

ART PAPERS

M A G A Z I N E

Janet Biggs "Girls and Horses"

by Martha Schwendener

Almost every girl knows one: the "horsey girl" who collects everything equine (pictures of horses, plastic horse figures), reads every work of juvenile fiction with a horse theme, obsesses over "National Velvet" and "International Velvet" and, depending on economics and location, rides horses or owns one. Later, subsequent to adolescence and undergraduate introductory readings of Freud, we may laugh at the memory of these childhood figures, now mentally transformed into pre-pubescent nymphomaniacs and Catherine the Greats, but their image is indelible. In her new show, "Girls and Horses," Janet Biggs explores the relationship between girls and horses, creating work that is more sophisticated and sympathetic than the usual, snickering analysis of girls who devote an important segment of their childhood to idealized reverie of a particular animal.

To create her installation, Biggs lined eight monitors along the center of the gallery. Each one shows a video loop of a little girl (infant through five or six years old) riding a fake or surrogate horse: coin-operated, carousel, stick horse or the back, shoulders, knee, or foot of a parent playing "horsey." A video projection that travels in the dark around the four walls of the gallery depicts a nine-year-old on a real white horse. In the rear gallery is a large scale C-print of a pre-adolescent girl in her bedroom, surrounded by every conceivable article of horse paraphernalia. Standing among her horse show prize ribbons, books and figures, in front her saddle, in full riding regalia, the photograph, like her installation-like arrangement is evidence of her obsession; the private space of her bedroom doubles as a shrine to a platonic notion of the horse.

Children and childhood fantasies and fears have played a large role in Biggs' work to date. Her continued analysis of childhood—child subculture and fetishes—is particularly interesting in the case of horses and female children. After all, horses were present in art as in everyday life in earlier centuries—animals served as transportation, companions, and objects of myth or fantasy. Usually considered wild beasts to be tamed or broken, horses were depicted at different times as controllable, as in David's depiction

of Napoleon crossing the St. Bernard Pass (Napoleon confidently guides his horse through a treacherous mountain pass) or beyond human control, as in Gericault's Romantic painting "Mounted Officer of the Imperial Guard," in which a terrified horse in the middle of battle symbolizes a world out of control. The equation of horses with the instinctual, base, and bodily, as opposed to the rational intelligent mind was extended to the system of patriarchy: women were like horses, in need of harnessing, breaking, and guidance administered by their male proprietors.

In spite of the disturbing history of female/horse subjugation and the enigma surrounding the Cult of the Horsey Girls, Biggs' installation is a playful, non-exploitative view into the recreation and joy of female children. Peals of laughter ring through the gallery as girls trot, canter, and gallop on the backs of electronic or human horses. There is the gentle association of riding with (childhood and adult) sexual pleasure and the big question that hangs over the show seems to be if female pre-adolescent interest in horses is somehow inextricably tied to biology—the proximity of female genitalia to the moving mass below and all that. Biggs' images run the gamut, from loving communion between parent and child

and happy individual play to the serious face of the-girl in the still photo and the nine-year-old rider who circles the gallery anonymously, disallowing human connection. The overriding picture, however, is one of happy girls consumed, to greater and lesser extents, by a preoccupation, at an age when they are presumably unscathed by society, which often still treats them like wild, exotic beasts whose bodies are more important than their minds.

The immediately obvious difference between Biggs and Diana Thater is that, unlike Biggs, Thater is a video artist first, and foremost—one whose medium above all else defines how she approaches her subject matter and art making. Her current show, "China, Crayons, & Molly Numbers 1 through 10" also explores relationships between animals and people, but video predicates all contact with Thater's subjects, it is the primary subject of her work, "China" (1995), for instance, is a large-scaled installation about two trained wolves used for Hollywood movies. Six projectors throw video-taped images of wolves named China and Shilo with their trainers against the four walls of the front gallery. The images are color coded in the different shades that make up the video image: red, green, and blue (the primary colors) and yellow, magenta, and



Janet Biggs "Girls and Horses" (details), 1996, 10 channel video installation

cyan (the secondary colors). As the viewer moves around the gallery wall, blocking out parts of the installation, imprinting new images on the scenes in the same way the trainers attempt to imprint or re-condition the consciousness of the captive wolves.

Thater's subjects are sad and poignant, but mitigated by the intense formalism of her work. "Shilo, A Confusion of Prints", and "From China to Shilo, Part II", three works grouped together to confound the notion of an individual video, use the same footage as "China". Here, however, separate monitors placed on the floor flash images of the wolves at different speeds, again in different colors, making them appear even more ghostlike. Thater's distortion of the "real" looking video images like all good formal art, makes us question our perception and, indirectly, our urge to impose order—subjugate animals, etc.—on the world around us.

This is succinctly, if sadly, stated in "Scarlet McCaw Crayons" a black and white projection of a parrot standing on a stick held by a hand belonging to an on-screen person. The person twists the stick, and the parrot lifts its wings to stay on the stick. Slowed down, the video reveals a subtle, but painful story of captivity and cruelty.

"Perspective Is An Energy" leaves the practice of videotaping images behind and concentrates on the light and energy of video itself. The flashing light on the screens of the four monitors arranged around a round table doesn't do much to further the thesis in the title of the work except demonstrate that, in this day and age, perspective is energy, rather than a grid, orthogonal, and a vanishing point.

Thater's work is definitely more ambitious than Biggs' from a video standpoint, but the juxtaposition of these two shows is interesting, given the use of a common medium and vaguely common subject matter. Biggs, a first time user of video, at least for exhibition, fares well, given her sensitivity to subject matter, and the elegant way she elaborates on it, building a visually solid show around a basic theme. Thater's projections and flashing screens are a visual tour de force, a display of technical virtuosity that overshadows the birds, wolves or bison spread throughout her work. Meaning with Thater is assembled abstractly, scattered like crumbs around the corners of her work rather than presented plainly from the start. Thater is the formalist of the pair, Biggs the realist. It seems strange to describe video artists who work in the theoretically uncoded frontier of art, in traditional terms. Formalism, after all, grew out of avant-garde painting and sculpture that considered realism and

representation the most retrograde and base of forms. What Biggs and Thater prove is that video accommodates the diverse approaches and shrugs off the yoke of technical mastery attendant with earlier art forms; significant work can be made by the virtuoso of the medium and by the neophyte. ■