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Janet Biggs' newest exhibit takes viewers on an Arctic expedition

By Dayna Roberts

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Janet Biggs visited Svalbard, Norway in 2009 and 2010, documenting footage of her travels. The footage, including shots of an emergency flare being shot into nothingness, is now part of "Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape."

Entering "Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape" at the Everson Museum of Art is like arriving in the Arctic. A mix of fear and beauty, this display of digital media aims to

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evoke a certain sense of mortality in viewers about their long-term impact on the world, artist Janet Biggs said.

The exhibit focuses on the Arctic, a place known for its vast, uninhabited environment, and how it is being greatly affected by people's actions despite its apparent detachment from humanity. The display consists of three videos showing different arctic landscapes – and people – to create an abstract piece of video art that highlights the climate crisis and our place in it.

“We all hoped that the work in this show really gets people thinking about the consequences of our actions and what we are doing to the planet,” said Everson curator and exhibition manager Steffi Chappell. “Janet’s work specifically is about the human impact on the arctic, but we can also look at it broadly.”

Janet Biggs has been fascinated with the Arctic since childhood. She used to scourge National Geographic magazines for photos of it, witnessing its terror and beauty.

Using footage she collected on her trips to Svalbard, a Norwegian Archipelago, in 2009 and 2010, Biggs aims to show viewers how the area has been greatly devastated by human existence.

In one of her videos displayed entitled “Warning Shot,” Biggs shoots off an emergency flare into the vast emptiness of the Arctic.

“When you do this, anyone who sees them is supposed to respond, but no one would see them and I could shoot them off all the time,” Biggs said. “It became a way to almost mark my existence there, but also this cry – I’m standing in this region that has no want or need for me, and somehow we’re destroying it.”

Biggs’ composition in her works titled “Fade to White” and “Brightness All Around” juxtapose explorers and workers against singing and dancing male performers. It creates a stark contrast between the stoic male model that’s often put forward and the fragile reality, Biggs said.

“I like the set up in the room, the scope of the Arctic is reflected in how big the screen is and the vastness of the room and its emptiness,” said museum visitor Chelsea Fruscello.

The most vital part of this exhibit is its ability to convey the bleakness of climate change, Biggs said. There is no sugar coating how the vast Arctic is still being touched by humans hundreds of miles away. It is irresponsible to be anything but blunt in terms of what is occurring in our world, Biggs said.

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Janet Biggs' exhibit projects visuals of the Arctic on the Everson Museum of Art's walls. Her travels document how the Arctic is impacted by human activity despite being empty.

When Biggs was filming at the Chicago Lincoln Park Zoo, the polar bears were attacking the glass toward the school kids. Teachers would reply and tell the kids that “they’re trying to kiss you” – which Biggs found odd and amusing. She believes students need to learn predator and prey roles.

“I feel the same about what’s happening in terms of the future of our planet, kids need to know because they have to live in it,” Biggs said.

The artist, curators, and viewers all said climate change is a topic that needs to be discussed. Glacial walls once present could vanish within a year, and water levels are rising with temperatures.

Biggs’ “Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape” highlights a new way to draw light to climate change.

“It’s really hard to be an advocate within the climate crisis,” Biggs said. “Things are changing faster than the predictions and there’s not a lot of walk back here. I think that making people aware of the natural world, to focus on it, and change their relationship with time is important these days.”