

# salt 2:

Sophie Whettnall

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Sophie Whettnall, whose artistic practice encompasses photography, video, performance, and site-specific installation, began her career as a painter. She eventually abandoned painting for a practical reason: she wanted to move around. Abandoning the confines of the studio, with its imperative for introspection, Whettnall set out to confront the outside world. “Ever since I was a child, I have traveled a lot....I consider myself a nomadic person,” she has remarked. Whettnall is not alone in her nomadism. The global contemporary art world is increasingly governed by a logic of transience; art fairs and mega-exhibitions are held on every continent, and artists—who often work in site-specific or installation-based formats—are called upon to travel constantly, presenting lectures and making on-site work. Artists have always engaged with the technologies of their time, and while there are plenty of painters still working today, many see video as offering the mode of image-making most adequately suited to an itinerant existence.

Even as Whettnall turned to video, her work frequently returned to landscape and self-portraiture, themes traditionally aligned with painting. In some ways, then, she remains a painter, working in an expanded pictorial field that extends to moving images and installations. Whettnall often explores the relationship of the body to its surroundings, and to this end, video becomes a performative space. This tendency is exemplified in Whettnall’s best known work, *Shadow boxing* (2004), which reached a large audience



Sophie Whettnall, *Shadow boxing* (2004), video still

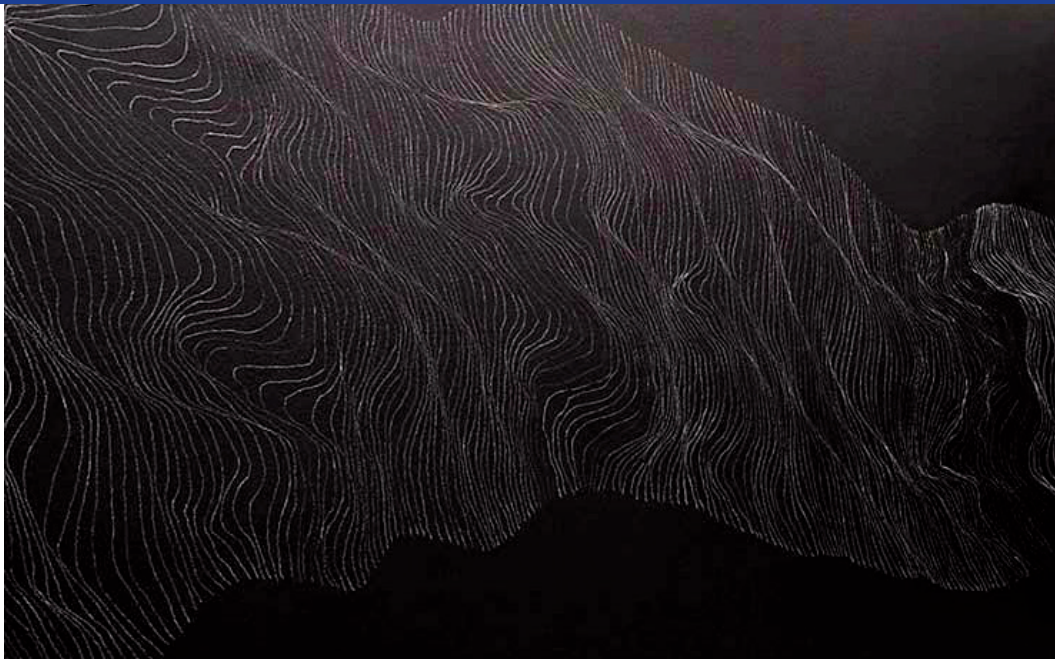
through its inclusion in the 2007 Venice Biennale. In the video, a professional boxer throws a flurry of punches at a woman—the artist herself—who stands tall and impassive, staring straight ahead. His fists come within a hair of her face, but never touch her—he is shadowboxing, after all—and she doesn't flinch. *Shadow boxing* dramatizes a number of recurring ideas in Whettnall's broader body of work: the tension between self and other, stillness and movement, aggression and passivity. *salt 2: Sophie Whettnall* presents three works (a video, a video installation, and a site-specific wall drawing) which further elaborate and complicate such oppositions.

At first glance, Whettnall's video installation *Waterfall* (2008) evokes a still photographic image: that of a waterfall frozen into stasis, transformed into an extraordinary ice sculpture. In fact, however, the image is moving: a river flows slowly across the bottom of the picture. *Waterfall* operates between poles of stillness and movement, which are especially salient properties of photographs and video images, respectively. We might see *Waterfall* as a meditation on medium, then, its content offering an analogue to the distinctive features of photography and video. Think of how a photograph stops time, arrests action; video, on the other hand, allows for the temporal flow of movement.

Like a person who smiles and freezes for the camera, turning herself into an image in advance of the camera's click, the waterfall's movement is literally frozen, transformed into a still image, a kind of photograph in three-dimensions. But this is a video, a moving image, and the river that flows in the foreground might be seen as analogous to the endless flow of motion that video facilitates.



Sophie Whettnall,  
*Waterfall* (2008),  
video still



Sophie Whettnall, *untitled*, wall drawing (2008), detail

Of course, Whettnall is not interested in image or medium alone. *Waterfall* inhabits a physical space—the gallery—which becomes a winter wonderland, inviting the viewer’s entrance. The artist acknowledges the physical support of the gallery’s architecture, coating a portion of one wall in glitter; that space becomes the screen onto which the waterfall is projected. In this immersive space, the viewer is also enveloped by sound: crackly noises echo, punctuated by a clear, high-pitched chime. This soundtrack brings us back to the durational dimension of video: the river flows in real time—flows like time itself—divided only by the chiming of bells.

The untitled wall drawing that Whettnall has made on the outside wall of the gallery translates many of these themes into another medium. Executed in white pencil on black paint, the site-specific drawing offers a different image of movement and flow—a river rendered in abstracted form.

Sophie Whettnall, *Over the Sea* (2007), video still

Whettnall's repeated lines run parallel to one another before converging, where they become ripples and waves. Seen at a distance, the drawing conjures a topographical map, marking elevations and depressions in the landscape. Alternatively, we might see this drawing as a different kind of map, one that indexes the artist's own movement. Each line traces the motion of Whettnall's hand, moving across the wall. In this sense, the image records the drawing as a performative gesture.

Whettnall's video *Over the Sea* (2007) also traces a performative gesture, following the footsteps of a woman in high heels as she makes her way from a public, urban space to a quiet spot overlooking the sea. Positioned at a low angle, the camera is fixed tightly on the walker's feet—in a series of long takes we literally follow at her heels. With each new shot the ground underfoot changes: now she





Caspar David Friedrich,  
*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1817),  
oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg

walks on an old stone street, now through a paved crosswalk, now along a dirt path. Her shoes offer precarious support—her ankles wobble slightly here and there but her pace remains at a steady clip. It is day, then night, then day again; the video suggests a lengthy journey. The terrain becomes steeper and rockier, but the walker's pace doesn't slow; she climbs with agility and balance. Placing a high heeled foot on one rock and then another, she stands high above the sea, finally. For a moment, we may imagine that she is poised like that of the male figure in the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1817), in which man appears as master of a sublime landscape. Whettnall's camera moves quickly between the walker's feet, through her legs, to rest on the sight of the ocean, wild flowers trembling in the foreground. In *Over the Sea* the human figure—here gendered female—is the meeting point between movement and stillness, nature and culture, public and private, self and surrounds.

**Sophie Whettnall** (b. 1973) lives and works in Brussels, Belgium. Whettnall has had solo exhibitions at La Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Spain (2010); Vera Cortês Agência de Arte, Lisbon, Portugal (2008); Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy (2007); Galerie Baronian-Francey, Brussels, Belgium (2006); Casa de Velazquez, Madrid, Spain (2006); A Chocolataria, Espazo de experimentacion e creacion contemporanea, Santiago De Compostelle, Spain (2006); and LE BLAC, Brussels, Belgium (2004). Her work has been included in many group exhibitions, including *A.B.C. Art Belge Contemporain*, Fresnoy, Studio National des Arts Contemporains, Tourcoing, France (2010); *Shadow Boxing*, Art Corner of the Belgian pavilion, The World Expo of Shanghai, China (2010); *la mirada iracunda/ the furious gaze*, Centre Culturel Montehermoso, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain (2008); *Artistes de la Casa de Velasquez*, La Garenne Lemot, Gétigné-Clisson, France (2007); *L'emprise du lieu*, curated by Daniel Buren, Reims, France (2007); 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale, *Think With the Senses—Feel With the Mind. Art in the Present Tense*, Venice, Italy (2007); *El viaje, nuevas peregrinaciones*, CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (2007); *Sur un fil, tendu!*, MAC's Site du Grand-Hornu, Belgium (2007); *the video dictionary*, La Casa Encendida, Madrid, Spain (2005); *Moving images*, tank.tv, ICA Digital Studio, London, England (2004).



***salt*** is an on-going series of semi-annual exhibitions showcasing work by emerging artists from around the world. *salt* aims to reflect the international impact of contemporary art today, forging local connections to the global, and bringing new and diverse artwork to the city that shares the program's name.

salt (sôlt)

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1. A colorless or white crystalline solid used extensively in ground or granulated form as a food seasoning and preservative
2. An element that gives flavor or zest
3. Sharp, lively wit
4. A mineral sharing definitive characteristics with Utah's capital city