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Janet Biggs
CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART

During a potently intimate moment in the video Fade to White, 2010, a singer (New York–based performance artist John Kelly) is shown attaining a state of grace—ecstasy worthy of Saint Theresa. Slowly closing and opening his eyes, Kelly extends outstretched hands, his plaintive counter tenor arcing around the notes of the late Renaissance composer Gualio Caccini’s haunting madrigal “Amarti, mia bella.” In a parallel narrative, arctic explorer Audun Tholfsen was filmed reaching a similar height, though less perceptibly, while sailing and kayaking frigid waters and hiking the icy Svalbard archipelago, located midway between the northern tip of Norway and the North Pole. Though neither character dramatically collapses into acres of marble drapery as does Benin’s Theresa, each evinces an expressive extracorporeality that artist Janet Biggs captured as she skillfully intercut the two characters’ respective stories into a captivating twelve-and-a-half-minute video.

Throughout most of the work’s roughly two dozen scenes, we follow Tholfsen, a handsome arctic guide in his mid-thirties, on his journey around Svalbard. He never speaks, but his subtle facial expressions suggest by turns curiosity, concern, doubt, purpose, and resolve. In contrast, Kelly appears more physically and emotionally demonstrative, the slow movement of his hands, arms, eyes, and head embodying his path from ambivalence and uncertainty to bliss. A slender, androgynous but not desexualized being clad all in white, Kelly occupies a hermetic white interior, his lanky physique the defining vertical in the frame’s horizontal compositions.

The artist’s earlier films often engaged themes of gender, sexuality, and the power dynamics between an individual and his or her all-powerful other. For example, in Vanishing Point, 2009 (on view in the adjacent room), Biggs employs her alternating narrative format to examine subjects facing personal fears—a near-fataly injured motorcyclist racing again crossed with performance footage from Harlem’s Addicts Rehabilitation Center Gospel Choir. In both scenarios, the protagonists demonstrably seek control of their lives. The singers unite in a determined and purposeful performance, and the female motorcyclist confidently speeds across Utah’s Bonneville Salt Flats before a largely male audience, both to adrenaline-pumping effect.

But in Fade to White issues of control are more nuanced. Here the counterforce—presumably the extremes of nature—is at once outside and inside the subjects as the video examines physical limits (Tholfsen’s muscular strength, Kelly’s vocal skill) as well as traditional notions of masculinity. (The issue of gender identity might have played out differently had the female arctic guide originally cast in the film not dropped out at the last minute.) But despite the distance between these two emptied worlds, the subjects’ trajectories are deeply linked by Biggs’s editing, as Kelly’s mournful voice is occasionally layered over the diegetic noises of wind whipping Tholfsen’s barren winterscape, the crunching of snow and ice underfoot, syrupy cold waters breaking against his schooner, and the slightest of waves gently lapping the shoreline.

If video artist Guido van der Werve has cast northern climates as foils in darkly sardonic landscapes of lack, Biggs, by contrast, emphatically establishes a sense of “there-ness” (to borrow from Gertrude Stein). Conjuring the declarative romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich, the majestic depiction of nature of Hudson River School painter John Kent, and the powerful figure-ground relationships of filmmaker Jane Campion, Fade to White engages on a visceral level with two seemingly divergent, though not discordant, narratives of discovery.

—Nord Wennerström