

Sophie Whettnall – Etel Adnan. La banquise, la forêt et les étoiles

CENTRALE constantly strives to discover and champion contemporary art in Brussels within an international scope.

For its new exhibition *Sophie Whettnall – Etel Adnan. La banquise, la forêt et les étoiles (The ice sea, forests and stars)*, the City of Brussels' art center does not derogate from the rule.

As is customary for exhibitions by Brussels artists held at CENTRALE, Sophie Whettnall was asked to choose an international artist to exhibit alongside her. She selected the canvasses, drawings, watercolours and engravings of **Etel Adnan**. A formal dialogue is established between both artists, a shared, intimate and personal vision of the landscape, the light and its transparency.

At the crossroads of East and West, the work of Etel Adnan, born in Beirut in 1925, is imbued with the richness of warm lands, the burning sun and rugged mountains and is adorned with a literary aspect re-transcribed in paint, since the painter is also a writer and has also worked with directors for the theatre.

With their subtle, sophisticated aesthetics, all the works by Sophie Whettnall offer an immersive experience that is both delicate and powerful, rooted in a dialectical tension. At every stage of its creation and presentation, her protean work has its origin in an attempt to create dialogue between contradictory perceptions: between softness and sensuality, femininity and masculinity, presence and absence, control and docility, personal and universal, the defined space and the infinite... By her own admission, her work contributes to a form of autobiographical unveiling which opens up into a more universal vision of the "irreducible multiplicity" of the self.¹

This multiple ego can be seen in the agreement to be part of the human race and, more broadly, to access the "immensifying being".² A particular mood of reverie, defined by Gaston Bachelard, which transports "the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity". This "immensity that resides in us, which is within us"³ underlies the creative process of Sophie Whettnall, who combines a positioning in (mental and physical) space and in time(s), the two essential elements of her work.

"The intimate immensity"⁴

This oxymoron, which contains introspection and the infinite, perfectly conveys what the drawings, sculptures, videos and installations of Sophie Whettnall invoke and inspire in me. Her work goes beyond the mere representation of the self, the landscape and the light to stress the cosmic dimension of the imagination. Each work offers a reflection on the forces and energy that define her relationship with the world and existence in action and/or in contemplation.

Contemplation above all lies at the origin of the works linked to the landscape and light. Sophie Whettnall has been experimenting with the landscape for more than 20 years: she surveys it, examines it, studies it, feels it and interprets it, then shows it to us in all its brilliance and power. The observation at the origin of her pictures, photos and videos is not static, rather dynamic and multiple; the landscape is her refuge and allows her to both

¹ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-philosophie-2008-1-p-95.htm> Diderot. Consulted 10/2018

² <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2010/10/limmensite-intime-bachelard.html>. Consulted 10/2018

³ Ibidem

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (The Poetics of Space), PUF, Paris, 1957, p.168.

protect herself by shutting herself off in solitary contemplation and to mentally project herself in its immensity. The representation or evocation of light and its shadow unites the recollection and memory of this meditation, placing it in the present moment, the here and now. Every time, Sophie Whettnall transposes the reality of the landscape into a sublimation of archetypes and goes beyond merely reproducing reality, allowing spectators to mentally project themselves into the work. She has developed a real "landscape diversity" in which the different elements align and engage with each other. She experiences an intellectual and emotional catharsis rooted in the earth and the air as much as in fire. This state allows her to acquire a "real value of sincerity that involves the entire being" within "the reverie of matter", to paraphrase Gaston Bachelard.⁵ It is through the convergence of several senses: hearing, sight and touch, which involve the "true human core" ⁶ of the artist, that her work reveals energy, force and serenity in all its intimate, universal authenticity.

Sophie Whettnall expresses the oscillation between an internal and an external perception of the world in her pictures that fix shadow at a precise moment, and others that are perforated allowing light to flood in, or in her recent immaculately white torn papers. She develops her vision through what Bachelard defines as a "phenomenology of the soul"⁷. Each process of creation unites the consciousness with the soul and allows "seeing to be like feeling".⁸ So when she perforates the paper, the light passes through it and reveals an inner light, a metaphor for the unconscious. When she tears the paper, she reveals matter and its invisible face. The creation of these pictures, composed of layers of torn paper, required particular concentration and dexterity. "I had to be totally present in the moment, like a performance or the action of painting", she explained. The artist found herself "in" the work, and perpetuated an action that was between vision and introspection, intuition and reflection. Her work is never narrative or descriptive, but she expresses impressions, feelings, moods or the inner reaches of the soul.

In recent works, Sophie Whettnall has used bold colours, which is a remarkable leap for this artist who works primarily with light and shade in black and white. Created from torn, superimposed coloured papers, they combine an evocation of the light and heat of painted landscapes with the blocks of colour used by Etel Adnan.⁹ Both artists agree on an intangible beauty in the world and share an intimately personal vision of the landscape, light and its transparency. Their works go beyond an evocation of reality to explore the cosmic dimension of vision as explorations of the inner landscape.

Action, or the body put to work

Unlike the more contemplative works and installations, Sophie Whettnall uses the body and its corporeal presence in her videos. She films herself during short performances. An example of this is *Shadow Boxing* (2004), a simulated fight during which she confronts the shadows of a boxer's uppercuts. She remains immobile and upright in the face of the jerking movements of the boxer, who attacks her at close range. The artist's stoicism in the position of the person being attacked, remaining almost impassive, ultimately proves to be more powerful than the violent gestures of the attacker. Determined evasion and defence are attitudes guided by a mental strength of victory. The artist's position is a real metaphor for the human being in its relationship with the world, others and itself, and it derives its depth

⁵ <http://www.moncarnetdelecture.com/philosophie/-la-terre-et-les-reveries-de-la-volonte-gaston-bachelard-extraits>, consulted 10/2018

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (The Poetics of Space), Paris, PUF, 1957, p. 4-5.

⁸ Carine Fol in the catalogue for the *Distant Proximity* exhibition, CENTRALE for contemporary art, Brussels, 13/3-8/6/2014.

⁹ Sophie Whettnall wanted to invite Etel Adnan to her exhibition at CENTRALE for contemporary art. Several works by the artist of Lebanese origin will be included in the exhibition from 4/04 to 4/08/2018.

from the ethical questions raised by this performance. The tension of this video contrasts with the video *La dormeuse* (The Sleeper) (2003), in which the artist trustingly placed her peaceful, sleeping face on a man's hand. Defence and abandonment, keeping control or surrendering yourself - even fleeing - into sleep, are antagonistic but complementary attributes that sum up our relationship with others and with ourselves. Unlike other performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Whettnall does not restrict her performances to combat or control of oneself or others. She dares to be vulnerable. This sensitivity is never insipid and gives a poetic dimension to her work, which depicts the being in its duality or in self-reflection.

Sophie Whettnall contends with several different ways of being in the world, in the present and the past, and attempts to work out the key themes of existence. This can be seen in her latest production, in which she is on stage next to her mother and her daughter. This video, visually inspired by the unfinished film *L'enfer* (Inferno) (1964) by Henri-Georges Clouzot, evokes the conscious and unconscious transmission between generations. Playing on an aesthetically subtle and resplendent contrast of light and shadow, the faces of these three generations of women are revealed to commentary from the artist's mother in the present intensified moment. The work evokes filiation, legacy, the unsaid, evidence and secrets. Sophie Whettnall questions the dividing line between art and life, making it undetectable. As unlike artists who play on their intimacy, she delicately depicts feelings and inner turmoil, allowing a universal interpretation of time and existence.

The temporality of the work

Time is omnipresent in her processes: in the "shadow pictures", the videos, the repeated gesture at the origin of the torn or perforated designs, in the process and in the evocation of memory. But also in the creative process itself. Temporality occurs at the origin of the work, during journeys to find places to film, in the pictures created in her notebooks. These various elements brought together will trigger reflections, actions and decisions. Then a gesture, a trait no longer reduced to these elements (landscape or figure, materials and instruments, thoughts, etc.) reveals a new composition.

These mental and material levels placed end-to-end create a narrative that brings about a new temporality in the work: that of the spectators' viewing. They in turn will experience perception/understanding. The work mobilises their memory and references that go beyond the context of the representation. This experience requires a different experience of time, that of the journey, contemplation, surprise and then stepping back from reflection. The transition from the completion of the work to it being open to the spectators' eyes, as described by Umberto Eco, allows each spectator, with their personal sensitivity, to interpret it according to many different perspectives. The work expresses a variety of aspects and resonances, while never ceasing to be itself.¹⁰

Sophie Whettnall invites spectators into an immersive observation of her work and projects them into many different temporal observations which merely stress that the human experience of time is on heterogeneous and homogeneous levels.¹¹ Each spectator feels the work within their own temporality, whilst becoming aware of universality. She has managed to fix "time in a sliver of space"¹² in her works, which oscillate between dynamics and serenity, present and past, here and elsewhere, and embody the duality of her (and our) inner landscapes.

Carine Fol

Curator of the exhibition and artistic director of CENTRALE for Contemporary Art

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *L'oeuvre ouverte* (The Open Work), Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1965, p.17.

¹¹ Extracts of several notes on time by philosopher Eric Clemens sent to the author in October 2018.

¹² Idem.

