

Horse of a different color

Solomon Projects installation examines relationship between female and h

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"BuSpar" (detail) by Janet Biggs

When you open the door to Solomon Projects these days, you may feel like you've entered Pandora's Box. From the outside, with its windows papered over, the gallery looks to be in between shows or perhaps closed. A note on the door says to enter carefully. So you do. But as you push into the darkened room, three floor-to-ceiling projections push you back against the storefront wall. That's because New York artist Janet Biggs confronts us

with our dark side in a very big way.

The three larger-than-life images enveloping the space have a sedating effect that belies the swarm of unfortunate ills they represent. The three-channel video installation at Solomon Projects is titled "BuSpar," the name of a prescription anxiety pill given to both humans and horses.

What if the other were you? Biggs seems to ask. Which one of us has escaped medication for one angst or another? Even if you haven't partaken of society's holy communion with drugs, you know someone who has. The work might well be called "A Woman Under the Influence," in this case, of society's stun-gun approach to dis-ease. The central image depicts a woman rocking in a chair. She is flanked by two close-ups of a cantering horse. Sounds of the horse breathing hard from exertion accompany the motion-filled, yet numbing visual triptych.

The woman's mental condition is meant to be vaguely defined. In fact, she is Biggs' autistic aunt. "I wanted that ambiguity. I wanted to retain her dignity by giving her eye-contact with the viewer," explains the artist. Middle-aged and plain featured, wearing a blue T-shirt, with no make-up and a simple, chin-length haircut, she seems genderless. Against a non-descript domestic backdrop, she rocks and rocks, her eyes shifting from an inward gaze to a direct, almost puzzled, surely damning, regard of the viewer.

As you watch the woman, in your peripheral vision the doubled image of a beautiful gray-white horse runs in her direction. 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 gesture. The well-muscled animal has been harnessed and compelled to perform. The horse's physical closeness to the woman's trance-like equanimity elicits thoughts and emotions about how instinctive urges have been quelled to create the animal's unnatural gait (and the woman's deadened state).

"BuSpar" expands a theme that interests Biggs: symbolic relationships between the female and the horse. In 1997, she debuted "Water Training" at Solomon Projects. The abstract cinematic installation contained two moving images -- a tethered horse running on an underwater treadmill and young women practicing synchronized swimming. By evoking the push/pull of restraint and release, the artist describes the moment when emotion meets discipline. Her "Girls and Horses" (1996) is a more transparent look at sublimated sexuality. Currently on view in the Nexus *Here Kitty, Kitty* show, the video work features girls playing horsie with their parents and the image of a girl riding a great white horse that runs laps around the edge of a darkened space.

There is no beginning or ending to the surreal narrative we enter via "BuSpar." The horses mirror each other, while we are left with the uneasy reflection of the woman. We are reminded that humankind (at least in the Western world) is complicit in a trap-setting cycle that has brought a majority to depend on drugs to fit in, to maintain, to refrain, to exist. Biggs opens our eyes to psycho-social paradoxes that accompany efforts to repress desire. The self-destructive nature of our endless apprehension is exposed in the mesmerizing "BuSpar."

"BuSpar" by Janet Biggs continues through Feb. 12 at Solomon Projects, 1037 Monroe Drive. 404-875-7100. "Girls and Horses" continues through Feb. 26 at Nexus Contemporary Art Center, 535 Means St. 404-688-1970.