

VIDEO ART REVIEW

# Pretty, pink and violent: '67 Bows' at the Hirshhorn

Video of flamingos with gunshot sounds enters the realm of voyeurism and victimization

BY ANNE MIDGETTE

The piece is called "67 Bows," and when I first heard the name I thought of ribbons and party dresses, something sugary and pretty and pink. Pretty and pink, at least, was on the mark. The work, a 2006 video by the Israeli artist Nira Pereg that goes on view this week at the Hirshhorn's Black Box, is about flamingos.

Pretty and pink, in a chattering, murmuring flock, the flamingos stalk on stalklike legs through the watery shallows of their enclosure. (The film was made in Karlsruhe, Germany; Pereg lives in Tel Aviv and Berlin.) Their "bows" are not ribbons, but physical actions: a lowering of the upper body, generally accepted in human society as a sign of courtliness or of submission. The flamingos bow in apparent unison, retracting their long necks together at intervals as if choreographed.

Put this video to a Tchaikovsky score and we'd see the movements as graceful arabesques. Instead, the soundtrack consists entirely of the clicks of a single

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NIRA PEREG AND BRAVERMAN GALLERY, TEL AVIV

**FRIGHTENED FLOCK:** In Nira Pereg's 2006 video work "67 Bows," viewers see a group of flamingos, confined to a crude enclosure, appearing to react to the sounds of gunshots as they bow in apparent unison at the repeated, percussive blasts.

## Birds of a feather, as victims

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gun being cocked, and then fired, over and over, at unpredictable intervals, and the birds bow each time the gun goes off.

The sound tears through the Hallmark fabric of our sentimental illusions and replaces one hackneyed vision (aren't these wild birds beautiful) with another (isn't violence tragic). The birds are cast not as a happy community of noble savages, but as a victimized population, enduring a steady threat, ground down by alarm until the fight-or-flight instinct of the first "click" becomes a mere reflex, a wearying accompaniment to the daily grind.

We see that the animals are imprisoned: Rather than embracing the tropical illusion the zoo seeks to create, we look behind the palm trees to the bare branches outside the plate-glass windows, or note the bunkerlike aspects of the enclosure, with its concrete pillars and puddle-deep pools of water.

At one point, the camera zooms in on a group of birds, one grooming itself so that

underfeathers of deep pink and crimson are visible; in this context, the plumage evokes a wound. Another bird stands still, its head on its breast, eye wide open and staring fixedly; it appears to be trembling.

Voyeurism is a kind of assault. We're used to watching animals in a zoo, and on screen; indeed, PBS and Animal Planet offer their own kind of tape loop of non-stop anthropomorphized narrative. In Pereg's piece, this voyeurism becomes implicitly culpable: Are we, as part of the larger society, responsible for this imprisonment, this innocent suffering?

Of course, we know that the flamingos aren't actually hearing gunshots; that something else must be provoking their movements; that not all of them — when you look closely — are actually "reacting" to the sound. Or do we? Film, for us, is so naturally equated with documentary that one has to fight consciously not to take the evidence the video presents at face value.

Video art has flourished in Israel over the past few decades. Pereg, in her early 40s, who has shown extensively in Europe and Israel but who had her first solo

American exhibitions in California only last year, is among a host of her compatriots who have embraced a medium that easily juxtaposes focused observation with social critique.

The implications of that critique are certainly obvious in "67 Bows"; the piece stands in a long line of animal metaphors in Western art that extends back to Aristophanes' "The Birds."

It doesn't offer any comparably fresh insights. Pereg's work is deliberately low-key; here, by contrasting a vision of "pretty" with a sound of "violent," both verging into the vocabulary of kitsch, she creates a work whose points are easy to grasp, as if emblazoned in block letters across the screen. Its facility returned me to the sugary evocations I first saw in its title; here, indeed, is social critique tied up with a homographic bow.

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### 67 Bows

The latest in the Hirshhorn's Black Box series will be on view through Nov. 13.