

## List of Works

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*Can't Find My Way Home*, 2015  
4-channel, high definition video installation with sound  
Running time: 8:19 min (looped)  
Unique piece

*I Can't Remember, I Can't Forget*, 2015  
Two halite crystals shown on pedestal  
Each crystal 2" x 2" x 2"

*Written on Wax*, 2016  
2-channel HD video installation with sound, 16 x 9 format  
Running time: 5:35 min  
Unique with 1AP

Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York



# ADMIT EVERYONE

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November 3–December 17, 2016  
University of Waterloo Art Gallery  
Curator: Ivan Jurakic  
Installers: Barb Hobot, Gareth Lichty  
Design: Scott Lee

This exhibition has been  
organized by Blaffer Art Museum  
at the University of Houston

University of Waterloo Art Gallery  
East Campus Hall 1239

🕒 Tuesday to Saturday 12:00–5:00 pm

📍 263 Phillip Street, Waterloo, ON

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# Echo of the Unknown

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**Janet Biggs**

**uwag**



# Echo of the Unknown

A woman in orange coveralls, hardhat and respirator descends into a mine. A technician prepares cultures in a laboratory. An elderly gentleman wanders amidst the vendors at a gem and mineral convention. Each scene unfolds as part of Janet Biggs' *Can't Find My Way Home*, an ambitious four-channel video installation that demonstrates the artist's fascination with extremes: from remote environments to mundane encounters.



Over the past decade, Biggs' travels have led her to explore a wide range of remote locations from the Arctic Circle to the Afar Triangle in Africa. Biggs' videos reveal a fascination with exceptional individuals working under extreme conditions. Often focusing on athletes or miners, her videos underline a compulsion with challenging herself both physically and mentally.

The central framing sequence of *Can't Find My Way Home* was filmed in a remarkable cavern at the Merkers salt mine in Thuringia, Germany. Discovered in the 1980s, the crystal grotto is located some 800 metres below ground, requiring a 20-kilometre underground round trip to visit.<sup>1</sup> The resulting video encapsulates several disparate points of view. The footage of the artist descending into the mine is initially juxtaposed with that of a technician preparing samples for an electron microscope. As the artist enters the crystal cavern, the secondary footage shifts to that of an elderly man, a gem collector examining crystals using a handheld optic. By cutting between these seemingly unrelated activities the artist tactfully mirrors the actions of one event with another to create a conceptual circuit. Taken in tandem, the scenes gradually align to form an affective composition that conflates the extraordinary landscape of the cavern with the commonplace exchange occurring at the gem show.

The sculptural component, *I Can't Remember, I Can't Forget* features a pair of large halite crystals lit from below displayed on a museum plinth. The crystals function as artifacts of the events documented in *Can't Find My Way Home*. One is an actual crystal retrieved from the Merkers cavern and the other a synthetic replica grown in a laboratory at the University of Houston. The artist leaves us to consider which one is real and which is false, or if this perceived difference even matters.

*Written in Wax* is a third component: a split-screen installation addressing the artist's own struggles with memory. The left monitor shows the artist hooked up to a device that is used to administer electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The right monitor is populated by an inventory of family photos followed by scenes culled from various videos produced by the artist. This imagery is interspersed by the regular appearance of a plus sign (+), a common symbol for addition, positive voltage and tolerance. The cycle concludes with footage of the artist learning to trick ride a horse. Appropriating the use of electric shocks in psychotherapy, the artist self-administered a jolt of electricity each time she was shown an image of horse's hooves, a stand-in for her earliest memory.<sup>2</sup> The final scenes of the artist on horseback echo the equestrian images of her family and embody an attempt to reconcile these childhood memories within her practice.

Biggs' narratives unfold deliberately, revealing themselves over repeated viewings. Her use of split-screen, mirroring and bifurcation are a recurring motif. These unexpected shifts between scenes open up narrative possibilities that allow the artist to experiment, switching from traditional documentary to an experiential mode of constructing meaning with the intention of provoking a more nuanced psychological impact.

Her approach to visual narrative is not unlike that of a composer using counterpoint or polyphony, a style of musical composition using two or more simultaneous but relatively independent melodies. Biggs' contrast of ambient sounds, the staccato rhythms of an ECT device and stringed instruments, frames the disparate visual elements in each video. Performed by musical collaborator William Martina, the resonating tones of the cello in both *Can't Find My Way Home* and *Written on Wax* succeed in conveying a deeply felt sense of mourning and loss.



*Can't Find My Way Home* was in part inspired by her grandfather, himself an amateur mineral collector who in his later years struggled with Alzheimer's disease. Over time he could not remember the names of his grandchildren yet retained the ability to recall the myriad names of minerals that he had collected. In this context, the expedition into the cavern becomes a symbolic journey through the mind of her grandfather. This parallel is further underlined by images of brain scans visible in the laboratory scenes and the elderly gem collector who becomes increasingly disoriented as the video progresses.

In discussion, Biggs notes the anecdotal similarities between the narrow elongated curvature of the interior of the Merkers' cavern and the hippocampus, a small organ located above the brain stem in the medial temporal lobe.<sup>3</sup> As part of the limbic system, this organ is closely associated with memory and spatial navigation.

It also appears to be one of the first regions of the brain to suffer damage during Alzheimer's, whose early symptoms include short-term memory loss and disorientation.<sup>4</sup> The artist's intuitive connection between crystals and cognitive function infers a causal link between activities occurring at the macro- and microscopic level: the deep time of the cavern brushing up against the mundane goings on at the gem show. As above, so below.

*Echo of the Unknown* evokes an existential crisis of memory. By exploring the cavern, Biggs not only echoes her grandfather's passion for crystals but also confronts her own apprehensions regarding the forfeiture of self. She honours this personal tragedy by transforming the loss into a journey of self-discovery that invites us to consider the limits of our own self-consciousness. In the end, we must all face that inscrutable cavern alone.

— Ivan Jurakic