

Atlanta

Janet Biggs

Solomon Projects

As she continues her work with women and horses, New York-based artist Janet Biggs presents *BuSpar*, a trio of beautiful and unsettling images that place the viewer inside an emotional and psychological paradox. The three larger-than-life projections enveloping Solomon Projects have a sedative effect that belies the dis-ease they represent. "BuSpar," the name of a prescription anxiety pill given to both humans and horses, is the subject. The viewer becomes the apprehensive object.

The central wall-sized image depicts a woman rocking in a chair. She's flanked by two close-ups of a gray-white horse cantering in her direction. Only the sounds of the horse breathing hard from exertion accompany the mesmerizing triptych. The woman's mental condition is meant to be vaguely defined. In fact, she is Biggs's autistic aunt. "I wanted that ambiguity. I wanted to retain her dignity by giving her eye contact with the viewer," explained the artist. Middle-aged and plain featured, wearing a blue T-shirt, with no makeup and a simple, chin-length haircut, the woman seems genderless. She rocks against a nondescript domestic backdrop, her eyes shifting from an inward gaze to a direct, sometimes puzzled or piercing, regard of the viewer.

Because the images are tightly packed into the gallery, one must choose what to look at. Watching the woman allows only a peripheral view of the horse's doubled image. The animal was filmed at night, cantering in the dark around a ring at the stables where Biggs teaches riding. Running, a movement that should carry with it notions of power and freedom, is here reduced to a repetitive, controlled performance. The horses' physical proximity to the woman and her trance-like equanimity encourage

comparisons. In both, instinctive urges have been suppressed by an outside force. Training in a harness creates the animal's unnatural gait, while BuSpar explains the woman's deadened trance.

There is no beginning or ending to the surreal narrative entered via *BuSpar*. The horses mirror each other, while the viewer is forced into the role of the woman's uneasy reflection. Biggs visualizes the psycho-social

interests Biggs: symbolic relationships between the female and the horse. In 1997, she debuted *Water Training* at Solomon Projects. The abstract cinematic installation contains two moving images projected into a corner of the gallery. As with *BuSpar*, the viewer enters the perceptual experience of the equine animal, able to see the images simultaneously only through peripheral vision. On the left, a tethered, wild-eyed horse runs on an

In *Water Training*, viewer empathy is drawn to the frightened horse, whose therapeutic treatment seems to be pushing him toward delirium. At the same time, his barely restrained physicality is intimidating. Described at a distance in their innocent awkward movements, the budding girls might be viewed as objects of desire. Some of the interest in this concept lies outside the gallery, in the real-life psychosexual affinity between girls and



Above: Janet Biggs, *BuSpar* (detail), 1999. Three-channel video installation. Left: *Girls and Horses*, 1996. Video projections and monitors, installation view.

dialectic of efforts to repress angst and emotion. She emphasizes the hypnotic and flattening effect of anxiety-reducing drugs on Western society.

BuSpar expands a theme that

underwater treadmill. His terrified visage is the focus. On the right, young women practice synchronized swimming. Their leggy figures are seen mostly from the neck down.

horses. Here the rapport shifts; the viewer is compelled to consider underlying sexual tension and other subliminal relationships between the horse and the girls.

Girls and Horses (1996) presents a more transparent look at sublimated sexuality. Concurrently on view in the Nexus Contemporary Art Center "Here Kitty, Kitty" show, the video work features girls playing horsey with their parents and the image of a girl riding a great white horse that

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runs laps around the edge of a darkened space. In the original version of *Girls and Horses*, the rapport between women and horses is magnified by rhythmic repetitions in eight videos and a room-sized rotating projection of the girl and her horse. Reduced to three monitors and a small-scale projection of the circling horse, the installation at Nexus is a pared down, much less giddy ride.

As she focuses on psychological relationships between horses and humans, the artist penetrates our unconscious. Her multivalent studies of restraint and release raise important questions about desire, discipline, and the construction of gender. Always more than sensual experiences, her moving pictures are powerful social commentaries. In *BuSpar*, Biggs heightens our awareness of humankind's self-destructive compulsion to control the irrepressible. Would that she could tell us what to do about it.

—Cathy Byrd