

# ART PAPERS

M A G A Z I N E

## Janet Biggs: Water Training

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In conjunction with the video installation *Water Training*, Janet Biggs showed a large, color photograph of a prepubescent girl dressed in riding clothes, standing in a suburban bedroom awash in the paraphernalia of adolescent equine obsession: ribbons from riding competitions, plastic horse models and so forth. This image of a youthful obsessive is both funny and disturbing, portraying as it does both the all-encompassing passion for horses and everything associated with them embraced by some teen-aged girls and the consumerist side of that passion. In an artworld that is increasingly dominated by work representing adolescent male sexual fantasies (e.g., Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Matthew Barney) it is actually refreshing to see adolescent female sexual sublimation represented through its classic symbol, the horse. The photograph's suburban context and its hint of economic analysis make it a deadpan cultural commentary that treats its subject with simultaneous affection and ironic distance.

The photograph is a relic from an earlier work by Biggs and is related to the theme of "Girls and Horses" that Biggs has been exploring in her work for several years. It complements *Water Training* by revealing the origins of that theme, which reappear in a far more abstract and hermetic form in the video installation. The installation consists of two very large projection screens situated at a right angle to one another in a corner of the gallery. A continuous image of a tethered horse running on an underwater treadmill shows on the left-hand screen, while several sequences of young women practicing a form of synchronized swimming to different pieces of music shows on the right. The soundtrack includes the sounds of the horse running and snorting as well as the muffled music to which the swimmers move.

The placement of the two screens within the relatively small space of the gallery makes it impossible to get enough distance on the installation to see the two adjacent images fully. The point

at which they meet thus becomes the focal point of the piece, and it is possible to see the two images simultaneously only through peripheral vision. In a strange way, this visual effect forces the viewer to enter the perceptual world of the horse, since horses, whose eyes are placed on opposite sides of their heads, cannot see objects in front of themselves at close range.

Other aspects of the installation also tend to promote identification with the horse rather than the swimmers. Whereas the horse is shown from the neck up, its facial expression continuously visible, the swimmers were shot from underwater and are seen mostly as decapitated bodies. Their heads do become visible when they swim underwater, but the absence of close-ups on the video provides little opportunity to see their facial expressions. These contrasting ways of representing the animal and the human undermine anthropocentrism: most viewers I spoke with at the gallery found themselves more drawn to and sympathetic with the horse and its struggle than with the swimmers, from whom they felt distanced. The horse and the question of what it was enduring becomes the emotional center of the piece and the heart of the issues it raises.

The formal structure of *Water Training* hinges on a series of contrasts, including: the single figure of the horse in close-up versus the group of swimmers in long-shot; underwater photography versus a camera out of water observing an immersed subject; and the different colors the water takes on in each context. The most poignant contrasts are implied rather than visible and thematic rather than formal. How should we compare the activity of the horse and the swimmers? All are bodies being subjected to regimens of physical discipline, to "water training." Ostensibly, the swimmers exercise freedom of choice in deciding to participate in their sport, unlike the horse, who is simply subjected to human will—yet both are in fact subjected to discipline imposed from without by trainers or coaches. Do the swim-

mers necessarily derive greater pleasure from their activity than the horse because they choose it for themselves? Should we see the horse's snorting and vivid facial expressions as signs of distress or of exertion and excitement? It is also tempting to read the horse's training as mere physical activity, while the swimmers' choreography can be seen as "expressive" movement. Given what we know about the dehumanizing rigors to which young athletes—particularly young women who wish to dance ballet, perform gymnastics, or ice-skate—are subjected, to what extent can we see their activities as freely chosen and expressive of their own artistic impulses?

Whereas the photograph of the horsey girl refers to the psycho-sexual relationship between adolescent girls and their equine companions in terms exaggerated just enough to be satirical, *Water Training* reconfigures that relationship by positing race horses and young women as equally subject to physical discipline, to having their bodies shaped to the terms of desire—their own and that of others. Through this permutation of her central image of girl and horse, Biggs opens it up to a broad range of evocations and speculative meanings.

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