



Hit Me with your Rhythm Stick, 2006. Photo: Ian Rubinstein. Courtesy: Clarie Oliver Gallery, New York

JANET BIGGS

CATHY BYRD

'I'VE seen things you people wouldn't believe... All those moments will be lost... in time, like tears... in the rain.' Roy Batty, *Blade Runner*, 1982.

How could the dying words of a deeply evil science-fiction film character from 1982 evoke an oblique sense of hope? It happens in a two-channel video installation when a blind equestrian speaks them aloud. 'It was a moment meant to reveal more about Anne-Greta [the sightless rider] and by extension more about ourselves,' explains American artist Janet Biggs.

Tears in the Rain (2006) is very much the performance of an inner dialogue. On to this work Biggs projects her fascination with the cult film *Blade Runner*, a disturbing dreamlike portrayal of the future, owing much to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), also a favourite of the artist: 'I've always been a closet fan of cyperpunk and science fiction. Philip K Dick and Ridley Scott hit on themes that interest me... what makes us human (empathy, relationships to animals, constructed memories)

as well as hybridisation, globalisation, our role in climate change, genetic engineering and drug-created enhancements of identity.'

To create *Tears* the New York-based artist gained private access to champion equestrian Anne-Greta Schricker in Germany, the Citadel's elite rifle corps and polar bears at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. The cadets practice amazing precision in a perfectly controlled environment. Like a caged rare creature, the regal Anna-Greta manoeuvres her steed within the confines of a great hall. The brutal architecture that encloses the bears' cerulean pool adds to questions about captivity and free will. Biggs' subjects are situated at the problematic intersection of beauty, longing and restraint.

Biggs creates a metaphysical space where the rapport among seemingly unrelated gestures, creatures and settings seems natural. In many ways, her art represents her certainty about her own perceptions and her anticipation of the



Clockwise, from left: *Like Tears in Rain* (production still: *Summerall Guard in Quad*), 2006; *Like Tears in Rain* (Production still: polar bears), 2006; *Like Tears in Rain* (production still: Anne-Greta Schricker on Dionero), 2006. All images courtesy: Claire Oliver Gallery, New York

viewer's empathetic response. This solipsistic perspective is at the heart of *Tears* and reveals itself in other recent work that wavers at the edge of hope. The artist admits her dilemma: 'As I don't believe in absolutes, I'm provoked by both dystopia and utopia and the navigation between the two. While I probably indulge more thoughts of an increasingly dystopian world, my earnest optimism rears its head too.'

The artist recently ventured from controlled video installation into public performance, where she lays down a loose framework and brings performers, sound and large-scale video projections together in a site-specific context. In each spectacle she watches as her original thoughts are interpreted by the performers and become new moments of discovery. A somewhat uncertain outcome appears essential to this new dimension of art making.

Presented in a hotel pool during Art Basel Miami this December, *Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick* (2006) involved a rock-and-roll drummer poolside, two female drummers positioned in the shallow end, a pair of bejewelled synchronised swimmers and a 10 by 12-foot projected video. The artist's attraction to synchronised swimming, spectacle and the performance of gender roles came from watching Busby Berkeley films. 'I wanted to use hyper-stylised sports, synchronisation and campy costumes, but, unlike Berkeley, I treat my performers as elements in a collage, combining them with other fragmented images and actions,' she explains. 'I want to literally and figuratively turn expectations upside down.'

The late Keith Moon, the wildly obsessive and idiosyncratic drummer in The Who, motivated the instrumental aspect of *Hit Me*. (Although in Miami the police and public noise constraints effectively dampened the artist's intent to explore the extreme pursuit of percussive perfection.) For Biggs, referencing male rock

musicians represents a romantic idea of masculinity, and in this work the same performative aspects of gender echo in the sensual choreography of the swimmers.

Carefully edited movement and sound are integral to the artist's formal compositions. Early videos that concentrated on the visual and the inherent sound of the images have segued to more expansive, dimensional concepts. Biggs began collaborating with Steve White, a member of the Blue Man Group, to design soundscapes for each piece. She opened yet another door when she introduced live percussion in her latest performance.

Exhibiting her work widely in the US and Europe, Biggs has a history of complicating the contemporary video genre. Since the 1990s, when she turned from painting to moving pictures, her series of dramatic room-sized multi-channel installation projects have commented on female sexual sublimation and male dominance, societal demands for conformity and the pathos of ageing and mental illness. The videos juxtapose magnificent close-ups of trained horses and captive polar bears with their human counterparts. Exposing the equally controlled behaviour of animals and people, she articulates their relationships. The new work intensifies early themes, looking at obsession, commitment and loss, while continuing to observe and question layers of participation in societies. 'My projects develop in different ways, but there's always a competitive or performative aspect to them that draws me in. Right now, I'm waiting for the snow to fall so I can head north to train with dog-sled teams.'

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