

CARETS AND STICKS

Water and Vapor: Jeremiah Barber at Southern Exposure

by Miguel Arzabe

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Back in 2009 my friend (and colleague at Berkeley) Bonnie Begusch and I decided it would be fun to host a show of grad students from some of the other Bay Area MFA programs. We took a trip down to Palo Alto and met (among other talented artists) Jeremiah Barber. His performance and sculpture expressed an interest in the body. Mounted to the wall were replicas of his own figure rendered in birch bark and fur, as well as a video projection of a performance Barber had previously done in a meadow. In which, he comically attempts to scramble up a log balanced on its end in a meadow while the log tips over and the artist repeatedly drags it off screen to make it a little shorter with a chainsaw until he is able to successfully climb on top. Paired with this absurd and comic act, was Barber's more "serious" photographic work: documentation of performances in which he and his wife Ingrid Rojas Contreras had used their bodies to form different positions in various natural landscapes.



Performance Still, Photo by Catherine McElhone

While watching Barber and Rojas' new performance, *Other Half Orbit*, which was part of a six person show that recently closed at Southern Exposure called *White Hot Lamp Black*, I recalled the mood of Barber's old photographs. In this new work, Jeremiah and Ingrid were dressed in plain clothes facing each other on their sides, lying half-submerged in a dark pool of water. They were lit obliquely (and thoughtfully) by spots from above that simultaneously replace the submerged half of each figure with its reflection and cast shimmering ghost figures on

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the rear walls. While the audience filtered into the space gradually over the course of the performance, the theatrical setting engendered a quiet and respectful witnessing of the intimate and unscripted conversation between the couple. The conversation centered around Ingrid's experience of memory loss from an accident. Through monotone and slurred speech, induced by water filling her mouth with each word, she confessed to Jeremiah (and the audience), that after her accident she would wake up in the night and think that he was her brother, and it confused her. Uncertainty towards one's most cherished loved one is deeply terrifying, and although as viewers we knew that Jeremiah's involuntary shivering was a physiological response to the cold water, we couldn't help but feel a connection between his shivers and Ingrid's emotive language.



Performance Still, photo by Catherine McElhone

Jeremiah wonders out loud – spitting out water with each strained syllable – that he is not sure whether his body can handle all that he asks of it. Surely commenting on his current physical condition submerged in cold water, he also seemed to be wrestling with the realization that one can never know one's partner as intimately as one's own body – as if this realization of alone-ness is at the core of human existence. Perhaps through authentic and extended examinations of this condition do we come to truly realize the value of our relationships. The beauty of the unscripted performance centered around these unplanned quiet moments – where the water stood to symbolize a certain space – linking the physical to the emotional and perhaps even existential.

The video documentation of the performance, filmed by Rory Fraser and Christian Gainsley with sound by Elizabeth Kohnke (and edited by Jeremiah and Ingrid), deftly captured these moments of vulnerability and contemplation, and hung in the gallery for the remainder of the exhibition as a documentation of the performance. Unlike the live performance, in which most viewers were stationary in front of the artists as in theater, the video provides a more cinematic experience: an establishing shot, over-the-shoulder shots, and a shot-reverse-shot structure for periods of conversation. In tender close-ups, we get a raw sense of empathy through subtle facial twitches and shudders. The video acts as a remnant of the performance, although comparing it to the live event seems to cast a light on modes of representation, documentation and medium. During the performance it was hard to hear certain phrases, and my mind filled in these blanks, creating an ambiguous conversation. The video has it's own aura – it draws you in with it's cinematic sound and detail shots. You are right there in the action and the emotion. If the performance was vapor, the video is water; vapor's more substantial and less ephemeral sister.