

# A CRYSTAL GROTTO

**In a new multi-screen video installation, Janet Biggs presents visual parallels for the profound disorientation of Alzheimer's disease.**

**by Faye Hirsch**

Still from Janet Biggs's *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, four-channel video installation, approx. 8¼ minutes.

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**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**  
Videos from the exhibition "Echo of the Unknown," screening throughout October in the 1st Biennale Art Nomad at various locations in France and Italy, and in January 2016 at Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. The entire exhibition travels to the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, Ontario, Nov. 10-Dec. 17.

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ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE is a frequent topic in the news these days. Although clinical research has not yet yielded a cure, the quest is of unusual concern to an aging population otherwise oblivious to the finer points of brain science. There is cultural interest as well, with at least a dozen movies on the subject appearing over the past decade, each narrating its own tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, partly spurred by the occurrence of dementia in her own family, New York-based video artist Janet Biggs recently completed an ambitious multipart project that examines the science and emotional toll of Alzheimer's. Three years ago, researching geological crystals (which she thought resembled plaques in afflicted brain tissue), Biggs stumbled upon Web images of a complex of salt mines near the town of Merkers in Thuringia, Germany. The complex contains a grotto filled with giant halite formations, located some 2,600 feet below the earth's surface. Struck by the morphological coincidence—as she saw it—between the cavern's shape and that of a brain's hippocampus, she resolved to film the mines, notorious (thanks in part to the 2014 movie *The Monuments Men*) as a former hiding place for Nazi gold and art, along with personal items confiscated from concentration camp victims.

Biggs's adventure at Merkers features in the most ambitious of three videos exhibited last spring at the Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston. The show, "Echo of the Unknown" (all works 2015), included the three videos (one, two and four channels), a separate sound piece and a sculpture.<sup>2</sup> Each video offers multiple self-contained narratives, and Biggs has manipulated the soundtrack and visual channels to selectively repeat, mirror and otherwise "echo" elements within and among the individual works. Her documentary footage was shot with sparkling clarity, but her arrangement of the various segments has little to do with fact. As an ensemble, the videos provoke in the viewer a constant sense of nagging recall, suggesting a correlation with dementia's lapses and arbitrary connections. In experiencing the work, one is forced to feel its content to an unnerving degree.

Like the resonances among the videos' distinct parts, their themes and formal devices echo previous aspects of Biggs's 30-year career. Most obvious is her tendency to journey to extreme locales—for example, to the frigid Svalbard Islands in the Norwegian Arctic Circle for a 2010-11 trio of videos, or to the Ijen volcanic crater in





Two stills from *Breathing Without Air*, 2014, video, approx. 5¼ minutes.

Opposite, stills from *The Persistence of Hope*, 2014, two-channel video installation, approx. 7½ minutes.

Following spread, view of the four-channel video installation *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015, at the Blaffer Art Museum, Houston. Photo Janet Biggs.

East Java, Indonesia, for *A Step on the Sun* (2012), her harrowingly beautiful work about sulfur miners.<sup>3</sup> Also notable is her creative approach to audio, always key to the meaning and mood of a piece. Having read that the pop singer Glenn Campbell is suffering from Alzheimer's, Biggs commissioned two musicians to compose riffs on his 1968 hit "Wichita Lineman," requesting that they "remember" the melody without reiterating its specifics. Incorporated into all three videos, the resulting remakes of the tune—two on cello and one on guitar—tug at our memories, suggesting a familiar song without allowing us to name it.<sup>4</sup> The effect is haunting.

AT THE BLAFFER, the videos were wall-projected in three darkened rooms, beginning with the single-channel *Breathing Without Air* (approx. 5¼ minutes). We first see an abandoned modernist athletic center in Marl, Germany; we peer at its now-ruined Olympic pool, through windows overgrown with foliage. From there we cut to a mineral fair in Denver, where we trail an elderly gem collector as he wanders from booth to booth, periodically examining specimens and often looking distracted. Suddenly, we join a kayak athlete strenuously

training in an indoor pool (not that Marl). The camera is attached to the kayak itself, so that, with the athlete, we repeatedly dip underwater and, after a struggle, gasp for breath above. At points—alternating with silence and ambient sounds—we hear a cello (plucked by the composer William Martina) playing remnants of "Wichita Lineman" in a lonely vein; at the end we see the old man wandering off in silence.

*The Persistence of Hope*, a 7½-minute, two-channel projection shown in the second room, alternates scenes of brain researchers at work in their lab (among their actions, removing tissue specimens from a freezer) and hummingbirds hovering at a feeder on a beautiful summer day. The footage of each is seen successively, with the two screens either mirroring shots or staggering action through lags and close-ups. At 4 minutes, we see a series of animated computer images of diseased brain tissue; at 5, the scene of a woman in the Arctic removing her glove and squeezing droplets from a fistful of ice. The two screens split into different subjects only toward the very end, as a close-up of the woman's hand, water trickling out, plays alongside that of a flitting hummingbird. In this work, a different "Wichita Lineman" variation (composed and performed by Daniel Lewis) is played on the guitar. Speaking at the opening, Biggs told a story about a naturalist uncle who, when he died, was found to have been storing dead hummingbirds in his freezer. His wife had Alzheimer's.

The most ambitious of the videos, a four-channel, 8-minute projection titled *Can't Find My Way Home*, brings back the old gem man along with new brain lab footage, and introduces the Merkers grotto and the artist. We see Biggs accessing the mine via elevator. She is dressed in an orange protective suit, a helmet and a gas mask that conceals her face except for the eyes. Next we speed along a tunnel road via a camera attached to the front of a vehicle, which places us—much as with the kayak—in the thick of the action, feeling the long, gloomy and somewhat claustrophobic descent as the road slants downward. This footage alternates with that of the lab; Biggs explains that the experiment she was taping had to do with a phenomenon of Alzheimer's in which brain synapses misfire. Remarkably, scientists have been able to record the sound, and, disconcertingly, we hear it rat-tat-tatting, not unlike the sputtering of a Geiger counter, as we watch her trudging toward the crystal grotto. When Biggs enters the ominously enchanting world of the cavern, all goes silent for a second or two, and a solo cello (Martina again, this time bowing) plays yet another plaintive version of the Glenn Campbell song. Biggs examines the cave in apparent wonderment, the footage alternating this time with images of the old man examining small crystals through a loupe.

At the opening, Biggs said it was so extraordinarily hot in the cave that, after a time, she began to lose her bearings. We see her both up close, touching the giant crystals, and from a distance, dwarfed by the cavern. In







Top, view of the three-channel video installation *BuSpar*, 1999, 1-3-minute loops, at the Tampa Museum of Art.

Above, still from *A Step on the Sun*, 2012, five-channel video installation, approx. 9½ minutes.

Opposite, stills from *Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015.

close-ups, we watch her eyes going in and out of focus, and we immediately understanding her condition and possible danger. The music stops, and the brain sounds fire up again.

Mines, athletic training, dangerous conditions, cameras mounted remotely—all these components have occurred previously in videos by Biggs. But of all the earlier traces resurfacing in “Echoes of the Unknown” the most poignant have to do with her interest in mental states and their attendant science. The artist’s fascination with issues of acuity and perception dates back more than 15 years. In her three-channel video *BuSpar* (1999), the middle screen presents a monologue by Biggs’s autistic aunt, flanked by screens showing the head and shoulders of a cantering white horse. (The work’s title refers to the drug her aunt was taking.)

Two years later, Biggs created a three-channel installation called *Risperidone*, after an antipsychotic pharmaceutical. Alternating three different athletic feats with hallucinatory shots of a rain forest, and confusing our senses with overlapping soundtracks (one of them blasting heavy metal), Biggs stated that she wished the work to imitate drug-induced psychosis.<sup>5</sup> Clearly motivated by a profound empathy with human affliction, Biggs

nonetheless conveys her message in a manner that can be quite unsettling, demanding more than simply passive contemplation on the part of a viewer.

Avoiding the direct representation of a person suffering from the disease (although her editing of *Breathing Without Air* evokes disorientation), Biggs’s Alzheimer’s trilogy urges the viewer to notice his or her own imperfect exercise of memory. Moreover, she embodies in her disparate images the paradoxes of a disease that transforms loved ones into increasingly distant semblances of themselves. Posted as an advertisement at the entrance to the mineral show in *Breathing Without Air* is a bright yellow air dancer in the shape of a man buffeted madly about by the wind. At the mercy of the elements, the figure becomes a metaphor for the loss of control that dementia poses, both to the sufferers and to those around them. For members of a caretaking family, the person with dementia can feel both remote and threatening—the genetic shape of their own futures. Empathy, loneliness and fear are the sometimes conflicting emotions we are made to feel in “Echoes of the Unknown,” and they will ring true to anyone who has witnessed the course of the illness.

Biggs gathers and shapes her metaphors through striking and unlikely juxtapositions and image sequences; this has always been the essence of her aesthetic. The various threads may not even make sense to her at the start, but through editing them she creates remarkably cohesive works. In “Echoes of the Unknown,” her by now finely honed technique has yielded a particularly apposite result. Biggs ensnares us in the complexities of this most intimate pathology. Alzheimer’s becomes a site as mysterious as the crystal grotto, yet as inextricable from the body as our own brain tissue. ○

1. Notable among these—especially for the acting talent displayed—are the Julianne Moore vehicle *Still Alice* (2014); *The Savages* (2007), with Laura Linney and Philip Seymour Hoffman; *Away from Her* (2006), starring Julie Christie; *Aurora Borealis* (2005), with Donald Sutherland and Louise Fletcher; and *The Notebook* (2004), featuring James Garner and Gena Rowlands.
2. Curated by Janet Phelps, “Echo of the Unknown” was on view at the Blaffer Art Museum, University of Houston, Jan. 17–Mar. 21, 2015. The 84-page catalogue contains essays by Phelps, Barbara Polla and Jean-Philippe Rossignol.
3. For an excellent essay on the three Arctic videos, *Fade to White, In the Cold Edge and Brightness All Around*, see Nancy Princenthal, “Janet Biggs: Mining the North,” in *No Limits: Janet Biggs*, Tampa Museum of Art, 2011–12, pp. 58–63. In summer 2014, Biggs traveled to the Eritrean border of the Danakil Depression, the hottest and lowest place on the planet, which is replete with active volcanoes and considered uninhabitable to all but the soldiers who defend it. The footage she gathered there is part of a work in progress.
4. For a fourth, somewhat distinct, sound installation, heard in headphones along a darkened corridor, Biggs wrote lyrics for a musical composition by Barney McAll, performed by the University of Houston choir and titled *The Unanswered Question (once touched, remains unknown)*, after the 1908 piece by Charles Ives.
5. Faye Hirsch, “Janet Biggs at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,” *Art in America*, July 2003, p. 99.

