List of Works

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

(Can’t Remember, 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

Courtesty of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York
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 cavern is located some 800 metres below ground, requiring a 20-kilometre underground round trip to visit. 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 effective 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. Sit from below displayed on a museum shelf. Created from halite, this organ is closely associated with the hypothalamus, the limbic system, this organ in turn is closely associated with memory and spatial navigation.

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 her grandfather’s hooves, a stand-in for her earliest memory. 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.

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. 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. 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 going 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 crisis of memory.

— Ivan Jurakic