



JANET BIGGS ATLANTA

The human body's weird, nearly extraterrestrial geography is Janet Biggs' beguiling fixation in *Tracking Up*, a solo exhibition of her recent video installation work [Solomon Projects; May 10—July 26, 2008]. Here, isolated and engaged in the esoteric, bizarre gestures of synchronized swimmers, bagpipe players, equestrians or marching soldiers, bodies become alien landscapes.

Viewers of Biggs' six short single-channel videos don headphones, enhancing their immersive effects. We feel the world shut out much in the way these performers must; concentration is directed to the task at hand. Another theme of *Tracking Up* is the altered state of performance—be it athletic or musical. Biggs captures the twitches and sweat, the concentration, expectation and rigor of people deep in their personal zone.

In *Airs Above the Ground*, 2007, a young woman with hair pulled into a bun, heavy makeup, and a serene expression bends her arms into ritualized gestures, first outside the water and then underneath. Shot mainly below the water's surface, the girl executes the precise, almost militaristic hand gestures and ballet-like leg movements of synchronized swimming. But Biggs flips the view. We end up with a privileged but odd vantage of the girl right-side-up underwater. She appears to hover above the water's surface. And the bottom of the swimming pool becomes a curved tunnel above her head, like a bell jar trapping an insect. She seems more weightless and extraordinary somehow, in Biggs' destabilization of our vision. As in her other videos, the artist creates something otherworldly, a defamiliarized landscape enhanced in this case by a plangent cello score.

Biggs produces a similarly alienating effect in the absorbing video *Performance of Desire*, 2007. Cadets at the Citadel in Charleston, their faces shot in extreme close-up, march in carefully articulated motions. Two synchronized swimmers echo their movements. This juxtaposition of ritualized, controlled performances suggests extreme forms of male strength and female beauty, as well as the human quest for perfection.

Biggs has often emphasized strange, hypnotic images of repetitive or ritualized movement: teenage

wrestlers, a child playing the drums in the four-channel installation *Ritalin*, 2000, or the Syracuse Scottish Pipeband preparing to march in *Tracking Up*. The stranger the endeavor and the more specific the costume—Vaseline-coated hair, skintight wrestler's leotard—the more fascinated Biggs seems. Like Matthew Barney, Biggs is invested in gender differentiation through costume, sport, and behavior. While both artists are similarly drawn to the fetishistic accoutrements of sports, entertainment, and military culture—the protective padding, helmets, hairdos, and dress that convey membership in a special sect—her work has an added *vérité* spin.

Biggs returns to an underwater view in *Solipsism Syndrome*, 2006. This time, however, her subject is a polar bear swimming in his Lincoln Park Zoo habitat, his undulating fur and awkward, stubby paws both graceful and strange in this watery setting. The swimming polar bear invokes a literal subtext: Biggs juxtaposes his Esther Williams act with footage of a frozen ocean, creating a suggestive geography that melds two realities into a new, imaginative realm. Likewise, *Fall on Me*, 2006, suggests human-animal coexistence or correlation. In this work, a man performs arabesques and graceful acrobatics on horseback while the animal canters around a ring. The melding of these two bodies—the rider's and the animal's—is a theme that, explored in previous work, Biggs teases out in several pieces here.

The effect of the video works varies. Most are hypnotic and thought-provoking, though Biggs' *Enemy of the Good*, 2007, is less successful. In that video, pianist José Luis Hernández-Estrada wanders through the beautifully futuristic Santiago Calatrava City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia—its own expression of human desire. Hyperconscious of the camera, the pianist then sits down to perform to an empty concert house. Stagey and performative, the video lacks the naturalism of the other works, that is, a privileged, up-the-nostril vantage, a nearly microscopic view of people captured unaware, or so deep in concentration as to appear unaware.

—Felicia Feaster