



## Janet Biggs Investigates Survival through an Innovative Two-Channel Video

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Janet Biggs, *The Persistence of Hope* (video still), 2015. Two-channel high definition video installation (sound, color), run time: 7:24. With Arctic footage from Katja Aglert's *Winter Event-antifreeze*, 2009 (filmed by Janet Biggs).

Many video artists use two channels to show two stories unfolding simultaneously. In her installation “*The Persistence of Hope*,” recently on view at CONNERSMITH. in Washington, DC, the artist Janet Biggs offers a sophisticated take on the same idea, using side by side panels to reveal subtler connections between two narratives.

With a running time of just over seven minutes, *The Persistence of Hope* is a two-channel high definition video installation with an original soundtrack inspired by the music of country singer Glen Campbell. The project brings together images from two seemingly disparate stories. One is a travel narrative of sorts, featuring Arctic footage shot by Biggs for fellow artist Katja Aglert's *Winter Event-antifreeze* (2009). The

other, involving scenes from hospitals and medical laboratories, feels more like a medical documentary with a personal bent—it is, to paraphrase the artist, an exploration of memory loss and of a family’s struggle with the challenges of Alzheimer’s disease.

It’s worth noting that while moving images from both stories are cut together in succession, Biggs doesn’t show them side by side for most of the film. Rather she employs the dual panels in unusual ways, yet still effectively and engagingly communicates the two stories. Sometimes, the panels present mirror images; other times, the screens display related but distinct images in parallel, like details of hovering hummingbirds, beeping machinery, medical samples in a freezer. Still other moments in the film show the same subject in varying degrees of detail. A scientist peering into a telescope, for example, with one side zoomed out to show the laboratory, while the other side shows a close-up of the scientist’s face and the eyepiece.

Watching these scenes, the viewer constantly moves back and forth between two worlds, searching for the unifying link between them. The central question seems to be “Why present these two stories together?” Some of the comparisons can be made readily, especially the parallels in regard to the sensory experience each video conveys. There’s a coldness to the sterile medical equipment, and, of course, a coldness and sterility to the icy geography of the Arctic. There’s beauty and vitality in the hummingbird, and also, rather more surprisingly, in the colorful vials in the laboratory freezer, and to a greater extent, to the vibrant organisms that the scientist views through his microscope. Perhaps Biggs is suggesting that there’s as much humanity and life in a medical research facility as there is in a remote snowy landscape.

At the end of the film, the two stories finally come together. Biggs displays, on the left, a close-up of a woman’s hand clutching a small piece of ice, the cold melting water seeping through her bare fingers. On the right, a hummingbird drinks water from the tube of a birdfeeder, his wings fluttering so quickly that they’re barely distinguishable. It’s a gentle reminder of the film’s title and purpose: an investigation of the universal struggle to survive, and the challenge of persevering in a harsh landscape, whether it be physical or emotional.

—Bridget Gleeson

*All works with Arctic footage from Katja Aglert’s Winter Event-antifreeze, 2009 (filmed by Janet Biggs).*

*“The Persistence of Hope” is on view at CONNERSMITH., Washington, DC, Oct. 14th – Nov. 30th, 2015.*