

ARTFORUM

Janet Biggs

As told to Prudence Peiffer
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Janet Biggs, *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, four-channel HD video installation, color, sound, 8 minutes 35 seconds. Installation view, Blaffer Art Museum.

*The work of Janet Biggs often finds the New York-based artist traveling to the ends of the earth to research and record extreme geographic landscapes and the people who inhabit them. For her latest exhibition, "Echo of the Unknown," Biggs has created an installation of sculpture, three video works, and a sound piece, all of which explore the relationship between intense conditions found in the exterior world and those in our interior selves. Curated by Janet Phelps, the show runs at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston through March 21, 2015. Biggs will also present a related multidisciplinary performance at Project Row Houses on April 16, 2015, titled If Ever I Would Leave You. Here, Biggs discusses *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, the largest work on view.*

THIS IMMERSIVE FOUR-CHANNEL VIDEO piece is about the idea of focus and disappearance and how they can coexist in one place, one being. It stems from my memories of family members who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. I also wanted this work to stand outside of my personal experience and to allow people to read it however they want. Part of my process is like collage, which is how we experience the world now: We get disparate pieces of information all the time and construct a narrative out of them. I'm trying to understand how all of us maintain a sense of who we are—how fragile that is, and how it constantly changes.

My grandfather was an avid collector, especially of minerals. Long after he couldn't recognize family members, he could still describe specific samples in his collection: where and how they were extracted, their scientific names. These moments of presence in a vast sea of loss allowed me to feel I still knew him, setting me on this path to learn what his experience was like. As this four-year project developed, it became a meandering meditation on loss, but also on hope.

I started by looking at samples from my grandfather's collection and researching where in the world giant crystal formations exist. I came across a crystal cavern in Merkers, Germany, and knew I had to film there. The cavern's interior is shaped like a hollow negative of the hippocampus, the seat of memory in the brain. The crystals that adhere to the cavern's wall have an uncanny resemblance to the tau tangles and amyloid proteins in a brain with Alzheimer's. I was also intrigued to put myself into a geode, inside a potential object of my grandfather's collection. The cavern is half a mile underground; it's extremely warm, and it's particulate, so I had to wear a respirator. I was submerged for eight hours a day and became completely disoriented; I had to be helped to find my way out.

This footage is intercut with scenes shot at the University of Houston's neuroscience department, where they are researching seizures. When the brain is in seizure, it is in a hyperactive state, which is surprisingly like what happens to the brain of someone with Alzheimer's. The piece also includes footage of an elderly collector at a gem and mineral show who has an intense focus and clarity when looking at crystals but becomes lost when trying to make his way through the overwhelming space.

Sound is important to my work. Part of the sound track of this piece draws from the country singer Glen Campbell, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. With his family's support, he continued touring for as long as he could. I found a video online of one of his last performances. He's singing "Wichita Lineman." It's heartbreaking; when singing he's so present, and then he wanders away

from the mic and he's completely lost. I've worked with musicians and composers over the years, so I contacted some and asked if they knew that song. I asked that they not to look up the music, but just play it from memory. Collaboration across disciplines has been central to my work, but never more so than here. I'm fascinated by science. I thought its methodology was so seductive because it seemed sterile and quantifiable, while my process is not. But now I know that's absolutely false! To keep going forward in either field, you don't need an answer; an answer closes a door. You want to learn what the next question is you should ask. I make art for that next question.