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Janet Biggs: 'The Arctic Trilogy'

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Winkleman Gallery

621 West 27th Street

Chelsea

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The three short, related videos that make up Janet Biggs's debut show at Winkleman were filmed on glacial islands between the top of Norway and the North Pole. Playing on separate screens and in overlapping sequence, the pieces can be viewed in any order, though a gallery news release, which I assume represents the artist's intentions, suggests starting with "Fade to White," which was filmed mostly outdoors and serves as an atmospheric scene-setter.

It opens with a shot of an antique schooner. On its deck a man suits up against the cold and launches a kayak. For most of the rest of the video we travel with him through ice-floe-clogged waters, catching glimpses of bears and other wildlife that make up the Arctic's fragile ecosystem. As if to emphasize fragility, these scenes alternate with studio shots of the performance artist John Kelly, dressed in white and singing a mournful Baroque madrigal. The video moves back and forth between the singer and the seaman, until the kayak heads toward the horizon and the screen goes white.

Most of a second video, "In the Cold Edge," is a space-distorting tour of an ice-cave interior, its fantastic forms illuminated only by the lights of mining helmets. The third piece, "Brightness All Around," takes us deep down into the earth where a solitary coal miner and machine operator named Linda Norberg oversees a thunderous array of drills and extractors. As a counterpart to their unearthly clamor, Ms. Biggs has folded in shots of another performer, Bill Coleman, dressed in black leather, and delivering a demonic, death-tinged chant.

As I said, the viewing sequence is optional. I watched "In the Cold Edge" last and was glad I did. It concludes on a stirringly ambiguous note. After we emerge from the ice cave to a terrain as bleakly beautiful as a moonscape, a woman — Ms. Biggs — shoots a flare into the sky. The sudden flash of color, heat and energy comes as a relief in a frozen world. At the same time it implies a condition of emergency, which takes us back to Mr. Kelly's rendition of a love song that sounds like a lament.