

RISD: MUSEUM

Program
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Janet Biggs

American, b. 1959

Apraxia, 2002

2:19 min. color DVD

Bright Shiny Objects, 2004

6:14 min. color DVD

Both courtesy of the artist

In the initial disorienting seconds of Janet Biggs's *Apraxia*, the viewer is confronted with the bodies of two senior members of a synchronized swimming team, hovering uncomfortably close to the camera amid a sapphire-blue void. Filmed upside down, the women seem to defy gravity, their treading motions suggesting flight. In perfect unison, they launch themselves gracefully into the depths above them.

The camera's concentrated gaze on these women's bodies sets up a number of unresolved, interlocking tensions. The word

VIDEOS

In Progress

Stairwell Gallery, continuous showing

May 11 – June 13, 2004



Still from *Apraxia*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

apraxia describes the loss or disruption of motor coordination, yet here it is associated with images of spiritual freedom and physical power. This paradox of simultaneous transcendence and bodily impairment is redoubled by the soundtrack, which blends an emotionally uplifting piano solo with sounds taken from a standardized test for measuring deafness. In the end, the myriad contradictions surrounding Biggs's swimmers urge us to rethink facile assumptions about strength, aging, beauty, and femininity.

OVER



Still from *Bright Shiny Objects*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

In *Bright Shiny Objects*, a new video created for this RISD Museum screening, Biggs develops these ideas further by juxtaposing incongruous images that relay a sense of isolated and suppressed intensity. The work opens with footage of a remarkable seven-year-old autistic girl, who has been able to fly on the ice from the moment she first tried on a pair of skates. Apparently, the physical sensation of unfettered movement taps into an innate reservoir of rhythmic coordination and fluidity in the girl, allowing her to break free from the confines of her debilitating disorder, if only for a short while. Intercut with these scenes is the vision of a horse fastened to a lunge line, a type of harness used by a trainer to exercise and school the animal. The horse in motion—another evocation of physical prowess and freedom—is restrained to a tight circle, unable to run wild as he would in nature. The work comes to a surprising conclusion, which reinforces the notion that beneath the surface of all things lie unknown reserves of power.