

On the Spot: Janet Biggs

Artist, 'A Step on the Sun'

BY SHAUNA MILLER POSTED ON MARCH 21, 2012



Video artist Janet Biggs finds the beauty in extreme situations. For her latest work, "A Step on the Sun," Biggs traveled to the Kawah Ijen volcano in East Java, Indonesia, to follow a sulfur miner. Inside the volcano is the world's largest acid lake, which, she says, "eats through a tin can in 15 seconds."

What is the mining process like?

They fit clay pipes into cracks on the [volcanic walls] to condense the sulfur fumes, and it hardens, and they carry it out in bamboo baskets. It takes 45 minutes to climb out of the volcano, then two or three hours to get to the weigh station. They do two loads per day. They're paid \$6-\$8 a load.

The piece follows one miner in particular.

I met [miner Slamet Hariadi, above left] at the weigh station. Right away I knew he was the focus of the piece. I would

trail after him as he went about his normal day. He understood the poetry I was after. He'd point out beautiful things, even as he was hauling more than his body weight.

This is not a typical documentary video.

I ride the line of documentary very closely and consciously. I think of my work as portraiture. I let my audience make their own decisions about what's happening.

The landscape and the colors in the piece are so otherworldly.

It really does seem like Mars. And the yellow of the sulfur is so bright, and that acid lake is this incredible blue. At the same time, it's the most exploitative thing I've ever seen in my life.

Conner Contemporary Art, 1358 Florida Ave. NE; Tue.-Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m., to May 5, free; 202-588-8750.

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