

ARTnews

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Janet Biggs

Conner Contemporary Art
Washington, D. C.

The spirit of the 19th-century explorer was alive and well in this show, “Nobody Rides for Free,” featuring two Janet Biggs videos that take viewers from the frozen glaciers of the Arctic Circle to the blazing terrain of Utah’s Bonneville Salt Flats. These extreme landscapes are captured with high-definition acuity, and Biggs imbues them with romanticism through her focus on lone athletes triumphing in these threatening surroundings.

Fade to White (2010) takes place near Svalbard, a small island 500 miles north of Norway, where temperatures plunge to 10 degrees below zero. Here a kayaker—blond, bearded, and blue-eyed, and every inch the arctic explorer—glides past icebergs and a rugged shoreline where polar bears gather to feast on a whale carcass. This frontier film is spliced with footage of performance artist John Kelly, wan and sensuous, singing an Italian aria. It is a 21st-century version of a Caspar David Friedrich painting, filled with all the more pathos as the viewer considers the latest reports that the polar ice cap is melting and its wildlife dying off.

Likewise, in *Vanishing Point* (2009), Biggs juxtaposes the virtuosity of her motorcyclist, Leslie Porterfield, “the fastest woman on earth,” with the prodigious performance skills of the Harlem Addicts Rehabilitation Center Choir, a group of people who’d had their own near-death experiences. We follow Porterfield as she mounts her cycle and reaches speeds of 234 miles per hour, the camera tracking the bright white ground flashing by beneath her wheels.

In both videos, we are acutely aware of Biggs’s presence as cinematographer, as she shares the risks taken by her lead performers so she can bring their adventures to light and permit viewers to experience them vicariously.

—Barbara Pollack



Janet Biggs, still from *Fade to White*, 2010, single-channel video, 12 minutes, 28 seconds. Conner Contemporary Art.