the search for transcendence.

Janet Biggs is an American artist, known primarily for her work in video, photography and performance. Biggs received her undergraduate degree from Moore College of Art, and pursued graduate studies at Rhode Island School of Design. She has had solo exhibitions and film screenings at the Musee d'art contemporain de Montréal; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; the Armory Art Fair; Tampa Museum of Art; Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art; Mint Museum of Art; Everson Museum of Art; Gibbes Museum of Art; Rhode Island School of Design Museum; and the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Australia; among others. <http://jbiggs.com/>