

RHONA BITNER

CRG GALLERY

There's not much clowning around in Rhona Bitner's recent Big Top photographs, even if her circus people are not lugubrious like Picasso's or tortured like Bruce Nauman's. Aside from a few large-scale formal portraits, somewhat reminiscent of those painted by Walt Kuhn, the images here were small action shots taken from the audience's perspective. In these, single figures (or occasionally small groups) captured in midmovement or at the climax of a pose appear isolated and luminous, spotlighted in pitch-dark surroundings: A man spins the wheels of a bicycle as it seems to climb an invisible 60-degree hill; another hangs agonizingly upside down from a pole; a third, elderly man focuses every ounce of his attention on a ball he's juggling (all works untitled). Bitner's female performers have a different kind of aplomb. The artful contortions of one, hanging by one hand and a knee from two suspended rings, possess an incomprehensible rectilinearity, as if she were competing for a position in that Erté alphabet of which Roland Barthes once wrote. Elsewhere, by contrast, a woman in a white harem getup wields a swirling ribbon that contradicts the availability her costume suggests by defining a circular zone of force around her.

Bitner roamed Europe and the United States to find these scenes, though you'd never know it; the photographs don't give any sense of different companies or cultures. Her subject is something beyond such particulars: that quasi-mythical or archetypal pantheon, The Circus. Tradition has it that The Circus is a microcosm of human existence, and Bitner clearly sees no reason to disagree. For her, however, the point is not the inhabitants' cooperative or competitive relations and their transcendence in spectacle, as it has been for some observers. Nor is it the ironic disproportion between the virtuosity of the performers' accomplishments and the disreputable nature of their itinerant existence, which has always made them so suitable for romantic analogy with the *bohème* of artists. Instead, Bitner's concern is the naked confrontation of per-



Rhona Bitner, untitled, 2001, color photograph, 10 1/2 x 8 1/2". From the series "Circus."

former and audience. On the one side, that of the sometimes heartbreakingly vulnerable-looking clowns, acrobats, and strongmen, the simultaneous need for and dread of the gaze is everywhere apparent. The psychological sleight of hand from self-manifestation to self-concealment and back that lies at the heart of all performance, including the performance of everyday life, has rarely been evoked as sensitively as in these photographs. More elusive, perhaps, is the other side of the equation: the single-minded gaze of the audience—here embodied in the cyclopean eye of the camera—which isolates and with only partial success objectifies the performer. Indeed, it is not the performer but the viewer, possessed by the ravenous desire for wonderment, around whom Bitner's meditations revolve. And it is her own passionate viewership that these photographs perform and, in turn, perhaps dissemble as much as reveal.

—Barry Schwabsky