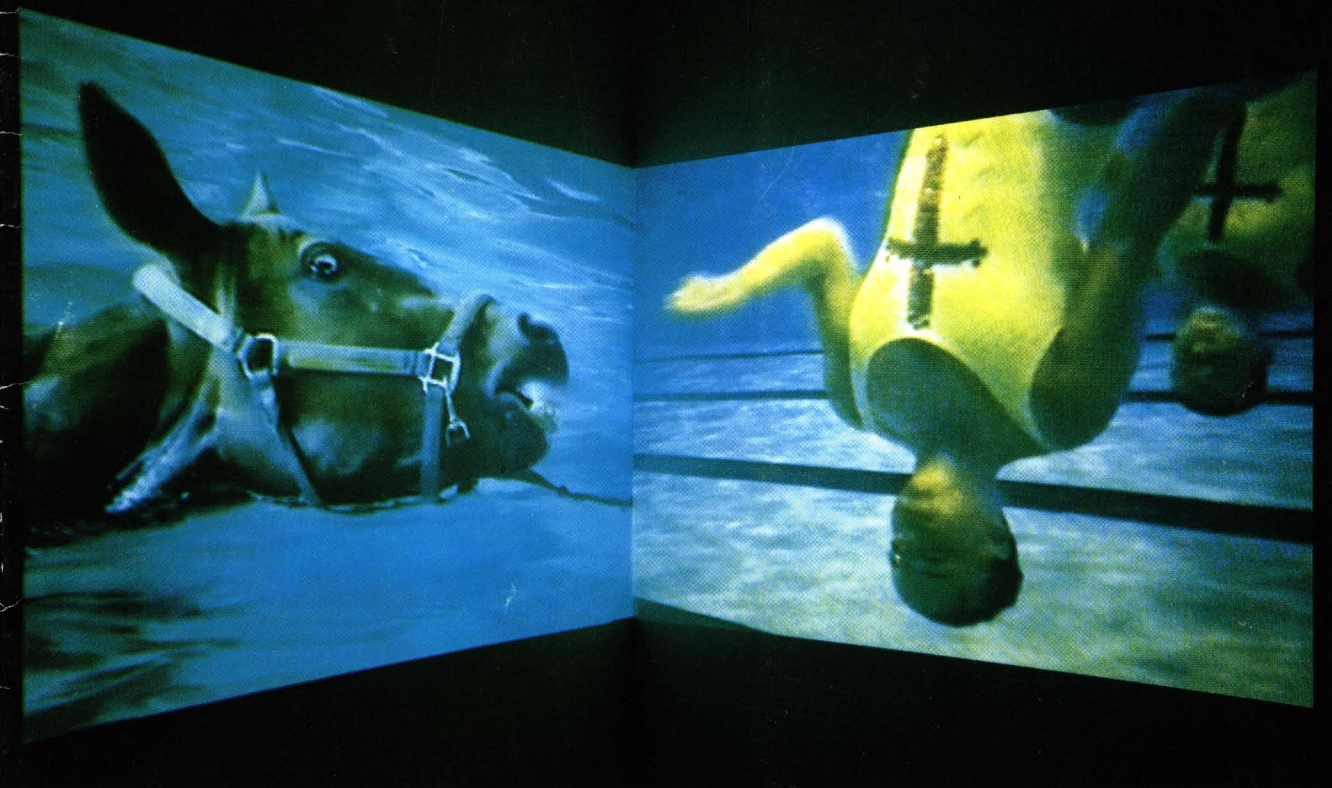


UP DOWNS

Janet Biggs



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As we step into the darkened gallery—filled with peals of young girls' laughter—we are faced with a large color photograph of an adolescent girl in riding attire. Standing in the middle of her bedroom, the girl is surrounded by prize ribbons, horse posters, plastic horse figurines, and every imaginable article of horse paraphernalia. Careful observers can spot prize ribbons from 1972, hinting at the artist's own teenage passion for horses. *Celeste in Her Bedroom* thus sets the stage for Janet Biggs' exhibition, *UP DOWNS*, a representation of female desire and pleasure rarely seen in contemporary art. Employing the horse as the classic signifier of female sexual sublimation, *UP DOWNS* represents an examination of the "performative" construction of gender. Biggs elaborates on these topics in her video installations, *Girls and Horses* and *Water Training*. Projected in the cinemalike environment of the gallery, the installations enact a visual dialogue about the relationship between still and moving images and women—as both subjects and objects of the gaze. Shown together for the first time at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, *Girls and Horses* and *Water Training* also demonstrate Biggs' growing fluency in and reliance on the video medium.

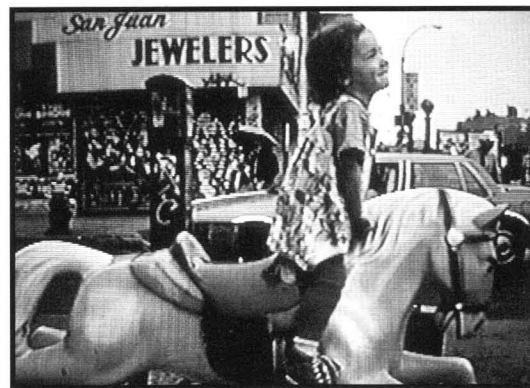
Biggs received her formal training in painting and sculpture and then, like many other artists of the 1980s, went on to work in the installation format, often employing serial imagery. Biggs created multimedia installations that included cribs, stuffed toys, night lights, and hundreds of baby shoes and focused on the more difficult aspects of childhood. Issues of security and insecurity were central themes in Biggs' earlier work in which childhood fantasies and fears loomed large. Her 1993 installation, *Crib*, included a baby's crib on stilts surrounded by a



protective ring of stuffed toy horses and color photographs of night lights. The distorted scale of the crib and its similarity to a prison cell inevitably triggered memories of childhood confinement and powerlessness. For other installations of this period, Biggs stuffed and stitched hooded baby rompers—often face- or headless—à la Mike

Kelley and Larry Mantello to create a child's sense of the world, comforting and frightening at the same time. Her *Night Light Room* of 1994 commented on the difference between an adult's and a child's view of security. The artist surrounded a small rocking chair with a variety of night lights on the floor, among which the viewer was encouraged to walk. In this way, the installation produced a sense of disorientation and anxiety in the adult viewer reminiscent of what a child might experience when confronted by the same leering faces of the night lights in his or her bedroom.

However, Biggs' interest in the psychology of children is not an end in itself but, rather, a means to examine fantasy, identity, and pleasure in the adult viewer. Through the contact with students in the semiotics department of Brown University during her graduate studies at the Rhode Island School of Design, Biggs was introduced to a body of theoretical writing that led her to examine the construction of gendered identities during childhood. Using memories of her own childhood counterbal-



anced by other children's accounts, Biggs exposes in her mixed-media installations structural formations at the level of the unconscious that go beyond autobiography. Thus making use of the tools of psychoanalytic criticism, Biggs' growing interest in the moving image and the cinema does not come as a surprise. As noted film historian Annette Kuhn wrote in her entry on psychoanalysis and film in *The Women's Companion to International Film*, "the idea of films as dreams and the cinema industry as a 'dream factory'—hinting at the exploitation of forces we do not understand—must be almost as old as the medium itself."¹ In a recent phone conversation, Biggs stated that her switch to video was "a very conscious choice" but that "she is not committed to video as a medium."² In other words, video is the best tool for Biggs to express her current ideas. Many other contemporary artists move freely between media in similar ways, using whichever is most effective to get their message across.

The use of sculptural elements such as television sets on pedestals and suspended rotating shelves with video projectors links *Girls and Horses* to Biggs' earlier mixed-media installations. The television monitors show parents playing "horsey" with their daughters in a variety of ways, while



two large video projections of a nine-year-old girl on a huge white horse circle the gallery. In this way, *Girls and Horses* examines issues of power, control, and sexual autonomy in which the horse is an object of fascination and fantasy for girls. Until recently, horseback

riding was one of the few sanctioned activities for girls to experience and express power. As one reviewer remarked, “Biggs doesn’t so much deny or deconstruct the connection between women and horses as amplify and subvert its cultural meaning through visual delirium.”³ Half the monitors face the audience; half are turned in the opposite direction. Girls ride on their parents’ shoulders, on carousels, pogo sticks, and plastic rocking horses. In order to see all the videos on the monitors, the viewer is forced to circle around them, mirroring the horse’s laps around the gallery. Thus cast in the role of Amanda’s trainer, as she circles the gallery on Diplomat, the viewer becomes an active participant in the performance. However, Biggs’ *mise en scène* also creates a sense of confinement and surveillance, reminiscent of her earlier installations. The low production values of the video images on the monitors, traditionally associated with home movies and surveillance tapes, reiterate this sense. The deliberate pattern of the monitors in the center of the gallery results in a continuous shifting of the role of the viewer from spectator to performer to spectator. Also, by participating actively in the installation, the viewer makes him- or herself available to the objectifying gaze of other spectators, carrying different implications for male and female viewers. Challenging a model of signification in which masculinity and activity, femininity and passivity seem symmetrically balanced, Biggs thus blurs boundaries between passive object and active subject of the gaze.

Steeped in feminist film history and criticism, it is important to Biggs that in this culture of hypervisibility her works of art engage and further theories related to the representation of women and the reception of film texts, especially for a female audience. Laura Mulvey’s by now classic 1975 article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” suggests that the construction of the spectator in Hollywood films is inevitably “masculine” and that the object of his look is “feminine.”⁴ While Mulvey’s argument is at the root of any psychoanalytic discussion of female spectatorship, pleasure, and identification, Biggs’ video installations move beyond Mulvey’s rather pessimistic implications. *Girls and Horses* and *Water Training* reflect more recent theories that emphasize women’s active participation in the creation of meaning and challenge the dichotomy of active/male vs. passive/female, allowing



for multiple identificatory positions for male and female spectators. In this context, concepts like masquerade and performance take on particularly subversive meanings. Film theorist Mary Ann Doane, for instance, argues that, for women, masquerading can be a form of resistance to patriarchal positioning, of holding the cultural construction of femininity at bay and creating a gap between the woman and the image.⁵ In this view, Biggs’ excessive representation of female sexual sublimation in *Girls and Horses*, in which the horse compensates for the supposed lack of the phallus in women, shows up femininity as “a set of expressions” that can be put on or taken off. For, as cultural theorist Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. . . identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”⁶

Exemplifying Butler’s observation, Biggs’ exhibition, UP DOWNS, presents performances of gender: Celeste’s obsessive collection of everything



equine, the utter abandon of the little girls playing horsey, the histrionics of the synchronized swimmers in *Water Training*—all these appear as gender self-construction, women’s power to both shore up and tear down traditional notions of femininity.

In *Water Training*, Biggs abandons the narrative and formal elements still operating in *Girls and Horses* in favor of largely “performative” aspects.

This two-channel video installation of 1997 consists of two approximately 12 x 14’ images projected at a right angle to one another in a corner of the gallery. Similar to the carefully placed monitors in *Girls and Horses*, Biggs positions *Water Training* in such a way that viewers must enter the projection space in order to see both images, thus literally and figuratively immersing themselves in the artist’s vision. The left image, a close-up, shows a horse strenuously treading water, while the right is a long-shot projection of young women practicing synchronized swimming. The horse’s head—eyes glaring and nostrils flaring—is above water, while the teenage swimmers are photographed underwater—their heads and legs alternately visible. The soundtrack for *Water Training* consists of the strained breathing and snorting of the panicked horse (actually in training for a race) as well as the muffled sounds of music and swimmers recorded underwater. Biggs did the original shooting underwater, resulting in the *cinéma vérité* quality of the projection that emphasizes the intersection of images, viewers, and the artist’s intent. Needless to say, synchronized swimming performances are not usually viewed from this vantage point. By filming the girls kicking their legs to stay afloat or upside down underwater, Biggs



focuses on the constructedness of the sport and, by extension, the construction of femininity.

Hollywood of the 1930s and '40s created many film genres directed toward a female audience. Melodrama, for instance, personalized the psychological tension between female desire and socially

endorsed femininity and elicited highly emotional responses. Overly stylized and by contemporary standards campy and over-the-top, Busby Berkeley's lavish musicals of the same period often incorporated synchronized swimming numbers starring Olympic medalist Esther Williams. In a very real sense, Biggs' video installation, *Water Training*, reads against the grain of these historical film genres in which the symbols of excess in the histrionics of the synchronized swimmers—their sequined costumes, their hyperstylized facial expressions, the conformity of their movements—readily evoke Butler's "performative theory of gender." With simple power, *Water Training* pairs this performance of femininity with an image of a single "masculine" horse struggling to stay afloat. The close-up of the horse's head above water—his veins and muscles visibly taut—generates empathetic discomfort in the viewer. We are witnessing something that is usually concealed, which, therefore, activates the myth of natural strength in both horses and men. Just as Biggs chooses to focus on the swimmers' intense efforts below the surface to produce a stereotypical image of feminine grace above the surface, she represents the classical symbol of masculinity in training and therefore in crisis. In *Girls and Horses* and *Water Training*, the horse is a signifying mark of feminine pleasure or masquerading masculinity, two sides of the coin in the construction of gender. This interdependency in the staging of gender also emerges from Biggs' decision to project the images in *Water Training* next to each other, such that the corner itself functions as a visible suture, replacing the invisible editing of dominant cinema and its hidden gender constraints.

Biggs' exhibition title, UP DOWNS, thus does not simply refer to Amanda's rhythmic bobbing to Diplomat's trotting gait, or to the young swimmers' flip-flop turns underwater, but, more importantly, to Biggs' own proposal to turn the construction of gender on its head—upside down.

Andrea Inselmann
Curator of Exhibitions



Above: *Girls and Horses* (1996; video installation; 12 x 30 x 44')

Cover: *Water Training* (1997; two-channel video projection; 12 x 28')

Back cover: *Celeste in Her Bedroom* (1996; C-print; 48 x 84")

Inside: Video stills from *Girls and Horses*

Photography: Erma Estwick



- 1 Annette Kuhn in *The Women's Companion to International Film*, ed. Annette Kuhn with Susannah Radstone (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 327.
- 2 Janet Biggs, in a phone conversation with the author, February 27, 1999.
- 3 Howard Halle, "Janet Biggs, Girls and Horses," in *Time Out New York*, March 20-27, 1996, 27.
- 4 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 5 Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 42-57.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.