

HYPERALLERGIC

Somewhere Beyond Nowhere and a Sugar Carpet



Allison Meier January 17, 2013



“Sugar Carpet” by Aude Moreau at Smack Mellon (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

After sustaining significant damage from Hurricane Sandy, Smack Mellon has reopened with two installations that seem frozen in time. Quebec artist Aude Moreau coated the floor of the front gallery in a blanket of sugar laced with charcoal designs, and Brooklyn-based Janet Biggs’ two-channel video in the back transports the frigid isolation of the Arctic to Dumbo.

The artists are exhibiting as part of the ongoing Brooklyn/Montreal project connecting 40 contemporary artists through 16 institutions in the US and Canada.



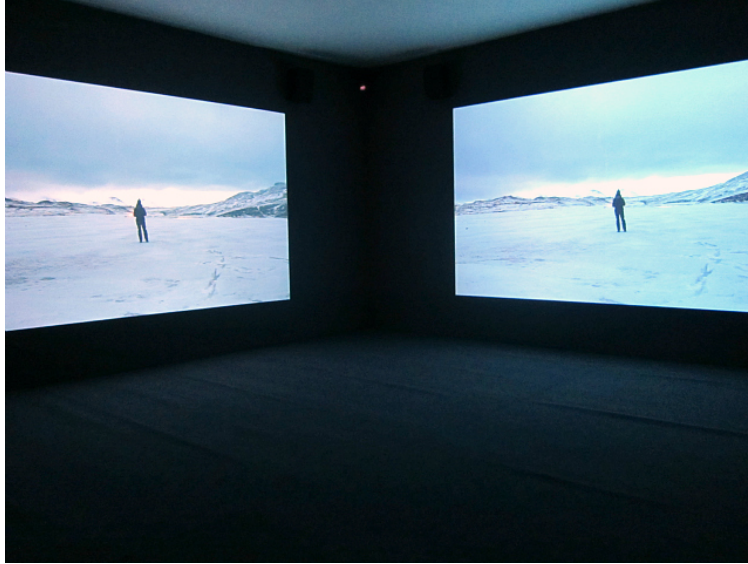
Detail of “Sugar Carpet” by Aude Moreau

Both artists just wrapped up showing video art at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal as part of the Brooklyn/Montreal exchange. However, Aude Moreau, who lives and works in Montreal, is much more known for her ephemeral installation work, and the “Sugar Carpet” she created in Smack Mellon is beautiful for its fragility. Here a Persian rug has been formed from 4,500 pounds of granulated sugar (an amount that seems staggering, but the label text says it’s so and the sugar certainly occupies an impressive amount of space), all donated by Domino Sugar (itself an icon of Brooklyn with its old abandoned factory on the Williamsburg waterfront). The installation is a painstaking suspension of time, one that falls off in minuscule cascades on the edges. The imperfections make it more interesting in revealing its precarious state.



Detail of “Sugar Carpet” by Aude Moreau

According to the artist, the installation is a way of turning people’s attention to a process of production that is undervalued, using the industrial character of the Smack Mellon space to bring out the industrial manufacturing of the sugar. However, it’s not the industrial story that’s the strongest when looking at the sugar, it’s the story of the artist hunched before this sprawling layer of fickle substance, achingly applying the pounds of granular matter into something that would exist only for these moments of the show. There are signs on the floor by the “Sugar Carpet” warning you not to walk on it, but they’re almost unnecessary; it practically radiates its own respect-demanding perilousness.



Installation view of “Somewhere Beyond Nowhere” by Janet Biggs

While Moreau’s installation feels close and familiar through the use of a common material, Biggs’ film is one of distance, enhanced by the curtained entrance to a dark room where you can be alone with the film. Back in fall of 2011, Janet Biggs staged *Wet Exit* with Smack Mellon, which was a multimedia performance merging the movement of kayaking in the East River with music and film of kayaks in the Arctic as an examination of this battle against unforgiving nature. Similarly, “Somewhere Beyond Nowhere” is a meditation on the power of the icy Arctic landscape, and its imposing solitude from the rest of the world. Despite it being over a century since Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen first navigated through the Northwest Passage, the frozen tip of the earth is still in some places as distant from modern life as the moon.

Biggs is an artist who is intrepid in throwing herself into distant and extreme places, having documented a motorcycle race on the Utah salt flats and the poisonous conditions for workers at a volcano in Indonesia. The two-channel “Somewhere Beyond Nowhere” was made with footage from Biggs’ 2010 expedition with the Arctic Circle residency program, which allows artists, scientists, and other creators to sail north on an ice-class Schooner

built in 1910, making it quite possibly the coolest, in all senses of the word, artist residency out there. In “Somewhere Beyond Nowhere,” Biggs is alone, firing a flare gun at the ice cliffs, making her presence known in a place of indifference, where her flare could fire for days with no answer. It’s gorgeously filmed with the stunning landscapes of snow and ice, but its beauty is bleak and at its core inhospitable. Biggs reminds us of this by showing the relics of failed 19th century expeditions, narrating in a voice-over stories of the loneliness of a boat caught in the frozen ocean of an Arctic winter and the notorious disaster of the 1897 hot air balloon attempt to reach the North Pole.



Still from Janet Biggs' "Somewhere Beyond Nowhere"

Swedish balloonist S. A. Andrée set off with high hopes, his hydrogen balloon poised to drop its voyagers at the top of the world without the pain of foot and sledge travel on the ice. After only a little over two days it had catastrophically crashed for the last time on the pack ice, leaving the three men to struggle over the Arctic terrain for months until perishing on an ice floe. The fate of the balloon and its riders was much a mystery for over 30 years, until the wreckage of the expedition, including a box of film, was discovered in 1930. The photographs are haunting and surreal, especially the one of the balloon collapsed on the ice, its

doomed adventurers examining their fate. Artifacts of these and other explorers are still strewn across the Arctic, along with sometimes even the explorers themselves, as in the case of the Franklin Expedition where whole preserved bodies sleep with their eyes open under the snow, suspended in state against time. Biggs reminds us of the ill-fated explorers who, like her, once stood in solitude on the ice, hoping, and knowing it was vain hope, that some salvation would come in a harsh landscape that is truly “somewhere beyond nowhere.”

While “Sugar Carpet” and “Somewhere Beyond Nowhere” have very different approaches to transience and time, what they share is an intrepidity in their creation. Both artists have gone to extremes with their work, with Moreau transforming a monumental amount of sugar into one of the most prized of decorative objects, and Briggs traveling nearly to the (magnetic) end of the world with its bone-biting cold and ghosts of the past. Biggs brought back these frozen moments of isolation, that, despite their distance, are not dissimilar from taking a moment to just look up at the vast sky and feel small. Moreau has presented something that plays with the identities of material, but the common material of the sugar makes it feel somewhat familiar. Together they make for a meditative exhibition on temporality and the pushing of life and art to its limits

Aude Moreau: Sugar Carpet and Janet Biggs: Somewhere Beyond Nowhere are at Smack Mellon, 92 Plymouth Street, DUMBO, through February 24, 2013. Smack Mellon’s downstairs studios are still wrecked from Hurricane Sandy, and you can help them get back on their feet by [donating online](#).